Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2014 Fall Meeting

Hal Taussig

At the November meetings in San Diego, the first major sign emerged that Westar's Christianity Seminar may play a significant role in how scholarship and the American public rethink early Christian history. The Christianity Seminar took votes of historic proportions, collectively setting aside what had been assumed for the last five generations and opening up a new collaborative path forward.

With at least twenty-five internationally known scholars in attendance, the Seminar voted with substantial majorities to rule "gnosticism," the reigning boogey man of early Christian history, out of order. In successive votes, the following dramatic positions were taken:

- The category of gnosticism needs to be dismantled. (Voted Red)
- Michael Williams and Karen King have made compelling cases that the category "Gnosticism"—whether it names an ancient religion equivalent to "Judaism" or "Christianity" or it functions as a typological category for the grouping of various teachers, writings, and movements—no longer works. (Voted Red)
- The relegation of gnosticism to the scholarly sidelines removes a confusing category for our ongoing Christianity Seminar work in rethinking the history of early Christianity. (Voted Pink)

It is difficult to overestimate what these decisions mean for the Seminar's resolve to rewrite the history of early Christianity and for broader historical positions long held about how Christianity came into being. For at least a century "Gnosticism" has been understood as the primary and earliest major heresy that threatened a pre-ordained trajectory from the message of Jesus to the "Church Eternal." Now, according to the Christianity Seminar, the idea that such a thing as "gnosticism" even existed is simply off the table.

The Christianity Seminar's collective actions at its San Diego sessions so blatantly contradict the commonly-held story of how Christianity emerged that these votes must be summarized clearly. The Seminar did *not* vote that heretical gnosticism was so wrong in its ideas and beliefs that it can never be considered "Christian." Nor did it conclude that "gnosticism" was not really so bad, and therefore was not a heresy. Rather, after strong discussion of major papers, the Seminar said clearly that most historians of the past 100+ years were wrong in thinking that such a phenomenon as "gnosticism" ever existed. In other words, historians must rethink the entire assumption that a unified heretical "gnosticism" played a primary role in how early Christianity came into being.

How Did This Happen?

The Seminar's votes at the November meeting were informed by cutting-edge scholars who, over the past fifteen years or more, have made a thorough case against the existence of gnosticism.

Primary among these is Karen King, Harvard Divinity School Hollis Professor of Divinity, who participated in the San Diego sessions. King has spent much of her career mapping out the consequences of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 and reframing the way early Christian history can be written in the wake of Nag Hammadi. Two of her major books, *What Is Gnosticism?* and *The Secret Revelation of John,* have thoroughly critiqued the ways nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars formulated the "gnosticism" thesis. In doing so, King has laid the foundations for reformulations of how Christianity began. King's work about "gnosticism" was summarized in a long paper by Hal Taussig (soon to be published in Westar's *Forum*).

Other leading scholars also wrote papers for the San Diego sessions. Michael Williams, long-term colleague of King and author of the 1996 book, *Rethinking Gnosticism,* presented a clear history of recent scholarship undermining the idea of "gnosticism." David Brakke, author of the recent book, *The Gnostics,* laid out his position against "gnosticism" and advocated for a smaller and much less central phenomenon he calls "gnostics." Denise Buell demonstrated how the notion of "gnosticism" developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the context of controversies between various church and spiritualist movements. Seminar Fellows Maia Kotrosits and Brandon Scott appreciated King's *The Secret Revelation of John* as a prime example of how to think about early Christianity's emergence without using the notion of "gnosticism" at all.

The way the Christianity Seminar is appropriating the innovative works of King, Williams, Buell, Brakke, and others in order to rethink an entire wing of work on early Christianity resembles the ways the Jesus Seminar in the late 1980s and early 1990s was responding to new perspectives on the historical Jesus in scholarship just prior to the Seminar's work. That is, the Jesus Seminar's collective work was not possible without the prior scholarship of John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Burton Mack, Marcus Borg, Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, and John Kloppenborg.

An Overview of the Voting in San Diego

Additional relevant ballot results from the San Diego session are:

- Scholarship now needs a less blunt tool/analytical category than gnosticism for examination of the Jesus/

Christ(ian) literature of the second and third centuries. (Voted Red)
- The wealth of documents that Nag Hammadi provides to both scholarship and the public has been blocked or caricatured by the imposition of the gnostic label on them. These documents offer important information to scholarship about the Jesus/Christ(ian) movements in the second and third century. (Voted Red)
- *The Secret Revelation of John* is Christian. (Voted Pink)
- Without an intense scrutiny of what we label Christian and why, orthodox coherence and directionality will be the implicit underwriters of our history. (Voted Red)
- In describing pre-Nicene Christianity we should discard the category variously called "the Great Church," "(emerging) Catholicism," "mainstream Christianity," or "proto-orthodoxy." (Voted Red)
- Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and company should be liberated from "proto-orthodoxy" and allowed to "be their own idiosyncratic selves." (Voted Red)
- The post-Constantinian project of creating a "catholic" Church, characterized by uniform theologies, structures, and practices, co-opted selected earlier Christian persons and groups to legitimate that project and should not determine our understanding of those persons and groups. (Voted Red)
- The *Gospel of Judas* should lead historians to discard the present category "Sethianism" and its reconstructed history and instead to create a new one, called "the Gnostics," and start over on its history. (Voted Pink)

These results clearly endorse the work of King and others. Although the last item on the above ballots also supports, at a pink level, David Brakke's notion of a smaller and much less influential group he calls "the Gnostics," the affirmation of this ballot item needs to be understood in the context of the other ballot results, in particular:

- Brakke's own rejection of "gnosticism" as an adequate analytical category in the study of early Christianity
- the relative smallness of Brakke's "Gnostics" group, compared to the standard of the last century of scholarship, which portrayed "gnosticism" and "gnostics" as the primary and pervasive heresy of the second and early third centuries
- the thorough rejection of gnosticism in the major ballots on the issue

The First Wave of Consequences of This Major Shift

The implications of this major pivot in the Christianity Seminar are—as of this moment—too broad to be fully assessed. For now we only know that the implications are many and significant. There are, nevertheless, two implications for the work of the Seminar that have been identified in the ballot items themselves.

1. A body blow to the standard version of early Christian history, which sees the triumph of orthodox belief as one of the most fundamental aspects of pre-Nicene Christianity's emergence.

It turns out that this standard twentieth-century characterization of Christianity depended in great part on the imaginary existence of a pervasive heretical version of Christianity called "gnosticism." Without this falsely constructed version of a crucial battle in the second and third centuries between early orthodox Christians and fiercely competitive and heretical "gnostic" Christians, the discourse itself of "orthodoxy versus heresy" becomes a much shakier enterprise. Here the forthright ballot formulations of David Brakke, supported strongly by the Seminar votes, make clear what is at stake for the larger Christianity Seminar project. These "all red" votes by the Seminar propose to:

- discard the category variously called "the Great Church," "(emerging) Catholicism," "mainstream Christianity," or "proto-orthodoxy"
- liberate "Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and company . . . from "proto-orthodoxy" and allow them to "be their own idiosyncratic selves"
- Not confuse "the post-Constantinian project of creating a 'catholic' Church, characterized by uniform theologies, structures, and practices, with earlier Christian persons and groups"

Perhaps even more eloquent in its rejection of the default characterization of Christianity as proper belief was the strongly endorsed ballot item from Maia Kotrosits's paper that "without an intense scrutiny of what we label Christian and why, orthodox coherence and directionality will be the implicit underwriters of our history." Once the pivotal 125-225 CE era cannot be framed as the emergence of proto-orthodox belief over errant "gnostic" belief, the construction of early Christianity as primarily creedal seems more like a caricature. Without "proper belief" taking up all the analytical oxygen for this era, other analytical categories can be used to contribute to how Christianity emerged.

2. The startling emergence of more recently discovered documents of Jesus people and Christ movements out of the shadow of alleged gnostic heresy as sources for a fuller picture of Christian beginnings.

One of the main effects of the dependence on "gnosticism" for understanding the processes within Jesus and

Westar News

A Colleague Remembered

Marcus Borg
1942–2015

Much will be said, and deservedly so, of Marcus Borg's career and contributions. No one can forget that his writings and lectures spoke to people far beyond the scholarly pale. But I cannot forget that notebook he forever carried to catch something unexpected, nor that shuttle ride to Atlanta's airport, when he gently detailed his personal quest for his Christian roots. As he finished, I looked into that gentle face and found compassion again, as if for the first time. —Art Dewey

Westar Membership grows in 2014

Westar membership and subscriptions increased 7% in 2014, the first such increase since 2005. Westar currently has 1600 *Fourth R* subscribers, including 1400 Associate members and 60 active Fellows. Westar is also sharing its research with a growing audience on social media. From approximately 600 followers in 2010, we now have 4600 followers on Facebook, 1300 followers on Twitter, and 700 on YouTube.

Most people learn about Westar through friends and family via an invitation to a Jesus Seminar on the Road, a shared article from *The Fourth R*, or the gift of a Polebridge book. You can increase our impact by encouraging friends and family to become members or follow Westar online. Thank you for your ongoing efforts to spread religious literacy!

Looking for Sponsors

Is there a particular program or need at Westar that matters deeply to you? We are always looking for sponsors to help fund or offer in-kind services for special projects—from small-scale needs to major program-level support.

Encourage a younger generation to become invested in Westar. Help us provide a welcoming experience for our new Young Leaders in Religion Forum by sponsoring a luncheon at the Spring 2015 Meeting ($400–600) or help inspire and challenge them by providing a stipend for Polebridge books ($150–200).

Bring Westar technology up to speed. Help us make our accounting more secure and efficient by donating up-to-date software (est. $500). Or help us update our member database to a version compatible with our website (est. $5000), so that we can make it possible for members to manage their information online and facilitate communication among members wishing to plan activities like study groups and Jesus Seminars on the Road.

Sponsor a Board-Staff strategic planning session. Normally members of the board and staff meet in person only during national meetings. And the press of the meetings doesn't allow time for deep thinking about Westar's future. An opportunity to gather together, in person, without the distractions of managing a meeting, would give us a much-needed chance to look down the road five or ten years ($5000–8000).

Interviews on AuthorTalk

Ron Way, a longtime friend of Westar and the winner of a coveted New York Festival award for religious broadcasting, has recently initiated a new program called AuthorTalk. It features candid interviews with authors about their books, hopes, and desires.

Interviews with Jason BeDuhn on *The First New Testament*, David Galston on *Embracing the Human Jesus*, Joseph Bessler on *A Scandalous Jesus*, and Art Dewey, Roy Hoover, and Lane McGaughy on *The Authentic Letters of Paul* have been posted and are available now.

authortalk.audio/polebridge-press.html

Christ movements of the second and early-third century was that the wide range of Jesus/Christ-related documents discovered since 1850 were by and large deemed to be "gnostic." They were therefore regarded as either heresy or second-rate theology. This meant, for instance, that fifty-two such documents discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 were almost immediately considered "gnostic," and as such either problematic or damaging to what early Christianity was really about.

The Jesus Seminar was one of the first scholarly venues to contradict this picture of such recently discovered documents, when it rejected earlier scholarship that defined the Gospel of Thomas as both "gnostic" and from the second century. Instead, the Jesus Seminar led scholarship over the last thirty years in noticing the relative impossibility of defining this gospel as "gnostic." More recently, similar work has been done on a number of these discoveries such as the Secret Revelation of John, the Sayings of Sextus, the Odes of Solomon, the Letter of Peter to Philip, the Gospel of Mary, the Thunder: Perfect Mind, and the Gospel of Truth.

But many more of these discoveries still lay hidden under the assumption that they are a part of "gnosticism," automatically marginalizing their relevance. With the

Christianity Seminar now rejecting "gnosticism" as a viable analytical category for the study of early Christianity, an even stronger possibility exists to integrate many of these newer documents into more diverse and complex pictures of the emerging Christian phenomena. In two different ballot items in San Diego, the Christianity Seminar affirmed strongly the necessity to claim Nag Hammadi and other recently discovered works from the first two centuries as an integral part of rethinking early Christian history.

Such progress hauntingly now manifests itself for the Christianity Seminar in the crucial need for scholars who know the Nag Hammadi and other documents well, and who can help elaborate their meanings and track how early Christianity developed in ways quite different than has been perceived so far. This new direction presses current and future scholars to redouble their study of the recently discovered documents. 4R

From *Abba*-Cry to Father-Prayer

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them; male and female he created them." That responsibility is not to destroy and devastate, but rather to preserve and protect the earth.

Finally, a word about that phrase "children of God." This does not indicate a status of child-like dependency, immaturity, and lack of responsibility (recall Paul's "coheirs" above). Recall our own cultural and linguistic convention in English. Parents can and do say, for example, that: "We are moving to San Francisco because our son lives there, our daughter lives there, or *our children* live there." Even though that clearly refers to adults, the parents can still use "our children" for adult persons. (If you met them, however, you would not address them as children!)

In Greek that would be an easy distinction between *paidia* and *tekna*. Never, therefore hear the phrase "children of God" as condescending *paidia* (kids) but as adult *tekna* with an emphasis not on immature age but on intrafamilial status within the Family of God.

The Full Prayer Content of *Intrafamilial* Divine Address

I conclude our reflections on the Abba invocation by turning to the Lord's Prayer. That prayer comes to us in three versions, and all three attribute the full prayer to Jesus' explicit and paradigmatic teaching.

> When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father . . . (Matt 6:7–9)
>
> He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father . . . (Luke 11:1–2)
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> And do not pray as the hypocrites but as the Lord commanded in his Gospel, pray thus: Our Father . . . (Didache 8.2)

All three versions attribute the prayer not only to Jesus himself but to his commanding it as a model of prayer. But, if that were an historical fact, why do we not find it cited elsewhere and earlier? Why, for example, does Paul not mention any such tradition—as he does for eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11:23 and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3? And why not Mark? Why is it that neither Paul nor Mark report that Jesus mandated addressing God as Father, even though both authors mention the Abba-invocation?

Here is my hypothesis, in two parts, for your consideration. First, what Jesus taught, modeled, and incarnated was an *intrafamilial* address to God—be it with Abba or any other such vocative address—which committed his companions to the rights and responsibilities of living *within* the Household and Family of God—as also within the Kingdom of God. That is what is still recalled by Paul and Mark. Second, very, very early—because very, very accurately—the implications of that status were spelled out in the Lord's Prayer as we find it now in Matthew, Luke, and the Didache. What I find striking is that the commitments expressed in the Lord's Prayer could all be extracted from accepting God as Householder of Creation's World House and accepting one's own status within that divine Household. 4R

Notes

1. Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (SCM, 1965): 9–30
2. *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988): 28–47.
3. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 611–30.
4. Sabine R. Hübner & David M. Ratzan, "Fatherless in Antiquity? Perspectives on 'Fatherlessness' in the Ancient Mediterranean." Chapter 1, pp. 1–28, in *Growing Up Fatherless in Antiquity.* (Eds.) Sabine R. Hübner & David M. Ratzan (Cambridge University Press, 2009). See pp. 8–9.
5. The New Revised Standard Version's inclusive language translates: "because you are *children*, God has sent the Spirit of his *Son* into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a *child*, and if a *child* then also an heir, through God."
6. Once again, the NRSV used the inclusive word "children" in the first line and thereby obscures Paul's striking shift from "sons" to "children."

John Dominic Crossan is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at DePaul University. He is the author of more than twenty books, four of which have become national religious bestsellers: *The Historical Jesus* (1991), *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), *Who Killed Jesus* (1995), and *The Birth of Christianity* (1998).