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After Jesus, Before Christianity

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This fall I've been teaching a 13-week "World Religions" class to undergraduates at Frederick Community College. Their final papers are due tonight at midnight. Last week, for our final class, we revisited three major themes that we traced throughout the course. I would like to briefly share them with you to help set the stage for our exploration of the time period that came *after* the death of the historical Jesus, but *before* "Christianity."

The three major themes woven throughout my students' 13-week journey through the world's religions are (1) that definitions matter, (2) original diversity, and (3) that our responses matter. Today, I'll use Christian origins and traditions as our jumping off point for each of these three themes, although we could examine each of the world's religions through these same lenses, and find similar results.

1. **Definitions matter.** *Who decides* what "Christianity" means? *Who controls* which parts of the tradition are emphasized—and which are neglected or suppressed? And crucially, *who benefits* (and who loses out) as a consequence of these decisions. As you have heard me quote before, "If you are not at the table, you might end up on the menu." Or, as the Broadway musical *Hamilton* taught us: it matters who is "in the room where it happens." Definitions matter, and how religions are *defined* is never a purely impartial process, happening in a vacuum; the historical trajectory of religions is

a function of unbalanced relationships that typically favor the powerful over historically oppressed groups.

2. Original diversity: Often, students sign up for a World Religions class expecting to study the differences *between* religions, and that is one good approach; however, an equally valuable task is to notice the diversity *within* each of the world's religions. For instance, there has never been one monolithic "Christianity"; rather, there have always been Christianities—*plural*. If we look around the world today, consider the many differences between a Roman Catholic mass at the Vatican, an evangelical megachurch in Texas, a simple Amish Sunday Service in Pennsylvania, a progressive Christian congregation in Manhattan, a snake-handling church in Appalachia, and a base? community in Brazil that is grounded in Latin American Liberation Theology. I could go on with many more examples, the point being that the more you zoom out to consider all the different types of Christianities in the world today, the more you might wonder to what extent it even makes sense to call these diverse examples parts of a single religion. One can similarly break down all the competing Hinduism(s), Buddhism(s), Judaism(s), Islam(s), Paganism(s)—and more. There is immense diversity, not only *among* the world's religions, but also *within* each tradition. And if we turn back the clock, we find that, in all the world's religions, there is diversity, messiness, and competition over power, control, and who gets to determine which of various meanings and interpretations can claim to go back to the very beginning.

3. Responses matter: Given the diversity we have been exploring, there are consequential personal choices to be made, and I encourage my students to take responsibility for such choices. In the words of the interfaith activist Eboo Patel from his memoir Acts of Faith, we are personally accountable for whether our individual religious choices help create "bubbles," "barriers," "bombs," or "bridges."

Now, in contrast to that way of exploring the history of a religion, a very different approach is often employed by orthodox traditions; their versions of religious history are often attempts to tell their story from only one perspective, and then declaring that perspective to be the one, exclusively-true historical and religious version from which all others are judged—and deemed heretical deviations. Religion scholars refer to such

an approach as “creating a **master narrative**,” one that seeks to dominate, control, and subsume all alternative versions of the story (Westar 2).

We will continue to use the word, “Christianity” as a case study for our focus today (although, again, we could do the same with all the world’s religions).

For example, there are ways of telling the story of Christianity that focus on the apostle **Peter** as the heir apparent to the historical Jesus. In this telling, Peter passed on the so-called “one true Gospel” to Linus (the second pope) and so on, in a purported unbroken line of apostolic succession that goes all the way down to Jorge Bergoglio, today known by the traditional reckoning as Pope Francis, the 266th pope.

If you read the Gospel of John closely, however, scholars point to signs of a community growing around John, the “Beloved Disciple,” as a more central leader than Peter. And if you read the Book of James, there are indications of a community (likely Jerusalem) in which Jesus’s brother **James** was the primary leader after Jesus’s death. Likewise with respect to **Paul’s** letters, he seems most important there, and the same goes for the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary, in which there were communities focusing primarily around perspective favored by **Thomas** or **Mary**.

As you begin to adjudicate between these competing claims of authority, a question may arise—as John Dominic Crossan explored in his book *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography: “How Many Years Was Easter Sunday?”* (190) What Crossan means is that the traditions around “what happened” after Jesus’s death were not one story of one morning told and retold in an unchanging way until today; rather, these varying traditions were *years* in the making. This is true both for the supposed date of the Easter (which seems not to have been set until at least a full century after Jesus’ death) but also true for the stories about Jesus’ appearances after his death, accounts which were shaped by their telling and retelling, as Jesus’s various followers struggled to make sense of his traumatic death. Clearly, these stories were told in different ways by the different communities of Jesus’s followers that gathered around various competing leaders in those early generations following Jesus’s crucifixion.

The Harvard historian of religion Karen King puts it this way in her book, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*:

The beginning is often portrayed as the ideal to which Christianity should aspire and conform. Here Jesus spoke to his disciples and the gospel was preached in truth. Here the churches were formed in the power of the Spirit and Christians lived in unity and love with one another.... But what happens if we tell the story differently? **What if the beginning was a time of grappling and experimentation? What if the meaning of the gospel was not clear and Christians struggled to understand who Jesus was...?**" (158)

Remember the three themes with which we began? *Definitions matter*: who decides what "Christianity" means? Who benefits and who loses out? *Original diversity*: there's not one true "right" history. And *our responses matter*: which parts of the histories of religion will we choose to valorize—and which will we choose to deprecate?

I've been thinking about all these matters recently, while reading a new book published by The Westar Institute just over a month ago, titled After Jesus, Before Christianity: A Historical Exploration of the First Two Centuries of Jesus Movements. Some of you may remember the Westar Institute from the 1990s, when they made major headlines with a project called the Jesus Seminar (xvii). Perhaps most famously, the Jesus Seminar made the claim (for which there's a pretty good scholarly argument) that the historical Jesus likely said only about 20 percent of what is attributed to him in the Bible.

Since then, the Westar Institute has continued its work with: the "Acts Seminar" on the Acts of the Apostles; the "Paul Seminar" on the apostle Paul; and the "God Seminar," exploring contemporary understandings of what is meant by the word "God." Westar's latest focus is their "Christianity Seminar," focusing on the time between the life of the historical Jesus and various conceptualizations of what is referred to as "Christianity."

As it turns out, neither Jesus, nor Paul—nor any other of those earliest generations after Jesus's death—would have understood themselves as "Christians." That term came later. Admittedly, in retrospect, it can be difficult today not to apply that term anachronistically to much earlier periods and figures. See, for example, *Paul Was*

Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle by Pamela Eisenbaum.

My warning today to beware of historical religious inaccuracies and anachronisms echoes our Sunday explorations a few weeks ago around the history of Thanksgiving—a tradition much messier and more complicated than one single unquestioned—but oft-touted—version of a simple 400-year unbroken line of annual meal traditions. And in two weeks, we'll explore a similar dynamic with regard to the historical origins of the many kinds of Buddhism.

For now, with regard to the origins of “Christianity,” historical scholarship concludes that, in the early decades following the death of the historical Jesus, not only is there no evidence that Jesus had any intention of founding a religion—or calling it “Christianity”; **“The use of the term ‘Christian’ was very rare, with no certain occurrence in the first century”** (11).

Indeed, if we look at all twenty-seven books of the “Christian” New Testament, we might think that the word “Christian” would appear numerous times. But it actually only occurs three times: twice in the books of Acts and once in the book of 1 Peter (15). Moreover, it's not clear that “Christian” is even the best contemporary English translation of that Greek word *christianos*, because in its original contexts, none of these three usages has anything like the connotations of the concept of “Christianity” as it later came to be understood in the third and fourth centuries—i.e., as that of a religion based upon believing certain creedal claims about theology.

Instead, back then, *christianos* had the implied sense of asking whether people were associated with the man Jesus who had been called the “Anointed One” or the “Messiah”—complicated terms we won't unpack in our limited time today (16-18). An additional use of a related Latin word *christianus* in a letter written by a Roman magistrate named Pliny the Younger also has very different connotations than today's usages of “Christianity.”

So, our first important point is that usage of the word in the Bible often translated as “Christian” (and additionally from that one extra-biblical account) is surprisingly rare. And the second important point is that all four of these references come, not from the first century at all, , but from the early-to-mid second century—

approximately a century or more after the life of the historical Jesus. Both Acts and 1 Peter are comparatively late New Testament documents (23).

Providing further context, it is helpful to keep in mind that, **“no New Testament existed in the first two centuries”** (304). Instead, the various documents that were later collected in the anthology now known as the *New Testament* were just being written during that time, along with a wide variety of other documents that were later excluded from the official orthodox biblical canon. If you are curious to learn more, Bart Ehrman has written a fascinating book titled [Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew](#).

So what did the earliest followers of Jesus call themselves? A whole variety of things (24)! In general, everything was much more local and regional at that time. You didn't have fast modes of transportation like cars, or instant means of communication like phones, TVs, and the Internet.

Growing up today when books are ubiquitous, Bibles are everywhere, and literacy rates are high, it can be difficult to appreciate that in the first two hundred years after Jesus's death:

Few people in these movements could read or write; literacy was minimal. Most people of the time were subsistence farmers, weavers and other artisans, day laborers, and merchants.... Few were wealthy and even fewer were authors.... One might be able to do the minimal necessary reading for marketplace transactions without ever going to school. People who did not write much, or at all, still were highly skilled at communication in daily life. Probably neither Jesus nor the great majority of his followers knew how to read or write.... They were busy with pithy parables, pointed assertions, clever blessings.... (304).

And they gathered in small, dispersed groups, usually in homes, to share potluck meals and support one another. It was only much later that large churches were built and professional priests appointed to direct them.

There is so much more to say about this, but let me give you four quick broad-stroke summaries that have become important touchstones for me in understanding the time period after Jesus and before Christianity:

1. **Jesus's life, words, and deeds meant *more than one thing*, and there is not one simple meaning or belief to focus upon.** (For more on the early oral tradition, see "[Remembering, Changing, Inventing: How Stories About Jesus Were Told.](#)")
2. **No one "heir apparent" was clearly designated by Jesus to pass along his message in an unchanging apostolic succession.** And even if that was Jesus's intent (which based on clear scholarly evidence, it wasn't), there is no reason we would still have to limit ourselves to that today.
3. The Christian tradition is **about much more than the identity of one individual male** (even Jesus); it's about the building over time of the beloved community.
4. **The earliest story is not always the best one.** There are wonderful (and terrible) aspects of the Christian tradition that have changed and evolved far beyond their apparent origins. It is not the case that there were some pure and perfect origins that were somehow later corrupted. Rather, scholars such as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza invite us to consider whether there has **always been an ongoing cultural struggle for equality and community *over and against* domination and control** (199).

Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, a student of Schüssler-Fiorenza, similarly argues that: **if the way someone is teaching and practicing Christianity contributes to the "liberation and dignity of all people," then we should support it**—a criteria strongly in line with our [UU Principles](#). Conversely, Johnson-Debaufre argues that, if the way someone is teaching and practicing Christianity leads to domination and control (including domination by individual men over women or over other historically oppressed peoples), we should oppose it (200).

For now, as I move toward my conclusion, let's link our exploration of "After Jesus and Before Christianity" back to the three themes we started with:

First, **definitions matter**: we don't have to limit our understandings of Jesus and the Christian tradition to one exclusive meaning, especially if we—or people who represent our interests and concerns—weren't even at the table or in the room where it happened. We can set our own table, come to our own conclusions, and widen our

circles of inclusion, inviting as diverse a set of people as possible to join us at the table. I would argue that that this is exactly what Jesus would have done.

Second, **original diversity** debates about the one, “true” historical Jesus and his intentions will never be settled once and for all. But our concern was never solely about the identity of one individual male, but rather about a larger movement for social justice which Jesus called “the Kingdom of God,” a movement which today has come to be known in our current “this worldly” context by the more-inclusive name of the Beloved Community.

Third, our **responses matter**: regardless of what did or didn’t happen two thousand years ago, what matters most is **whether we choose to seek justice, mercy, reconciliation, and compassion here and now**. I am grateful to be with you on that journey.