



**Center** (L-R): Carly Daniel-Hughes, Heidi Wendt, Dennis Smith, Elli Elliott, Lane McGaughey. **Clockwise from top right:** **Right**—top Richard Kearney; **center** (R-L) Phil Harland, Heidi Wendt, Lillian Larsen; **bottom** Namssoon Kang. **Bottom**—right center Burton Mack; **center** Maia Kotrosits; **left center** Jack Caputo. **Left**—bottom (L-R) Bob Miller, Robins Meyers, Dennis Smith; **center** Joe Bessler; Sarah Morice Brubaker; **top** (L-R) Hannu Saloranta, Jarmo Tarkki, Jack Kelly. Photos by Jennifer Baquing.

## Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2016 Spring Meeting

### Carly Daniel-Hughes

The Christianity Seminar continues with its robust agenda of remapping early Christian history. At each meeting the Seminar addresses the work of a scholar whose research has impacted the field in a significant way and focuses on a theme, a key issue framing historical study of Christ-believing groups. At this meeting the contributions of Burton Mack and the topic of family occupied the Seminar.

For his part Mack (Professor Emeritus, Claremont Graduate University) continued to probe and challenge the Seminar (as he had in the years of the Jesus Seminar) to consider the power of myth. In his public lecture Mack extended his insights about early Christian myth-making to think about American political culture and its own narrative of a “Bible myth” employed to support particular po-





litical and imperial agendas. Mack's forceful arguments highlighted questions about what, if any, interventions biblical scholarship can make in our own time. In the context of the Seminar, Mack's work on myth as a category for conceptualizing Christian origins pushes back at how the Seminar speaks about "origins." Rather, Mack wants to draw attention, as he does in studies such as *The Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (1988), to myth-making as a discursive enterprise that can be understood as a social process. In his response, Ron Cameron (Wesleyan University) offered a solid survey of Mack's work, the intellectual context in which his research developed and took root, and the attention his work gave to the historical and discursive contexts of ancient Christian communities. Seminar Fellow Maia Kostrosits' response framed the work of the Seminar in conversation with Mack's use of myth, and opened spaces for challenging some of the dichotomies in his work (such as myth/history, secular/theological, Jewish/Hellenistic). Kostrosits suggested that Mack's work could be read productively as highlighting the ambivalence of our sources "caught between various pressures," a product of living under Roman colonial rule.

The theme of family, in fact, provided fertile ground to challenge a contemporary myth, that of "family values," and to showcase precisely some of the pressures that defined the lives of Christ-believers in a colonial context in which slave labor was accepted as normal. For members of the Seminar the set of "family values" that dominates the American culture wars has no precedent in the ancient Roman world of Christ-believing communities. Here family (*oikos* or *familia*) signified a social and economic unit in which power was ordered and distributed among its members. It was a unit that relied significantly on the labor of enslaved people. The gospels, Paul's letters, and a host of monastic writings from late antiquity reveal that Christ-believers did not challenge or subvert the structures of the family, but rather relied on them as basic to their self-description, social organization, and survival. In these sources, believers become brothers and sisters and leaders, fathers and mothers, and even in some instances, slaves. (For example, Paul calls himself a "slave of Jesus Christ" in Rom 1:1, and he asserts, "I have made myself a slave to all" in 1 Cor 9:19). Reliance on the "family" extended into their social practices and the material conditions upon which they depended as well. Followers of Christ formed new groups; these groups met in houses (perhaps also at family tombs, or outdoors) to share meals. Even into the fourth century, monastic groups set up households of their own, and/or depended heavily on households in their organizational structure and household labor in their day-to-day existence. Three papers by Westar Fellows Dennis Smith and Susan Elliott, as well as by Lillian Larsen (University of Redlands), oriented the Seminar's treatment of the topic.

Dennis Smith extended his study of ancient meal customs, from work such as *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (2003), to address the space of the house, particularly the dining room (*triclinium*) and the ritual of the evening meal (*cena/deipnon*) that took place there as the setting for communal formation in ancient Christ groups. Smith argued that evidence of meals in homes of Christ-believers is amply demonstrated in a series of canonical sources. He considered how social practice—sharing a meal—gave rise to a theological metaphor for the "Christ event." But it was Smith's insistence, in his ballot items, on the household dining room as *the* primary place where Christ-groups convened that elicited debate among Seminar members. Evidence for meals at family tombs (both in literary sources and archaeology, such as the bench-tombs at Ostia cited in Smith's paper) suggested to some members other options for imagining gatherings among these groups. Not readily dissuaded, Smith pushed Seminar members to locate exegetical data that would support alternative locations for meetings. Further, Smith's paper raised important questions about the social dynamics of the meals, in which he suggested that some

## Christianity Seminar Spring 2016 Ballot Items

The melding of fictive and factual familial models manifested in late-ancient ascetic praxis commends a shift in nomenclature from “monasticism” to “monasticisms.”

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Monastic “solitude” must be understood as relative, and implicitly linked to/defined by fictive and factual familial constructs.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Albeit traditionally construed as fictively familial, monastic households appear to be comprised of both factual and fictive members.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

As monastic language of humility melds with established household roles, the fictive and factual distinctions that separate master/parent, son/daughter, sibling, disciple, servant and slave are increasingly difficult to discern.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Monastic history has traditionally been drawn from hagiographical source material, and so framed in dichotomies—solitary or familial, desert or city, individual or communal, hierarchical or egalitarian, elite and rustic. When such sources are examined in the light of the literary genre to which they belong, they may more accurately be understood as mirrors, their monastic protagonists as ciphers, of the tensions that lie closest to the surface of monastic life.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

In order to understand early Christ group social and identity formation we must give attention to the physical space in which it took place and was nurtured.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The house was the primary physical space where early Christ groups were formed in the first and second centuries and was a determinative factor for their social and identity formation.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Guests at a house gathering met in a room prepared for a reclining meal and followed the cultural model for formal communal meals including rituals of shared food, wine, invocation of the deity, and various forms of social interaction, all of which constituted rituals of social bonding with the deity and among the diners.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The protocols of a house gathering included: (a) a patronage relationship of the householder to the guests, (b) the practice of hospitality and its cultural protocols which included not only the invitation into the dining room but also the expectation of equal treatment of the diners, (c) allowance for household members and their complex relationships as specified especially in the household codes regarding wives and husbands and masters and slaves (Gal 3:28; Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; Titus 2:1–10; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7).

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Participants in a Christ group house gathering would include not only members (or “dedicants”) but also potential members (“uninitiated”) and other outliers, some of whom might actually be hosting the gathering (“unpledged”) (1 Cor 1:2; 10:27; 14:16, 24–25).

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

None of the participants in Christ group gatherings came from the elite class; rather they came from the lower classes and included mostly individuals at a poverty level and a few who were lower class householders.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Gray**

Christ group house gatherings were small in number, ranging from about seven to about fifteen, befitting cultural expectations for a communal meal as well as the modest size of the setting.

Fellows **Red**/Associates: **Red**

slaves (invited as guests to the meal) would recline, while other slaves of the household presumably served at this same meal. Finally, Smith’s ballot items solicited discussion of the socio-economic status of these communities. Did Christ-believing groups attract low status members, or is this model in need of rethinking?

Susan Elliott’s paper on Paul’s letter to Philemon offered a nice complement to Smith’s on household meals. Locating Paul’s rhetoric in the context of Augustan Rome, in which the Emperor cast himself as father of the Roman people, Elliott revealed how “family” shored up imperial

power structures. In his letter to Philemon, Paul voices a kind of double-speak, at once avowing the authority of Philemon as household patriarch, and on other occasions, voicing an alternative model in which community (including slaves) would be ordered around common values. Like Smith, Elliott drew the Seminar’s attention to the presence of slaves in Christ-believing communities, asking the Seminar to address the terminology we might employ to think about their affiliation with them. Are they members of the community, or simply members of a household whose *paterfamilias* hosts an assembly? Further, when

The concept of “church” as an assembly hall gathering where the sacrament of Eucharist was celebrated was not operative during the 1st and 2nd centuries.

Fellows **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Christ group house gatherings functioned as a form of household association differing primarily in terms of the deity being honored.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Social and identity formation at Christ group gatherings took place by means of the experience of full inclusion in the rituals of the meal being held in honor of the Judean god and the Lord Jesus.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Hospitality functioned not only as a cultural practice but also as a theological metaphor for inclusion and equality in the community of God.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Study of the “family” is important for the work of the Christianity Seminar both as the context of proximate social relations in which Christianity formed and as the imperial context that was shaped using the family model of the time.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The values of *pistis* and *agape* as virtues upheld by the community addressed in Paul’s letter to Philemon indicate a difference between that community’s core values and those that characterize the Roman *domus*.

Fellows **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Paul’s letter to Philemon reveals his utopian anti-slavery vision.

Fellows **Black**/Associates: **Black**

Paul’s letter to Philemon reveals dissonant interests and purposes among members of Philemon’s household and the community of the Anointed meeting there.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Onesimus’ silence is as important as Paul’s words for the interpretation of Paul’s letter to Philemon.

Fellows **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

turning to Elliott’s ballot items, the Seminar considered whether the obscurity of Paul’s rhetoric on such issues challenges any simple formulation that would deem Paul for or against slavery (a concern of modern abolitionists and foreign to Paul). To formulate the question as such is to wrest Paul from the power dynamics that naturalized slavery in which he was embedded. Indeed, as Fellow Chris Shea noted, such claims also demand careful attention to the particular realities of ancient slavery (distinguishable from that of the American South). In particular, the practice of manumission in the Roman context introduced an

additional category, “freedman,” whose relationship to their former masters (and their families) entailed a kind of servitude. At the same time, manumission enabled (at least potentially) social mobility for former slaves. Seminar members concurred that further treatment of slavery was in order.

Lillian Larsen, on her first visit to the Christianity Seminar, proposed critical rethinking of dichotomies that have been applied to ancient monastic contexts: solitude/communal living, asceticism/domesticity, and of course, fictive/factual families. Larsen’s discussion generously oriented the Seminar to monastic sources from late antiquity, to the rich debates about them—notable for instance is the possibility that Shenoute’s White Monastery attracted members on the promise of asylum for slaves. Larsen noted that experiments in ascetic living were undertaken within the orbit of supporting communities, and even became sites of new communities. She raised critical questions about how such reconfigurations of the family regularly relied on slave labor, and on the presumptive subordinate status of the slave. As Larsen showed, ancient Christian sources do not tell a simple story in which asceticism defied or overthrew patriarchal household structures, but rather one in which patriarchal structures offered a productive model for thinking and framing ascetic experiments. Moreover, the ties between natal and monastic “families” remained deeply intertwined.

In her discussion with the Seminar, Larsen pointed to the presence of children as well as slaves in these monastic communities. She highlighted the fluidity in terminology within the sources that makes it difficult to discern the status of its members, and indicated the need for a “new rubric” for thinking about the constitution of monastic groups. Challenging the romantic rhetoric of sources, like the ancient *Apophthegmata Patrou* (“Sayings of the Desert Fathers”), that imagine solitude and virtuous Christ-like living to have motivated ascetic experiments, Larsen illuminated a whole set of other possible rationales for the rise of monastic communities in the period of late antiquity, including economic and social reasons, such as social mobility and education. Most intriguing was Larsen’s suggestion that what is needed is a model that works backward from the fourth century to the second to identify lines of development and points of continuity. Indeed, already the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (notably the *Acts of Thecla*), as well as in writers such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Tertullian of Carthage, among others, we find evidence of ascetic experiments undertaken within the context of Christ-believing communities. This agenda item promises an important contribution to a neglected area of early Christian history, potentially situating asceticism and monasticism more fully within it. **4R**