The Concept of "Community" and the History of Early Christianity

Stanley Stowers

Department of Religious Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI 02906, USA
Stanley_Stowers@brown.edu

Abstract
The pervasive assumption that all Christian literature and history in the first one hundred years or so sprang from and mirrored communities inhibits historical explanation by social and psychological theory that is normal for the rest of the academy. A community in this sense is a highly coherent social formation with commonality in thought and practice. The idea that the Christian movement began with these communities derives from Christianity's own myth of origins, but has been taken as historical reality. The myth can be traced to Paul, Acts and Eusebius.

The way the concept of "communities" and "community" is deployed in scholarship hinders historical work on early Christianity, especially if early Christianity is to be treated as a normal human social phenomenon studied in the non-sectarian university (Stowers 2009). In contemporary English, "community" has a number of senses connected to uses developed in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and North America. One sense of the word is territorial or features place as in "rural communities" and "flooding affected many households in the community." A neighborhood in this sense can be called a community even if its inhabitants have almost no social interaction with one another. We also speak of a "linguistic community," although there may be enormous cultural and political differences among those speakers. The range of meanings that has been important for scholarship on ancient Christianity, however, has a different history not only in Christian thought, but also in European and American social and political thought. This is the idea of community as a deep social and mental coherence, a commonality in mind and practice. Although Enlightenment traditions sometimes approached the idea as in the French Revolution's fraternity in "liberty, equality and fraternity,"

it has been the anti-Enlightenment and Romantic traditions that have featured community in this sense. Most famously, the sense was central to Fascism, National Socialism, many other Twentieth Century pre-World War Two conservative movements and both Christian and non-Christian forms of communitarianism. A now much criticized, but influential sociological approach to the concept is found in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) with his dualism between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the former supposedly based upon the essential will (*Wesenwille*) of the participant. The idea of an essential and totalizing identity and commitment is very much like the idea of early Christian conversion. Factors within Christian traditions together with broader European culture have contributed to pervasive appeal to communities and community that have made the study of early Christian history oddly different from other ancient history.

I. Romantic Historiography and the Early Christians

Thus, the uses of these concepts in the study of early Christianity are far from descriptive and analytical.[1] They instead carry strongly normative freight from both of these historical sources. In making this claim, I want to make something clear: I am not invoking a variety of historicism which suggests that a word or concept's history somehow intrinsically inheres in later uses of the word or the related idea that words accumulate masses of historical implications from their histories that inhere in words as individuals use them. I am simply claiming that "community" belongs to a larger discourse about early Christianity that shapes the meanings that readers attribute to the word. So, while it would certainly be wrong to imply that the liabilities of "community" discussed here appear whenever a scholar uses the word, the promiscuous use of the term in the field, on the whole, does manifest the problems.

One among several routes for Romantic influence is a link to interpretation of the canonical Gospels. Johann Gottfried Herder (1782-3; 1822; 1833) contrasted the author/audience kind of prose literature to a more primitive and authentic kind of literature exemplified by ancient poetry and the Hebrew Bible. Because the Hebrew literature derived from the original pure primitive roots of the nation, the Bible escaped the decadence of literature from Greco-Roman times of the New Testament. The more authentic and *Geist*-filled literature came not from the rational manufacture of authors, but grew organically from peoples, cultures and communities. Herder's account of the Gospels pro-

---

[1] I am, of course, not claiming that my descriptive and analytical concepts are somehow free from all normative implications.

vided the basis for later Form Criticism and standard assertions about oral tradition, a fact well recognized in standard New Testament scholarship (Kümmel 1970: 79-83; Baird 1992: 177-83). The form critics and many of their heirs have continued to deny that the early Christian writings are properly literature. Letters and Gospels are rather deposits of folk speech or so-called oral tradition. The Gospels contained the *Geist* of the preaching, teaching and primitive churches because they are residues of oral speech such as parables, stories, testimonies and "the gospel message itself." Thus the essential core of the New Testament writings is both an expression of an authentic non-literary individual-social experience and Hebrew-Jewish in its essence, in spite of some external Greek forms. Herder's work had a profound influence on Hermann Gunkel, usually seen as the founder of Form Criticism, and the History of Religions School. Another member of that "school" was Johannes Weiss, the teacher of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann, who also studied with Gunkel, was the most important exponent of Form Criticism of the Gospels.

The Form Critics did not emphasize the experience of discrete local communities expressed in the Gospels, because following certain German Romantic strains, they thought of them as collections of small oral texts that had been composed and circulated among folk communities over time in ways too complex to identify the mark of particular communities. Central to their approach were the Romantic ideas of communal creativity and communal authorship. The Redaction Criticism that developed from the work of the Form Critics kept their assumptions, but complained that the Form Critics had neglected the editors who had collected this material and composed it in ways that reflected social settings (i.e., *Sitze im Leben*) that were more than the Form Critics' sorting of materials into those that had come from Palestinian Jewish Christian, Hellenistic Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian communities. This move fleshed out the German Romantic equation of unique historical experience, language, tradition and *Volk* in terms of unique Christian communities. Increasingly, Redaction Critics treated the Gospels not only as originating in the experience of particular Christian communities, but also as being stories about Jesus that were also stories and lessons about the communities of authorship. It has become standard to speak of the Markan community, the Matthean community, the Johannine community, and finally, the Lukan community (e.g., Esler 1987). With Luke and Acts there was some hesitation because Luke was thought to be more like a normal Hellenistic author and thus the idea of something that suggested communal authorship was exposed for its oddness.

The idea that the Gospels reveal communities has been approached in two ways that are often combined. First, the author's "theology" might be seen as

the thought that was created or developed in a particular community, the theology that defined and differentiated the community from other communities. Here the writer is the voice of the group. Second, the writer might be seen as composing a story about Jesus that in almost every detail addresses issues and needs of a particular community. The Gospels are almost like allegories about communities or sermons for particular communities (Bauckham 1998). Scholars have even attempted to outline the history of these communities on the basis of reading the gospels in this way. Books with titles such as *Matthew's Community* and *The Social History of the Matthean Community* and extensive scholarly discussions about the history of the Johannine community (Brodie 1993: 15-21) signal the centrality of this consensus that sees the Gospels as community products and as about particular communities.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an important and salutary turn toward the social sciences and social history in the study of early Christianity.[2] The trend, however, exacerbated the tendency to read communities behind early Christian writings. Although the scholarly trend was helpful in bringing into the discussion other social formations such as households and schools, the assumption that from the beginning the basic social formation in the movement that would become Christianity was communities was rarely questioned. The question was usually about the social organization of these communities. That is, were they egalitarian, or hierarchical, or patriarchal, or sectarian and so on?[3] Against my strong expectations, scholarship on the Corinthian letters—with all of the obvious evidence for social disunity—did not turn out to be an exception to this tendency. It has certainly been a gain to bring in reflection on issues such as social strata, women and gender and patron/client relations. Nevertheless, the scholarship usually works with the idea of an existing coherent "congregation" as a social norm against which other social considerations and occasionally other social formations are viewed.[4] In spite of talk about social stratification, scholarship with a social bent still suffers from a pervasive confusion of solidarity with equality (e.g., Horsley 2004). My admittedly untested intuition is that in addition to the desire for liberal values, the

---

[2] There is a great deal of literature here and some genuinely excellent work—in spite of an often rather peculiar appropriation of work from the social sciences to advance various Christian theological agendas (see Hanson 1994: 63-119).

[3] One example is the debate over "love patriarchalism" with its heavily normative Christian theological agenda: e.g., Horrell (1996).

[4] A good overview of this scholarship can be found in the collection of articles, Adams and Horrell (2004). One illustration is Gerd Theissen's article in the volume (pp. 97-105). He rejects the "romantic" idea of proletarian community (p. 99). Instead he argues for a socially stratified community with those of a higher social status naturally leading this "congregation."

confusion suggests romantic and communitarian conceptions of community on the part of scholars. Indeed it has been often and powerfully argued that this confusion and conflation lies at the heart of communitarian thinking (Lund 1993, 1997; Frazer 1999). The clash of the communitarian conceptions and liberal values goes unnoticed.[5]

One feature of the trend that clearly contributed to the strengthening of communities and community as explanatory assumptions was the Durkheimian inspiration of many of the studies.[6] For Durkheim and most functionalist social explanation, religious beliefs, symbols and rituals re-present the group that produces them. Society worships itself. Furthermore, that tradition placed an enormous emphasis on social cohesion as the inherent goal of religious activities and all culture. The normative social formation for Durkheimians has been groups with a deep social and mental coherence, a commonality in mind and practice. In other words, what scholars of ancient Christianity tend to call *communities*. This kind of now deeply criticized social theory works with the idea of social wholes such as society conceived as organic unities or like machines with every part contributing to the functioning of the whole.

The theological or ideological origins of the totalizing role of community in Christian imagination about early Christianity can be pinned on Paul and his letters. Paul did not merely try to persuade those whom he wanted as followers that they ought to become a very special kind of community. He told them that they had in their essence already become such a community. This was a brilliant strategy. Instead of putting an impossible ideal before them and saying, "try to reach this goal," he said "you are this community of transformed people so live up to what you are." As the sociologist Rogers Brubaker writes, the skill of an ethnopolitical or religious entrepreneurs is that "by invoking groups, they seek to evoke them, summon them, call them into being" (2004: 10). Paul told them that no matter what their ethnic-religious identity, gender or social status, they were all ontologically one (Gal 3:27-8). They all shared the same ontological status of being "in Christ" (Stowers 2008: 352-371). They all shared the very same divine *pneuma* (intelligent self-powered airy substance) given to Christ by God. Paul told his audiences in his letters that they had come out of mind-boggling levels of moral and religious degeneracy (e.g., 1 Th 4:3-8; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Rom 1:18-32) to moral perfection in Christ.

---

[5] In an interesting study from a normative Christian perspective, David Horrell (2005) explicitly brings Paul's letters into the "communitarian/liberal debate" and rightly concludes that Paul's thought better fits communitarian conceptions. Unfortunately, he assumes that the differences Paul sometimes defends on certain issues indicate liberal values. The book also fails to historically contextualize Paul's thought.

[6] For a critique of some functionalist inspired scholarship from a Christian theological perspective, see Horsley (1994).

"Those who are of Christ have crucified (i.e., killed, destroyed!) the flesh with its emotions and appetitive desires (Gal 5:24 cf. Rom 6:1-6)." They shared Christ's mind and traits of character.[7] Such ideas are pervasive in the letters. For scholars, these ideas and often the idea of "the Pauline communities" are correlates of an equally miraculous idea of "conversion." Paul came to Corinth, preached the gospel and the Corinthians in question converted and became a Christian community. Paul, then, long before Acts turned the idea into a narrative, created a central idea of the Christian myth of origins that the new movement grew in a miraculous way.

What Paul himself proclaimed as a miraculous creation by God, scholarship has often taken as sociological data. When Paul does talk about, so to speak, actual life on the ground, the picture is quite different. This disparity is most well known in the Corinthian letters, but shows up in most of the letters. Interpreters know 1 Corinthians as the poster child for the danger of division in the community. The problem is not that interpreters have missed the disparity between Paul's ideal and the actuality. Rather, it is the failure to bring to bear normal academic social analysis and instead hold to Paul's mystified and miraculous social rhetoric. As a contemporary sociologist writes: "We must, of course, take vernacular categories and participant's understandings seriously, for they are partly constitutive of our objects of study. But we should not uncritically adopt the engaged *categories of ethnopolitical practice* as our *categories of social analysis*" (Brubaker 2004: 10; original emphasis).

The way that "conversion" and "community" govern so much thinking about the formation of Christianity also implies the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. If Paul and other apostles preached the gospel and that led to conversion and the formation of communities, then deviation from the unity of belief and sentiment implied in the concept of community must be like heresy. It was a departure from an original state of purity in thought and action. Thus instead of scholars thinking that, as one might expect, Paul was never able to get the Corinthians, or Galatians or Philippians to accept or fully accept his ideas, practices and demands, they often ask, "what false teacher came in from the outside or what set of ideas from the cultural context seduced some of those in the community so as to produce false belief or immoral behavior or division in the community?"

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that those whom he addresses as the assembly or congregation of God (1:2) are one body with one *pneuma* (spirit) no matter what the ethnic background or social level (12:13), they have been made holy

---

[7] Paul's basic idea here is assimilation to Christ, a concept that he almost certainly borrowed from Platonism as did Philo (e.g., 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29) and that Paul speaks of as a process, but one that has substantially taken hold of those who are in Christ.

(1:2, 30; 6:11; 7:14), they are God's temple with God's *pneuma* in them (3:16-17: 6:18-19), they are rich in all speech and knowledge (1:4-5), they lack no pneumatic endowment (1:7) and they are "of Christ and God" (3:23). And yet they are deeply divided around different teachers or teachings (1:10-17, 3:4), they are immature and lack pneumatic endowment (2:14-3:4), they are arrogant toward one another (1:6-7), they tolerate incest (5:1-2), they are taking one another to court (6:1-7), they consort with prostitutes (6:12-20), they are ungrateful for God's gifts (4:7), and so on of this very familiar litany. But the interpreter should not get caught up in the oppositions. There never was a social body, a congregation, a community, on the one hand, nor were there defilements of a social purity, rifts and defections from such a non-existent social miracle of harmony and unity of mind, on the other hand, except in Paul's imagination and rhetoric. To conclude that Corinth was indeed a problematic case of communal failure, but that the Thessalonian or Philippian "churches" were communal successes is to miss the point. Scholarship needs to think about the social formations associated with Paul in terms of what are known to be ordinary human social processes. Paul's categories and those of traditional scholarship are not only "ideal" and rhetorical, but they are also too gross and holistic. One of the motivations for the recent turn to theories of practice in social theory has been to break down these traditional social wholes such as society, community and identity into knowable patterns of human activity (Rouse 2007: 639-682). The move gives individuals agency without in any way diminishing the social character of activity and social formations can be analyzed from their smallest constituents of linked practices.

I have illustrated problems with the pervasive scholarly use of the concept of community and communities with the letters of Paul and the canonical Gospels, but I could have used other later literature. My impression is that this usage shows itself by far most prominently in the era of Christian origins that, depending on the particular scholar, may extend well into the Second Century or later. A historian or anthropologist of religion might immediately recognize concepts such as early Christian community, conversion and deviation from the original state as typical elements of myths of origin.[8] They are features of a fabulous and singular time of origins when things happened in a very special way. The writer of Acts, who in my view was heavily dependent on his reading of Paul's letters, certainly featured such community in his myth of origins. Thousands, for example, convert and form a community in Jerusalem at the hearing of one sermon. The author writes, "the great number of those who

---

[8] The notable exception to ignoring the mythic nature of early Christian writings is Mack (2001) and the work of the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar, Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins, in Cameron and Miller (2004).

believed were of one heart and one mind and no one said that any of his possessions were his own, but everything was common to all of them" (4:32). They all submit themselves to the apostles (4:35), listen to the amazing teachings of the apostles and spend their time together (2:44-47). Unsurprisingly, many scholars have been captured by this picture, even if they have added critical caveats around its edges and expand the story to explain traditions discovered by modern scholars.[9] This permits a scholar such as Ulrich Luz to confidently write: "Historically, the Matthean community is part of the posthistory of the saying source Q. It is a Jewish Christian community originating in the activity of the Jesus messengers who were among the bearers of the Q tradition. Later, after the failure of the mission to Israel and the Jewish War, the community settled in Syria, where it received significant inspiration from the Gospel of Mark" (2005: 7). I have certainly used the concept of early Christian community and communities uncritically myself. Many scholars, of course, have intuited or explicitly seen problems in these concepts and have made good efforts at corrections. I will discuss some of these below.

II. Liabilities of the Community Myth

In what follows, I will list and briefly discuss major reasons why the concepts should be used only in the most sparing way and the implied picture of mythic origins abandoned.

1. Use of the "community" and "communities" is almost always unjustified. By unjustified, I mean that writers do not give evidence and arguments for taking the social formations in question to be highly cohesive with commonality in belief and practice. The claim that an early Christian group or social formation was a community ought to require as much evidence and argument as any other historical claim. Appeal to what Paul and other writers thought some population had miraculously become and ideally ought to be is not good evidence for actual community.

   2. The claims about communities are usually unreflective and almost always untheorized. In other words, the concepts are not used as analytical concepts that can do work in some project of historical inquiry that employs social theory. They are often normative theological concepts parading as descriptive

---

[9] A case in point is Helmut Koester's (1982) widely used account in which he cautions that Acts's episodes about the Jerusalem church are "dominated by legendary and idealizing tendencies" (p. 86) but then accepts Acts' basic picture of its community as an agent for the origins of the new religion (pp. 86-91).

and explanatory social concepts. For Paul and other early Christian writers, Christian community is a normative idea; so also for modern Christians. This may be quite fine, but holding to this normative status is not a practice that contributes to the normalization of the study of ancient Christianity in the non-sectarian academy.

3. The approach treats "pagans," Greeks, Romans and others, as passive dupes instead of socially and humanly *plausible persons*. It may seem plausible to some that the message of early Christian teachers was simply so wonderful that it inevitably totally captured "those with good hearts," but the scenario is not plausible in light of the massive work of modern history, ethnography and the social sciences. For those at all attracted to someone like Paul, the reaction is mostly partial and selective acceptance of the message and practices, and assimilation of the teachings to the person's own interests and frame of reference rather than unqualified understanding, acceptance and submission, as a very large body of ethnography and history makes clear (e.g., Bercovitch 2001: 211-35; Smith 2004: 340-61; Comaroff 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Furness 1995: 231-63; Sandos 2004).

Certainly some individuals submit, but such unqualified acceptance should be viewed as unusual. Accepting baptism—even if it was freely chosen and not because a master, patron, parent or husband wanted it—might be done for many reasons. Studies of modern missionaries describe typical reactions of negotiation and resistance for those with any interest at all. The missionized often appropriate what they want selectively and assimilate what they appropriate to their own beliefs, practices and interests.

Sadly, the portrait of Greeks and Romans as horrifically evil and immoral people before conversion to Judaism or Christianity still informs much scholarship on ancient Christianity, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Knust 2006). In this way, community is taken not only to mean high social cohesion with commonality in belief and practice, but also moral goodness. But the one idea does not necessarily entail the other idea. After all, the Nazi party had a high level of social cohesion with commonality in belief and practice. The traditional concept of early Christian community has implied both a social cohesion and a moral goodness that was in contrast to unconverted Greeks and Romans. The idea of such a wondrous community, in such an evil world, made pagan willingness to fully convert seem plausible. The scenario, however, belongs to the realm of myth, not critical history.

One antidote to mythic and magical ideas of conversion is a plausible theory of mind. It should now be beyond dispute that the human mind is not a unified and all-purpose reasoning or central planning machine (e.g., Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994; Damasio 1994; Gigerenzer 2000; Gazzaniga 2006;

Kurzban and Aktipis 2007). There are two major points to be made from the brain/mind sciences and areas such as cognitive anthropology. First, the modularity or evolved systems (without following the massive modularity thesis, i.e., Fodor 1983) of the human brain/mind makes the idea of totalizing domination by ideas and commitments and consistency in thought and action across the domains of life unlikely, to say the least. Second, some mental "representations" are more easily gotten, held and transmitted than others. Unfortunately humanistic and especially post-structuralist scholarship has operated with untheorized and implicit conceptions of mind as a blank slate and a culture sponge (McIntosh 1997), even though they have often helpfully criticized "the integrated Cartesian subject." One simply cannot write and think about human beings without some implicit theory of how minds operate. In the sponge conception, people indiscriminately soak up whatever "representations" come their way. Thus one often sees the claim that individuals are socially constructed in their entirety by culture. But cognitive psychology and other fields have shown that some cultural items are easily acquired, held and transmitted while others are only gotten, held and transmitted with great and ongoing socio-cultural labor.[10] I see little likelihood that early Christian thought was all of the easily acquired, remembered and transmitted variety. I make these passing comments on a large and complex area of scholarship only to suggest some of what I mean by "humanly plausible." Humanly plausible need not mean only our common sense or scholarly intuitions. History, anthropology and psychology ought to also inform our sense of what is plausible.

   4. The relationship between early Christian literature and early Christian communities posited in much scholarship makes early Christian literature unique and incommensurable with other ancient literature and writing practices. In all other areas that study ancient Mediterranean and West Asian literature, a writing is studied as the product of an individual writer working in a particular social and historical context, not as the product of a community. Classicists do not approach Vergil's or Philodemus's writings as the products and mirrors of Vergil's and Philodemus's communities. Indeed, the most important social formations for these individuals as writers may have been other writers and associated networks that taught high literacy, interpreted and circulated writings, mostly people whom they had never known. The

---

[10] For bibliography from the cognitive sciences see McIntosh (1997), but scholarship on differential memory and transmission of "representations" has already had an important impact on anthropology and history (e.g., Atran and Medin 2008; Whitehouse 2004) including early Christianity (e.g., Whitehouse and Martin 2004; Luomanen 2008).

approach to early Christian literature posits a tight fit between a writer and a highly coherent social group with commonality in belief and practice.

As noted above, this has been especially the case for the canonical Gospels, but also affects the way that scholars read Paul's letters. The letters are often, but not always, read as responding in intricate detail to particular communities that—except perhaps for Romans—Paul supposedly knew very well.[11] A perceived note of sarcasm, the use of a particular word, and always allusive language that rarely spells out particular and concrete details about the supposed community are taken as corresponding to a social reality. There are at least three problems here. First, the audiences who potentially could have or actually did hear Paul's letters may have never consisted of anything nearly so coherent as a community. Second, Paul's knowledge of and understanding of the potential audience may not have been so perfect. At Corinth, he may have known Crispus and Gaius (1:14) well, but not the slaves and women in another household who had been present for some of Paul's meetings. Paul says that he baptized the whole household of Stephanas (1:16). Did he understand the dynamics and individuals in what could have been a large, complex and highly disunited household well? Third, the approach robs Paul of the creativity and known tendencies of writers and speakers to produce writings that have a rhetorical and artistic semi-autonomy and that respond to imagined audiences in broadly creative rather than narrowly specific ways.

Admittedly, with letters the correspondence between writing and actual audience is one of more and less. But the model of letter-writing that envisions two friends exchanging letters can be misleading when used to imagine Paul and those whom he describes as the assembly of God at Galatia, Corinth or Thessalonica. A friend is likely to be less complex, more coherent and knowable than a socially diverse group of people from different households. While the scholar of the New Testament or the Apostolic Fathers typically constrains herself by this tight writer-community relation, the classicist can study the way that writers and writing culture produces literary-rhetorical dynamics that tend to give writing a semi-autonomy in relation to the wider social context and a special relation to networks of writers and highly literate readers. At the same time, the normal academic approach to literature followed by the classicist allows the scholar to place the writer in a vastly more complex social (including political, economic, religious) context than the writer-community model allows since the bounded and sealed idea of a community inhibits

---

[11]   In the last decades, even Romans has been increasingly read in this way with the "weak" and "strong" of 14:1-15:13 connected with the supposed expulsion of Jews from Rome and then the letter treated as Paul's detailed intervention and expression of religious ecumenism. I find the reading tendentious on many different levels.

thought about social formations that cut across the groups or populations covered by the idea of community. The social spaces, for example, consisting of the highly specialized practices of highly literate writers, interpreters and consumers of specialized writings held together and cut through many other social formations, including the populations known as Pauline churches. Similarly if Paul had been a leather worker, his associations with a network of others associated with the trade would have touched on those "church" populations in the person of Paul, but without those people being parts of the social formation(s) of which the trade consisted.

5. The uncritical assumption that early Christianity exclusively consisted of communities precludes and occludes the possibility of finding other social formations in the history of early Christianity. Simply put: the task of the historian ought to be inquiry into which of the vast number of possible social formations were involved in the beginnings of what came to be known as Christianity and the roles of those formations in those historical processes. The interest of the last forty years in insights from the social sciences and in social history has lead to the study of households, ancient associations, schools and so forth. The results have been good, but in my estimation, far too limited. One cause of the limited success has been the tendency to keep the enchanted idea of early Christian communities and then to ask how the study of households, schools and so on might enhance our understanding of these communities. Did the social hierarchy of ancient households affect the organization of Christian communities? Community often becomes one of those holisms of thought with quasi-metaphysical properties like society, culture, tradition, identity, a system of differences, the symbolic order, discourses and the *Volk*. A social formation that cannot be broken down into smaller units such as actions and practices that explain the larger formation is a metaphysical entity. Such comfortably useful holisms can stifle explanatory historical and social-theoretical thinking. The concepts need to be critically disaggregated. Are they truly holisms? Do these entities not consist of complexly linked actions and social practices of people? The social complexity hidden by community needs to be described and explained.

III. "Unbuilding" Early Christian Communities

Why should community or even households-plus-communities be the only social formations that can be used in the explanation of early Christianity? Why should formations such as neighborhoods, merchant networks, patterns of social connection based on religious places, artisan networks, religious entrepreneurial-consumer relations and networks, circles of slave friends,

linked levels of social domination, coalitions of friendship and enmity, age and gender sets (e.g., elderly men, early teenage girls), many sorts of markets, patterns and practices of ethnic identification and non-identification and many other social formations not be important for the social explanation of early Christianity? Although I am sure that there was some early Christian community, I would argue that another social formation was more important: Fields or networks of literate and specialized cultural producers (Stowers 2011 A and B). A social formation that produced, circulated and consumed writings, speeches, divine messages and learned interpretations came before and was causative of anything like the communities envisioned in scholarship and Christian myth. In antiquity, where only a tiny fraction of the population was literate at all and a much smaller fraction literate enough to write and interpret literature, networks or fields of writers, interpreters of writings and readers educated into particular niches of the fields formed highly specialized social arenas that produced and contested their own norms, forms of power, practices and products of literacy. Banishing individual persons as writers from the account of Christian beginnings mystifies interests and power relations. If the writings that constitute virtually all of our evidence, and could have been the most powerful force in the "movement," simply swell up from vague communities, then the writings do not clearly have interests and are not the results of explainable social processes.

It would be misleading to not stress that some scholars have implicitly intuited problems with the pervasive appeal to communities and others have explicitly criticized uses of the concept. I can only mention a few of these here. Attention to these criticisms can be an aid in developing a broader assessment of the field's approaches to Christian beginnings. In 1977 (p. 13), Abraham Malherbe wrote, "We must, for instance, resist the temptation to see so much of early Christian literature either as a community product or as reflecting the actual circumstances of the communities with which the writings are associated. We too frequently read of communities that virtually produced one or another of the Gospels or for which they were produced."[12] Then Malherbe points to examples of movements that never formed anything like communities and yet produced literature. He also draws attention to the Roman Pythagoreans who came about as a group because of literature from the Hellenistic age written by intellectuals writing in the name of famous Pythagoreans and imagining the continued existence of the long extinct Pythagorean groups.

---

[12] To be sure, Malherbe does not critique the idea of communities themselves and contrasts the social to individuals and leaders in a way that is theoretically inadequate. Nevertheless, the discussion is very insightful on the basis of ancient literature and philosophical groups.

Literature can be causative of social formations. The literary movement created a myth of origins of Pythagoreanism as the primal philosophy. As far as I have been able to determine, Malherbe's cautions went unheeded and his examples unnoticed.

Some scholars have not so much critiqued the use of the ideas of community and communities as they have ignored or side stepped the issue because of particular interests and theoretical commitments. Several approaches inspired by literary criticism focus on the text or reader as autonomous, either with little interest or overt denial of the role of author and the assertion of the autonomy of the reader (Burke 1998; Moore 1989). In certain cases, literary approaches have led to treating the gospels as ordinary literature directed toward a more general audience of readers (Tolbert 1989). This is a large, complex and theoretically and philosophically troubled area that is beyond the scope of this article, although the arena's influence needs to be noted. Most important for the issue of community, many of these approaches operate with a naïve or implicit idealism that undermines inquiry into the socio-historical materiality of writings (Stowers 2008).

From the direction of conservative Christian scholarship, another challenge to "Gospel's communities" has come in a debate stirred by a book of essays, *The Gospels for All Christians* (1998). In the lead essay for the volume, the editor, Richard Bauckham, argues ". . . not merely the implied audience of a Gospel is larger than the current consensus allows, but that it is *indefinite rather than specific*. This is a difference of kind, not just of degree, from the current consensus. The evangelists, I have argued, did not write for specific churches they knew or knew about, not even for a very large number of such churches. Rather, drawing on their experience or knowledge of several or many specific churches, they wrote *for any and every church* to which their Gospels might circulate." This position affirmed by other authors in the volume would indeed make the Gospels more like other ancient literature in some ways. While this is a gain and many of the volume's arguments against the consensus position are sound, I believe that Bauckham's and the book's revised position moves even further from a non-mythic and normal academic historical approach to early Christianity.

To begin with, the approach keeps the same enchanted communities and merely changes the relationship between the canonical Gospels and the communities. Now instead of a Gospel being created by or mirroring, say, the community in Antioch, Baukham envisions that an author/evangelist wrote that Gospel and addressed all Christians everywhere. In this familiar model, the possibility for this universal address and communication occurred because the writer and the audience shared the same Empire-wide community, the

Christian church, created by the same gospel message. On the basis of the preaching of this gospel, churches/communities were brought into existence across a wide swath of the Roman Empire that had a commonality of belief and practice. Without eliminating a certain degree of diversity, the scenario seems to imply a universal Christian subject that allowed mutual recognition, again the miracle of conversion.

The writers of the volume dwell on the well-known conditions of high mobility and good communication in the Roman Empire and evidence especially in the letters of Paul and from the second century for communication between "churches." Bauckham emphasizes that Christians had a sense of being part of a worldwide movement. "Gentile converts were inculturated into a new social identity that was certainly not purely local" (p. 33). In all of this, appeal to Acts plays a central role, and for the first century, the letters of Paul. Bauckham would have a difficult time mounting his case if he did not take the letters of Paul to be depicting this scenario. But what we know for sure is that Paul did not envision the kind of institution that became "the church" that Bauckham supposes. Whatever his "assemblies of God" or "of Christ" are, when he wrote 1 Thessalonians he assumed that this movement consisting of a paltry handful of followers in the North East quadrant of the Mediterranean and a few other places would have reached its missionary end during his lifetime when Christ returned from heaven. When he writes Romans, he says that he has fully preached the good news to the Gentiles all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum and that he will soon be ready to go on to Spain by way of Rome in order to finish the mission by going to the West. He clearly does not have the later idea of either an enduring worldwide church or of a mission to convert the whole world. His assemblies are likely to represent those Gentiles that God has assembled to meet Christ at his return and take eschatological offerings to the temple in Jerusalem (Nongbri 2008: 161-203). Bauckham is not following Paul here, but rather Acts' and Eusebius' reinterpretation of Paul. The empire-wide miracle of the Spirit driven mission in Acts and Eusebius that creates a universal church is a myth of the origins of a world-wide community. This is historically less plausible than the varied and often isolated communities of the consensus.[13] The scholarly consensus from the Form Critics to Walter Bauer and the present was created because of the vast evidence that the Acts-Eusebian story was historically implausible. Differing isolated communities each producing their own "theologies" and

---

[13] In one of the responses to the Bauckham volume, Esler (1998) muddies the waters further by trying to both hold onto the traditional communities model and allowing for a secondary circulation to all Christians.

literature better fit the evidence of the second and third centuries indicating that there never was a coherent and unified orthodox Christianity from the beginning. The consensus also seems more plausible in that it envisions less institutional development and a gradual socially embedded development of "theology." But the consensus picture created its own improbabilities. Abandoning the working premise that there were Christian communities everywhere that there is evidence for some activity—e.g., teaching and writing about Jesus Christ - holds promise for opening a space to imagine more historically explanatory social formations.

After Paul's letters, we have the Gospel of Mark, but Mark tells us nothing of communities or an expansive church or even of a religion called Christianity. It is an odd story about an executed god-empowered teacher of mysteries. Next we likely have Matthew, perhaps in the 80s or 90s. The author of Matthew, like Paul, has clear ideas that he advocates about an ideal Israel and about a social and ethical (Stowers 2010) order for the coming Kingdom of Heaven. He also knows of assemblies, possibly from Paul, and has Jesus announce a world-wide mission to the Gentiles. But none of this, even at the end of the First Century, is evidence for the myth of origins seen in Acts and the volume edited by Bauckham, much less a historically and socially plausible explanation for how Christianity came about.

The problem that most challenges the group of scholars in the volume edited by Bauckham is that their scenario has no account of how social formations such as "Christianity" or "the church" formed in terms of ordinary social processes. "The church" as a coherent trans-empire entity just appears when a handful of individuals make speeches. Even if this scenario might seem to have some plausibility, and I do not think that it does, one would have to explain how the hearers of these speeches could even understand this alien message, how they gave enough legitimacy to the messengers for things to get off the ground, and why the message would have had any appeal. Even more important, one would have to explain how speeches and teachings, should they be understood and accepted, could have caused such a far-flung, but socially and ideologically uniform and cohesive social formation/institution in such a short time. All four of these questions would need to be answered in terms of understandings, beliefs, practices and social formations that made sense in Greco-Roman culture and not in terms of the self-obviousness projected by the Christian myth(s) of origins. Any such account must show both how the historical phenomenon emerged from the culture and cultures of Mediterranean antiquity and how it is humanly plausible.

References

Adams, Edward and David G. Horrell ed. (2004). *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Lousiville: Westminster John Knox.

Atran, Scott and Douglas Medin (2008). *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Baird, William H. (1992). *History of New Testament Research: Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Bauckham, Richard (1998). *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

Bercovitch, Eytan (2001). The altar of sin: Social multiplicity and Christian conversion among a New Guinea people. In Susan L. Mizruchi (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Studies*, 211-35. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brodie, Thomas L. (1993). *The Quest for the Origins of John's Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers (2004). *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Burke, Sean (1989). *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Cameron, Ron and Merrill P. Miller (2004). *Redescribing Christian Origins*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

——— (2011). *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Comaroff, Jean (1985). *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, Jean & John Comaroff (1991). *Of Revelation and Revolution Vol I: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Damasio, Antonio (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Esler, Philip F. (1987). *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts.* SNTSMS 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——— (1998). Community and gospels in early Christianity: A response to Richard Bauckham's Gospels for All Christians. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51(2): 235-48.

Frazer, Elizabeth (1999). *The Problem of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fodor, Jerry A. (1983). *Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Furness, Elizabeth (1995). Resistance, coercion, and revitalization: The Shuswap Encounter with Roman Catholic missionaries, 1860-1900. *Ethnohistory* 42(2): 231-263.

Gazzaniga, Michael (2006). Forty-five years of split brain research and still going strong. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 6: 653-59.

Gigerenzer, Gerd (2000). *Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hanson, Kennith C. (1994). Greco-Roman studies and the social-scientific study of the Bible: A classified periodical bibliography (1970-1994). *Forum* 9(1-2).

Herder, Johann Gottfried (1782-3; 3rd ed. 1822). *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie: Eine Anleitung für die Liebhaber derselben und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes* 2 vols. Dessau: Herder; 3rd ed. Marburg.

——— (1833). *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. James Marsh (trans). Burlington, Vt.: Edward Smith.

Hirschfeld, Lawrence and Susan A. Gelman (1994). *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Horrell, David G. (1996). *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*. SNTW; Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

———— (2005). *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics.* London: T&T Clark.

Horsley, Richard A. (1994). *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*. 2nd ed. New York: Continuum.

———— (2004). 1 Corinthians: A case study of Paul's alternative society. In Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (ed.) *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*, 227-237. Lousiville: Westminster John Knox.

Knust, Jennifer Wright (2006). *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Koester, Helmut (1982). *History and Literature of Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Kümmel, Werner Georg (1970). *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Kurzban, Robert and Athena Aktipis (2007). Modularity and the social mind: Are psychologists too selfish? *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11(2): 131-49.

Lund, William R. (1993). Communitarian politics and the problem of equality. *Political Research Quarterly* 46(3): 577.

———— (1997). Politics, virtue, and the right to do wrong: Assessing the communitarian critique of rights. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28(3): 101-22.

Luomanen, Petri, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Risto Uro (2008). *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*. Leiden: Brill.

Luz, Ulrich (2005). *Studies in Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Mack, Burton L. (2001). *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic and Legacy*. New York: Continuum, 2001.

McIntosh, Janet (1997). Cognition and power. Paper delivered at the Society for Literature and Science Meetings. Pittsburgh. (McIntosh:%20Cognition%20and%20Power.webarchive).

Malherbe, Abraham, J. (1977). *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*. Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press.

Moore, Stephen (1989). *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Nongbri, Brent (2008). Paul without religion: the creation of a category and the search for an apostle beyond the new perspective. Yale University Dissertation.

Rouse, Joseph (2007). Practice theory. In Stephen Turner and Mark Risjord (ed.), *Philosophy of Sociology and Anthropology*, 639-682. Oxford: Elsevier.

Sandos, James A. (2004). *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Smith, Jonathan Z. (2004). *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stowers, Stanley (2008). The ontology of religion. In Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (ed.), *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, 434-49. London: Equinox.

———— (2009). The history of ancient Christianity as the study of religion. A paper presented at the North American Association for the Study of Religion section at the Annual National Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans.

———— (2010). Jesus as teacher and Stoic ethics in the Gospel of Matthew. In Ismo Dundenberg, Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Tuomus Rasimus (ed.), *Stoicism in Early Christianity*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

———— (2011). The religion of plant and animal offerings versus the religion of meanings, essences and textual mysteries. In Jennifer Knust and Zsuzsa Varhelyi (ed.) *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice: Images, Acts, Meanings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———— (2011). Kinds of myth, meals, and power: Paul and the Corinthians. In Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (ed.), *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*. Leiden: Brill.

Tolbert, May Ann (1989). *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Tönnies, Ferdinand (1887). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Leipzig: Fues Verlag, with eight editions and several reprintings.

Whitehouse, Harvey (2004). *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Whitehouse, Harvey and Luther H. Martin (2004). *Theorizing Religions Past: Archeology, History and Cognition*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.