Continuity and Change in Second Century Christianity:

A Narrative Against the Trend[1]

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For Liz

I: Introduction

How should we narrate continuities and discontinuities in Christian belief over the second century? At the end of the first century, one narrative might run, most of the key texts that will be incorporated into the New Testament (and some that will not) have been produced. In these texts we see inchoate models of ecclesial structure and very brief forms of Christian confession. But, by the end of the second century, our sources imply a widespread Christian community scattered through the Mediterranean basin, deeply concerned with establishing and maintaining right belief against a multitude of "heresies". The model of a single bishop exercising rule over each Christian community seems to have taken hold across the Mediterranean, and each bishop seems to have seen himself as the protector of a faith originally expressed by the apostles. We also see quasi-credal statements (the rules or canons of faith or truth), sharp polemical rhetoric and new styles and genres of theological writing. If the story can be told like this, has not Christianity undergone many and significant shifts since the end of the first century, shifts that render any simple belief in continuity rather naive?

Treating the question of continuity and discontinuity by considering only these two poles would now seem inappropriate to many. To such scholars the vastly increased number of texts that have become available through the Nag Hammadi discoveries demands that we speak of a plurality of Christianities, of a range of responses to the life and teaching of Jesus. From within this set, one group gradually rose to dominance – the "proto-orthodox" community - and presented itself as the single guardian of an apostolic orthodoxy, while the others are the "lost

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[1] I dedicate this paper to Elizabeth A. Clark on the occasion of her retirement, and in thanks for her friendship.

Christianities" that await modern recovery.[2] Quite a number of scholars also advise us to avoid attempting judgments about which of these various groups or traditions bears the closest relationship to Christianity in the late first century for that, too, exhibits considerable diversity.[3]

As a contribution to considering these complex questions, I will argue that when we narrate the development of Christianity during this period, we *can* legitimately begin by emphasizing fundamental continuities between the discursive space of our earliest Christian texts – say in the period between 60 and 120 - and the discursive space of proto-orthodox writers in the period between 180-220.[4] This is so even if we are also appreciative of the great shifts in Christian culture that took place during this period, and even if we are attentive to the complex diversity of expressions we find within second century Christianity.

II: The Discursive Space of Christianity c. 100

I will begin with some observations offered in Rowan Williams's very helpful 1989 essay "Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?" Williams suggests that our earliest Christian texts share a very particular concern with the relationship of believers to the story of Jesus:

> "the canonical narrative tradition" gives priority to the task of bringing the believer into "'dramatic' relation with the subject of the story, offering a place within the story itself..."[5]

Williams' presentation is brief and formal, but it will provide a fruitful point of departure for thinking about unity and diversity among late first century Christian texts. I will fill out Williams's comment by sketching some interrelated features

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[2] The reference here is to the title of Ehrman (2003)..

[3] For what is perhaps the strongest proponent of such a view see King (2003), esp. 228ff. and (2011). For other rather different versions see Ehrman (2003) and (in a careful and subtle form) Brakke (2010), chp. 4-5. In the case of King's analysis I do not see that genealogical argumentation *necessarily* involves naïve assumptions about unitary origins. I would also draw attention to Talal Asad's point (see Asad (1986)) that discursive spaces are necessarily discursive traditions and that hence, some form of genealogy is unavoidable – as the form of King's book itself demonstrates.

[4] For "discursive space" see below n. 6.

[5] Williams (1989). The essay also attempts a sophisticated characterization of "Gnostic" types of religious experience; this aspect of the essay is outside my purview and my argument does not depend upon it.

within what we might term earliest Christianity's "discursive space", by which term I designate both the interrelated conversations of early Christian discourse and the social contexts that fostered and shaped these conversations.[6] Thinking first about "interrelated conversations," we see our earliest texts consistently using conceptual resources from Israel's thought world to create explicit and implicit narrative patterns that link Christ's work with the act of creation and, then, with Christ's continued presence within the contemporary Christian community. My use of "narrative patterns" is intended to indicate that I am not primarily concerned here with passages that offer explicit summary narratives (there are, of course, relatively few), but with the narratives that underlie accounts of Christ's actions or teachings, accounts of the earliest Christian community, exhortations and critiques of practice or belief taken to be erroneous.

For a first example of these narrative patterns, I will turn to Hebrews. An initial exegetical discussion locates the unique Son as the creator designated by God and worshipped by the angels. Because the Son is the one "through whom and by whom all things exist" (2.10) "he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin" (2.11). The other side of the narrative frame is then formed by the promise that we might enter his, Christ's, "rest". We, who strive between these sides of the frame are the Israelites in the desert (3.15-19), but the Israelites with a perfected priest who has entered once and for all (8.12). And yet because he also shared all that is human, and because God continues to work through him in us (13.21), we live toward that rest in faith. The narrative structure here is one that relates Christians to Christ by emphasizing both our status as believers who treat his story as pivotal, and the continuing work of Christ among us. In one sense we are subsequent to Christ's determinative actions, and prior to our ultimate rest; in another

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[6] The concept owes much to Foucault (1972), 40-46. Subsequent uses of the concept are influence also by Habermas and MacIntyre. For a use inspired by MacIntyre that emphasizes " discursive spaces" as also "discursive traditions" see Asad (1986). My own use is influenced in particular by that found in those cultural theorists who have explored the "discursive spaces" of emergent minority communities (eg. See the work of the Jamaican / British theorist Stuart Hall - with comments by Bhaba (2005), esp. 40-45, 252ff). In such contexts the valorization of power relations is particularly complex because the ability to exercise power, however complex, is also a necessity for the shaping and encouraging of such discursive spaces. Note that the relationship between the two dimensions I name in the text is *not* merely that of discourse and the environment that makes it possible. The social structure of a discursive space – the character of the institutions and relationships that have grown up to foster a discourse - also shape that discourse, sustaining some aspects while suppressing others, social structures exercise a significant role on the development and change of ideas.

sense this time is defined by Christ's continuing presence and work known only in faith.

A parallel narrative pattern may be discerned at many points in John's gospel. Recall, for example, Jesus's high priestly prayer at John 17. Jesus prays to the Father for the glory that was his before the world (17. 5 & 14). The language of glory coupled with the insistence that Jesus has come from the Father (17.8, cf. 16.28 & 30) points us back to John's first chapter, and to Christ possessing glory as the Word with God in the beginning. The eschatological end of the narrative is given inseparably with an account of where those whom the gospel addresses stand. They are those to whom the promise is made that Father and Son will dwell in them, those who may become one even as Father and Son are one (17.11 & 21-3). Jesus prays that those who are his may come to be where he is and to see his glory (17.24), a reference that is partly eschatalogical. But, of course, from John 1.14 we know that we "have" already seen that glory and thus Jesus's comments in John 17 about the time when his glory will be seen, and when those who are his will be drawn toward unity in him, are about the time of the church as a time of the end. So, once again, a narrative frame locates Christ's life and teaching; it begins with insistence that he comes from the Father and is not "of the world"; at the other side of the picture, as it were, Jesus returns to the glory that was his before. In the middle of the story we are connected to Jesus both by attending to the events of his earthly ministry, but also as those among whom he now works and among whom the end is already begun.[7]

To point to these parallel patterns is already to point to a phenomenon that indicates both continuity and diversity. These texts use distinct and yet overlapping sets of terminology, and by means of that terminology create accounts of central

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[7] The same narrative patterns are embedded also, to give a rather different example, in Matthew. The locating of Christ with reference to the God of Israel (who is also "Lord of Heaven and Earth" at 11.25) is apparent through Matt. 1, in the baptism scene (3.16-17), in the description of the relationship between Father and Son at 11.27, in the quotation of Ps 110.1 at 22:44, and most widely in the constant emphasis of the early chapters that Christ acts in order to fulfill prophecy. One example of how Matthew considers the relationship between Christ and Christians is found in his discussion of Christ's authority. Christ acts with the authority of God (eg. 9.6-8), with the authority of one greater than the temple and as one who is the Lord of the Sabbath (12.6-8). This authority is given to the apostles (10.1; 28.18-19), and its exercise is connected with the continued presence of Christ (eg. 18.20; 25.30; 28.30). But this exercise of authority is conditioned both by the uncertain timing of Christ's return in judgment (24.36ff), and should be governed by the belief that while the Kingdom has begun, it reaches "abundance" and fullness only at the judgment (13.31-50), and hence this time is one of taking up the cross (16. 24-28).

themes and figures that sit in complex relationships. This is particularly evident, to take an important example, in the differing terms used to name that which was present in Christ. Overlapping sets of terminology are used around the central name of Christ; thus, for example Hebrews uses, among others, Son, Glory, Word and Priest while Colossians uses Image, Beginning, Firstborn, Fullness and Head – and this is only to indicate some individual terms rather than parallel phrases. The interpretation of each set is a complex enough matter; attempting to grasp the relationship between different sets adds yet another level of complexity.[8] And yet, across the texts that use such sets there are clear continuities. The narrative patterns to which I have pointed do also offer a certain boundary marking; even complex sets of terms such as these create a field wherein judgments that can sustain negotiations and judgments about whether given accounts are or are not consonant.

Even as we must be attentive to this mix of unity and diversity, I suggest we have warrant for what, to some, will seem a frighteningly naïve statement: these narrative patterns seem to be present in (or at least not directly contradicted by) all the surviving Christian texts that can plausibly be dated before c.120.[9] We must be cautious here for a number of reasons. The earliest surviving non-canonical materials such as the *Gospel of Peter* or the "Unknown Gospel" of *P.Egerton 2* are too fragmentary to enable firm conclusions. Proponents of an early date for the *Gospel of Thomas* might well suggest that there is at least one piece of evidence against me. However, in the first case, and unless one opts to date the whole of the text very early (a move of which current scholarship seems increasingly shy), most of the *logia* that seem to offer the clearest evidence for an alternative basic narrative framework for "Thomasine Christianity" are usually those ascribed to a much later layer of the text.[10] In the second case, with such *logia* excluded, it is not at all clear how the remainder could (as they sometimes are) be judged to offer a "sapiential" Christianity *sans* narrative structure without us knowing far more about the intended function of such a

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[8] In particular, while genealogical/etymological treatment of each term certainly provides a key foundation, the task remains of adjudicating both how the various terms function as part of a set, and how their application to Christ involves a unique twist on prior usage.

[9] Of course, there has long been a strain of criticism arguing that certain key texts that eventually make it into Christian scriptural canons post-date Marcion (eg. most recently Vinzent (2011)). I do not find this writing at all convincing, for reasons set out well in Carleton-Paget (2012).

[10] Eg. *Log.* 50, but also such sayings as 1, 3, 19, 24, 114. In all honesty I should also admit that I find a great deal of sense in Goodacre (2012) and Gathercole (2014).

text.[11] It certainly seems that Christianity began in a context that was replete with possible tracks for cosmological speculation, and it seems that some ventured out early on those tracks. But the nature of the beliefs they espoused is mostly unknown to us.[12] When reading such texts we must also remember that scholars who think complex Gnostic myths were "in the air" in the mid to late-first century are now rare. This is so both because rejection of older accounts of a pre-Christian gnostic myth fits well with the paucity of actual evidence within our earliest Christian texts, and because we seem to be able to trace a development toward the more mythologically complex within at least a few of those second century groups that would eventually be counted heterodox.[13]

If we were also to include in our set of texts those that most likely date from the first half of the second century, such as 2*Clement*, *Letter to Barnabas* and Ignatius's letters, I do not think it would take long to show that these texts also contain narrative structures (expressed once again in overlapping terminologies) parallel to those I have indicated above. And thus, unless we significantly multiply lost Christian writers from this period, or suppose an extremely widespread lack of consonance between the beliefs and practices of Christian communities and those within them who produced our surviving texts, it seems that these narrative patterns can fairly be described as fundamental in our earliest Christian texts.

However, attending to the conversations of this discursive space provides us with only a small part of the picture. The essay by Rowan Williams, referred to earlier, also makes claims about the drive toward communication between communities that seems to have marked those early Christian communities of which we have secure knowledge. While (obviously enough) we cannot speak of a unified institutional organization in this period, we do see complex networks of communication between Christian communities. Williams points to Paul's reference to the "collection for the saints" (1Cor 16.1-3), to networks resulting from relationships of dependence on a missionary founder, and to networks that seem to

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[11] The same remark would apply also to some construals of Q as "sapiential"; but at present I am unconvinced of Q's existence, and have not discussed it here.

[12] The most compelling evidence here is famously provided by 1Tim 1.4, 6.20 and Col. 2.8-19. For examples of more oblique allusions, which may represent evidence for early Christians taking such paths, see 1John 4.2, 2Peter 3.16 and Jude 1.4-8.

[13] King (2003), chps. 5 & 6 nicely documents the history of scholarship here.

reflect an assumed pattern that inter-communication between Christian groups was foundational.[14] These networks are first revealed in the Pauline corpus, and may be traced well into the second century. Thus the genre of the letter occupies a central place in the literature of the early second century. We have for example, the letters of "Clement", Ignatius, and Polycarp, and we know of a number of other writers whose texts are now lost. While, in some cases, these letters reveal to us communities in serious disagreement, it is noteworthy how often their writers adopt a tone of correction, assuming that they deal with disagreements within communities that might be resolved without breaking communion. An emergent marking of boundaries seems underway in this network of communities, but we are still dealing with a network for whose dispersed leaders mutual communication was perceived as an important task.[15] It is, of course, difficult to speak concretely about the contexts within which the gospels were produced (either institutional contexts, or contexts within particular traditions of education and thought), but the bare fact that they appear to have been nurtured within communities that sustained patterns of inter-communication offers us a fundamental point of departure and warns us against assuming too easily simple distinctions between different earliest Christian groups.

III: On Diversities

At this point the question of what one means by "unity" and "diversity" has begun to impinge. Recent scholarship on diversity within second century Christianity has focused on uncovering diversities hidden by rhetorics of unity. While this theoretical perspective has been extremely useful to many scholars of early Christian thought and practice, its success has perhaps diverted us from sufficiently attending to tools for examining different types of diversity. That problem is perhaps peculiarly apparent when we consider Christianity at the turn of the second century. As fewer and fewer scholars retain faith in the idea of an early fully-formed Gnostic myth, the assertion of a plurality of Christianities at *both* the turn of the second and third

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[14] Williams (1989), 12.

[15] For a strong argument that the marking of boundaries concerning "heresy" and "orthodoxy" was inherited by Christians from second Temple contexts see now Royalty (2013), partly in opposition to Le Boulluec (1985). For my own part I think Le Boulluec accurately charts the rise of a particular mode of marking distinction. In a subsequent essay (Le Boulluec (1996)) also points to the necessity of a certain scriptural culture for this mode of boundary marking – a point to which a number of my points later in this essay are parallel.

centuries begs significant theoretical questions. Believers in such all-encompassing plurality must claim the "plurality" of late first century Christianity, but what sort of plurality may now be plausibly suggested?[16]

As a contribution to theoretical reflection I suggest once again the usefulness of Wittgenstein's famous "family resemblances". Discussing what it is that enables the category "games" Wittgenstein writes:

> …we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail… the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way… and for instance the kinds of number form a family in the same way. Why do we call something a 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.[17]

The adaptation of Wittgenstein's discussion by the social anthropologist Rodney Needham provides a particularly useful example of how this principle may be used.[18] In reflecting particularly on kinship relations Needham's model envisages a set, say of 5 individuals A-E. A, B, and C share three characteristics, 1, 2 and 3. Individuals C and D share characteristic 3 and another, 4. D and E share characteristic 5, while E shares characteristic 6 with A. B and E thus share none of the six characteristics, but they are intertwined in a network of relationships that constitute a class.

From one angle this model provides a theoretical basis for thinking about how we might speak about a highly pluralistic set "Christianity" at various points in the second century, some members of the set sharing only a few features with other members (and perhaps none with some others). But, the same model also presses us

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[16] Such a statement of Christianity's "pluralism" at this point in time may be found in Karen King's essay in this volume.

[17] Wittgenstein (2009), §66-67. Cf. idem (1958), 17ff.

[18] See Needham (1975), advancing on his earlier discussions of kinship and drawing on a parallel appropriation of Wittgenstein's model in the botanical sciences.

to think more clearly about those forms of Christian belief that are most like each other, and hence about elements within the Christian mix that are peculiarly continuous. With reference to the question of Christian beliefs at the turn of the second century the model, I suggest, enables us to note the fairly dense set of family resemblances with reference to the narrative patterns to which I have pointed.

Noting family resemblances is a complex art, requiring a certain aesthetic judgment whose results will always be open to contestation. For an example, an expanding on my observations in the previous section of the paper I would suggest that one of the striking family resemblances between the sets of terms used to describe that which was present in Christ lies in a common space, a common begging of and hinting at ontological questions of intra-divine relationship that remain unanswered. This space is not only that within which some of the fundamental doctrinal debates of the second century will emerge, but also one which surely helps to stimulate or at least make possible some of the avenues of cosmological speculation of which I have spoken. Thus, we need not fear that the identification of family resemblances necessarily involves corralling data into a class that hides complexity; the concept may actually focus our attention on common patterns of ambiguity and complexity within a class.

IV: The Discursive Space of Proto-Orthodox Christianity c. 200

Let us now leap forward to the end of the second century. I want, first, to point out at the heart of proto-orthodox writers the very same patterns that I identified earlier. It might seem that one obvious source for identifying basic narrative structures in such writers would be their "rules of faith", these "rules" actually tend to say only very little about the relationship of Christians to Christ.[19] Longer summary statements of the economy of creation and redemption certainly do say much more, but I have picked two brief examples that show my narrative patterns underlying complex exegetical argument[20] This procedure not only shows them to be deeply

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[19] For a strong argument that the *regulae* have a narrative structure see Blowers (1997). See also Blowers (2012) for an extended argument that a basic narrative of creation and salvation governs much early Christian discussion of the creation.

[20] For an example which does offer a summary treatment of "salvation history" see Irenaeus, *Dem.* 4-5, 40-41. Paras 42b-97 offer detailed discussion of Old Testament texts that draws out these earlier summary statements.

embedded in the imaginative world of these thinkers, but will also highlight a significant difference between the two periods on which I have commented.

In *Against Heresies* 5 (written c. 190) Irenaeus emphasizes that just as the one Son and Lord grants creation to us, he saves through establishing the Eucharistic bread and wine as his body and blood, that body and blood through which he redeemed us (quoting Colossians 1.14, and alluding to a number of creation texts). His body and blood nourishes our fleshy bodies so that, when they die, like cuttings from a vine which eventually bear their own fruit, they will rise, despite decomposition, into immortality. The nourishing of our bodies now, and their rising from decomposition occurs through the power of God (quoting texts from 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians and Luke), and in that nourishing we see at work the Spirit and Word who sustain the whole of creation. The resurrection that we will undergo is a resurrection into the glory of God.[21] The action of Christ in saving is thus linked to the act of creating and, because the same agent is at work throughout, Christians find themselves drawn toward the eschaton through their relationship to the pivotal action of the Creator in Christ, and because of the continuing act and presence of Christ and the Spirit.

With this passage compare an observation Tertullian offers in his polemic *Against Marcion* (written c. 207/8). At 5.7 Tertullian comments on 1Cor 5.7's "cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump":

> …so that the unleavened bread was to the Creator, a figure of ourselves, and in this sense too Christ our Passover was sacrificed. Yet how can Christ be the Passover except that the Passover is a figure of Christ because of the similitude between the saving blood of the <paschal> lamb and of Christ? How can [Paul] have applied to us and to Christ the likenesses of the Creator's solemnities, if they were not ours already?[22]

Christ is the Creator's Christ, coming from him before all things, and all things in creation point toward him. Thus, the history of Israel, ordered by the Creator, prepares the way for Christ and points toward what he will do for us. When Paul links together Christ, the events and rites of Israel's history, and the life of Christians, he does so because this is how the Creator sees those relationships. This dense

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[21] Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.2.2.

[22] Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.7 (Evans, 550-551).

comment relies on a narrative assumption that links Christ's incarnate activity to the Creator, and our lives to Christ as not only savior but also revealer of the creation's true purpose. The principle enunciated here sums up a practice Tertullian has already deployed in many places. At 4.40, for example, Tertullian comments on Christ's institution of the eucharist. Why does Christ say at Luke 22.15: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you"? It cannot be, Tertullian jokes sarcastically, just because Jesus likes lamb. Rather it was because Christ sought, in the first place, to fulfill prophecy and thus reveal the meaning of Israel's scripture. But, in the second place, Christ also creates figures and symbols out of himself that enable us to grasp the new mystery of our existence. Here, these symbols identify Christ's actual body as the bread that gives us life now and until the end.

From one perspective, such passages show us an important continuity between our earliest Christian texts and those of the "proto-orthodox". We see the same narrative patterns embedded in texts at both ends of our temporal spectrum, and in both cases we see similar sets of biblical terminologies used to express those patterns. Before I remark on some fundamental differences that are also apparent, allow me to make a further point about the discursive space of proto-orthodox Christianity. While the rise of mono-episcopacy has been the feature of ecclesiological organization that frequently grabs the attention of scholars, this period also sees a subtle development in continuity of that drive to inter-communication of which I spoke earlier. The letter continues to be a central feature of early Christian literature. It is, however, during the late second and early third century that we begin to see evidence of reasonably large scale meetings of Christian leaders, and we also know well-known figures were occasionally called on as mediators in theological disputes (Origen's travels are perhaps the best example).[23] Once again, the importance of shared narrative structures seems to grow in importance when they are seen to be shared by figures

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[23] Peter Lampe inadvertently offers an interesting parallel on the micro level in his seminal study of Christians in Rome during the second century. One of Lampe's central concerns is to articulate what he calls the "fractionation" of the Roman Christian community, the manner in which Christians seem to have divided, from a very early date into diverse small "house churches" through the city, possibly mapping onto the shape of the Roman Jewish community. And yet, even though Lampe argues strongly that there was no one Roman bishop exercising sole command of these communities until the last couple of decades of the second century, in his discussion of fractionation and theological plurality Lampe finds himself noting the extent to which these communities were also able to act together in situations of dispute. See Lampe (2003), 385-408.

whose milieu was one that promoted mutual interchange. In the essay to which I have referred throughout this discussion, Rowan Williams also argues that the persistent desire for mutual communication is also part of the pressure that drove Christians from the very early stages to a negotiation over boundaries.[24] I think there is much in this suggestion, and focusing on the wider phenomenon of mutual communication between communities who seem to have shared similar implicit narratives, helps us to think more clearly about what is actually distinctive about the manner in which the proto-orthodox marked doctrinal boundaries.

This last sentence draws us to the significant differences between our two periods, and some of the most important stem from the character of late second-century exegetical culture. Proto-orthodox writers treat the texts of the emerging "New Testament" as part of a scriptural corpus all of which is appropriately examined using methods adapted from Hellenistic traditions of literary analysis.[25] Adopting these methods has significantly shaped the character of Christian speculation. For example, in the late second and early third centuries, Christian writers increasingly engage in careful parsing of individual terms and phrases in both "Old" and "New" testaments using ancient literary-critical techniques – identifying connotations, exploring ambiguities and interpreting terms with contemporary philosophical content, commenting on the grammar of sentences which speak of "Father" and "Son" in relationship – and this work plays a vital role in how beliefs are defined and explored.

What we see in the rise of this exegetical practice and speculative tradition is, in other terms, one of the most important ways in which we can still usefully think of Christianity as being (further) "hellenized" during the second century. Even though there are (thankfully) very few scholars of this period left who think of the second century as a period in which Christianity moves from being expressed in "semitic" terms to being expressed in "Greek" (the complex continuities between Hellenized Jewish traditions and the thought world of late second century Christianity have rendered the idea far too blunt a tool), there are contexts in which the concept remains helpful. Christoph Markschies argues that there is only one in the second century,

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[24] Williams (1989), 14.

[25] For my own contribution to the context within which at point at which this culture emerges see Ayres (2014). Seminal here is the work of Young (1997) and Neuschäfer (1987).

and that is with reference to the evolution of "school" structures (especially in Alexandria and Rome) that mirror ancient philosophical institutions.[26] Within such contexts modes of Christian thinking that incorporate pre-Christian Hellenistic academic practices and styles of speculation are adapted to Christian use and thus a more intensely and consciously "hellenized" Christian speculative practice emerges; "hellenization" in this sense is a negotiation within the Hellenic tradition, rather than an entering into it from "outside".[27] While the concept of "hellenization" once served to mark clear cultural distinctions, in this revised and somewhat chastened form it may help us to explore complex relationships of continuity and discontinuity. Now, Markschies's argument is extremely helpful, but also rather restrictive in his focus on Alexandria. While there are certainly particular forms of this development in Alexandria, we see this exegetical culture appearing in a number of centers across the Mediterranean during the period between 160 and 220 – Irenaeus and Tertullian both being excellent witnesses to the phenomenon. I suggest that the development of a particular exegetical and speculative culture is actually at the heart of this late second century "hellenization".

One of the best examples of what this process means for this paper is provided by discussion in these writers of the relationship between the Father and that which was present in Christ – an area of theological speculation discussed earlier in the paper. The same basic range of terminology found in our earliest texts is apparent in the texts of this latter period, and yet the mode of discussion has changed. At the risk of significant over-simplification, we should note both the increased attention to how the terms are used in particular scriptural passages, and the increasingly sophisticated arguments about which philosophical resources can most persuasively be brought to bear to press the ambiguities of the text (which in part involves judging how the text governs and shapes such appropriation). This new speculative dynamic is, fairly obviously, dependent on shifts in notions of how the text of scripture should function in argument. Our earliest texts witness to the adaptation of earlier Jewish (and hellenized Jewish) conceptualities, and that adaptation proceeds in part by some basic exegetical maneuvers that may find their origins in both Jewish and Greek contexts; toward the end of the second century we see an intentional claim made on and a far

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[26] Markschies (2012), (2012a) and (2007).

[27] In this sense I would endorse considerable portions of Lyman (2003).

denser use made of techniques of hellenistic literary analysis, and we see those techniques now used on an (at the least) implicit canon of Christian texts. This latter phenomenon involves a significant shift – and certainly involves the increasing centrality of those particular sets found within these particular texts as opposed to other earliest Christian sets that did not receive much coverage in those texts that became canonical – and yet, we must speak of a shift accompanied by considerable continuity.

Recent work on the history of Christian thought would also resist the sense that the developments we see here is best comprehended as simply a move from a lack of doctrinal definition toward increasingly precise definition. There is certainly a move, partly driven by doctrinal controversy, to rule out certain options (debate over "adoptionist" accounts provides a good example).[28] But, even as there is a clearer marking of theological boundaries in the late second and early third century, the disputes of that period frequently also involve (at the very least implicit) attempts to preserve nodal points of mystery in the relationship between "Father" and "Son". Irenaeus and Tertullian, writing in different polemical contexts, both argue against particular construals of the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit (from rather different perspectives); but both share a belief that the text of Scripture enables a certain precision in our speech about these relationships even as what remains unsaid and the sheer distinction between human and divine existence renders fundamental features of them incomprehensible and ineffable, ultimately approachable only through some form of analogical exploration.[29] Careful attention to such discussions enables a fuller appreciation of the complex but clear "family" resemblances between our earliest Christian texts and those of the "proto-orthodox". And thus, if the narrative patterns to which I have drawn attention provide warrant for the claim that there are fundamental continuities between the two periods I have considered, my brief discussion of shifts in exegetical practice suggests a key context within which I think we can best explore the similarities and differences across this "long second century".

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[28] I would be happy also to side with those who have argued that, in various respects, these debates do not simply involve the rejection of a position taken to be beyond the pale, but its cannibalization and adoption.

[29] Thus, for example, compare Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2. 13.2-4 and Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 10-11.

IV: Conclusion

Setting apart the scholarly construct of a second century Christian smorgasbord, of a set of Christianities each of which may claim a foundation in the diverse phenomenon of earliest Christianity, I suggest that there is one late second-century tradition that can fairly claim close family connections with themes that seem fundamental to our earliest Christian texts – and it is the tradition of the "proto-orthodox". The claim by an Irenaeus or a Tertullian to have maintained the faith of the apostles of course needs much nuance, but dismissing it as naïve or as deceitful rhetoric is not good history. Indeed, that this tradition demonstrates such continuity recommends the story of its development as still a (or one) suitable backbone around which we can narrate second century Christianity. Making such a claim, however, need not involve denying the complex pluralities and diversities that are also apparent in this period.[30]

And so if one asks "what is the consequence of beginning with a story of historical development and continuity, rather than with a picture of stark plurality?" I would say that we should find ourselves drawn toward particular forms of caution. In particular, we must show great caution about where we identify boundaries. Much excellent scholarly work that has been done in recent years to show that the work of establishing boundaries was undertaken in different ways throughout the century, and was always a work in progress. Discovering where those boundaries lay was by no means obvious even to those whose grasp of the core was most strong. Obviously enough, and against the thrust of much current scholarly orthodoxy, I think the claim of the "proto-orthodox" that Valentinian and Sethian mythologies were incompatible with some core features of Christian discursive space as it had developed since the late first century is not that surprising. But, to make a claim of this form does not mean that we have to assume anachronistically that the boundaries of that space were apparent to all at the time.

The gradual development within Christianity of that "Hellenized" interpretive culture apparent toward the end of the second century is unsurprisingly presaged by earlier engagements with Hellenistic culture. Teachers such as Basilides,

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[30] An interesting parallel argument about the continuities in Christian thought over the second century is provided by Markschies (2007), 381-3.

Valentinus and Justin copied models of Hellenistic teaching and speculation, and adapted modes of textual criticism and allegorization whose roots ran deep in pre-Christian Greek culture. But, in turn, this adaptation cannot be counted simply an alien imposition both because of the elements of Hellenized Jewish thought and speculation that seem intrinsic to the conceptual world of earliest Christian writing, and because the Christian documents of this period themselves make use of Greek rhetorical and compositional technique. And thus, it may both be true that from the fundamental Christian narratives of Christ's relationship to the creative and salvific work of God developed the Christianity of the "rules of faith", and that the cosmological ambiguities of earliest Christianity (and the Jewish thought worlds of the period) also at least offered a fertile soil for the speculations that flowered in the early decades of the second century.

The question remains, then, whether we can or should speak of multiple Christianities during the second century. Here also, caution is in order. Perhaps we can do worse than look to the odd dynamic we see at work in Origen's *Against Celsus*. Celsus condemns the Christian tendency to divide into factions. Reading him charitably, Origen responds with two rhetorical ploys. The first, in Book 3, is to argue that factions arise necessarily when the philosophically cultured differ over matters of exegesis and we should not be surprised if Christians do likewise. Here Origen allows the name Christian a remarkably broad extent.[31] However, in Book 5, Origen takes a different tack and accords some of these groups distinct names, and to identify distinct doctrines that separate them from the truth. Here Celsus is wrong to speak so easily of division when some of those he classes together are simply outside the fold of the Christian.[32] Origen's account is, obviously enough, an apology for his own Christian community; but it perhaps suggests the need for a dual strategy in our own naming. Extending the term "Christianity" in the singular or plural form is, at times, pedagogically useful and historically sensitive to those convinced by Wittgenstein's model. But the task of comparison is also possible and necessary. As historians we *must* permit ourselves to explore how and where the core of this family set is to be found and we should, as historians, allow ourselves to ask about questions

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[31] *c. Cels.* 3. 12ff. Cf. Clement, *Strom.* 7. 15. 89ff.

[32] *c. Cels.* 5. 61ff.

about the evolution and development of that family's characteristics down the generations.