

What Categories Are Left?

A Conversation with Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?*

Bernard Brandon Scott

Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?* has clearly and decisively problematized the category of gnosticism. Her arguments are complex and frankly my knowledge of the literature she surveys is only sufficient to follow her discourse, not sufficient to critique it. I find her argument convincing for two reasons:

1. Her control of the data and exposition of the history of scholarship is compelling.
2. Her argument coheres with other problematic areas we are uncovering as we explore the rise of the Christian movement(s).

Gnosticism is one more problematic category in a long list of problematic categories, all calling for a thorough revamping of how we reconstruct the emergence and development of the Christian movement.

King charges that gnosticism was a construct of scholarship based upon the dogmatic categories of the heresiologists, principally Irenaeus:

The ancient discourse of orthodoxy and heresy has affected not only the goals and substance of the study of Gnosticism but its methods as well. I suggest that in the development of modern historical scholarship the concerns of ancient discourse with origins, essence, and purity were transformed into disciplinary methodologies.¹

She demonstrates that the gnostic redeemer myth, a favorite of German scholarship, was a complete fabrication. Furthermore, scholars attempted to shoehorn the newly discovered Nag Hammadi documents into the procrustean bed of the gnostic model. After following her careful analysis, I began to wonder if what these documents had in common was the jar in which they were found.² I take away a set of correlated conclusions from King's analysis:

1. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 219.
2. In a similar way I have wondered if what the books in the canon of the NT have in common is that they are in the canon.

1. Historical categories must not be determined by dogmatic concerns.
2. The categories should arise out of the material itself.

Plato is the Problem

At the heart of King's charge against the scholarly gnostic model is its dependence upon the dogmatic categories, especially those of Irenaeus. Ultimately it is a dogmatic model, not an historical model.³ Thus her argument is another in the long line that attempts to free the study of early Christianity from the grasp of dogma and theological needs. This debate extends back to the origins of our discipline—back to Hermann Samuel Reimarus, David Friedrich Strauss, and Ferdinand Christian Bauer.⁴ It has been a long and difficult struggle, always being refought in each generation. Gains are never as complete as we think, and the task always remains unfinished.

King argues that the categories of the heresiologists were determined by dogmatic needs. Since they sought to define who was in and who was out, these needs were also political:

Thus his [Irenaeus'] refutation was two-pronged: to describe the false teachings and to provide the true. In so doing, his work *Against the Heresies* not only laid the basis for what would later become Christian orthodoxy, but also set a pattern for attacking one's opponents that would persist to the present day.⁵

This is essentially correct, but it can be pushed deeper. Irenaeus seeks to protect and prove the truth of Christianity by following the ancient Greek model of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He is after the essence of Christianity, which he maintains the heretics have defiled. For Plato, the form or (in Aristotle's terms) the essence precedes or pre-exists existence. It is eternal, perfect, and change-

3. This dogmatic prejudice is easily seen in debates concerning the *Gospel of Thomas*. To identify it as gnostic means that it is not historical, not reliable, as though canonical meant the opposite. John Meier is a good example of this tendency. He assumes that "among first-generation Christian leaders, there was a common gospel message on which all of them agreed," pointing to 1 Cor 15:11. Likewise, "from the very beginning of Christian preaching about Jesus, there was a certain 'biographical' thrust that formed the Jesus tradition in a direction that ultimately produced the canonical Gospels." Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1.118. This biographical thrust is anti-gnostic. Notice the implicit use of Irenaeus' model: the pure essence of the gospel handed on in the canonical gospels. In Meier's discussion of the *Gospel of Thomas*, showing that it is gnostic is what resolves the question of its use as a historical resource for the historical Jesus (see 1.125–6). Jonathan Z Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, called out this duplicitous way of reconstructing history.

4. Hans Conzelmann in the first sentence of his classic RGG³ article "Jesus" states: "The historical and substantive presupposition for modern research into the life of Jesus is emancipation from traditional Christological dogma on the basis of the principle of reason." Conzelmann, "Jesus," 5. Joseph Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*, argues that Martin Kähler's Christ of faith is an effort to make faith and the churches safe from the political challenges and loss of power opened up by the historical understanding of Jesus.

5. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 31.

less. What we see in this world is defective and error prone, yet it reflects that perfect other world. Our senses perceive these perfect forms, but only in a reflected way. This model is often referred to as essentialism.⁶

Irenaeus has adopted and adapted this model for his apologetic purposes. The pure essence is handed on through the unbroken chain of apostolic succession, what King calls the argument from genealogy. He lays this out in *Haer.* 3.1.1:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world.⁷

Like an eternal, unchanging form, the truth is contained in a guaranteed vehicle, “in the tradition of the apostles.” This truth they took care to hand on:

We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times.

Like the forms themselves, those who were entrusted with handing on the truth “should be very perfect and blameless in all things.” The chain from the apostles to the bishops is like the chain of a perfect philosophical school. From Christ the perfect philosopher, to the apostles, to the bishops, a perfect and unchanging essence is handed on to perfect and blameless successors. This chain of succession (genealogy) guarantees the truth of what they hand on:

[They] taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to the perfect apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves.

The truth and those who pass it on are perfect and unchanging. Those are the marks of truth. The heretics “rave” and are disordered and have changed the unchangeable, thus proving they are not true.

Irenaeus has co-opted Plato’s model for his understanding of the truth of Christianity. That truth must be a perfect, unchanging essence. The heretics have evidently corrupted that pure, eternal, and perfect essence. In fact, their lack of moral perfection is proof of their heresy, because ethics and ontology are interchangeable.

The underlying power of Plato’s model is evident in Irenaeus’ defense of why there must be four and only four gospels. The number four in his analysis is the number of perfection:

6. For an excellent summary article, see Teresa Robertson and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties.”

7. Translation of Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Kindle edition).

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.

There is only one Gospel but four gospels, so the four gospels represent the perfect representation of the one—their very “fourness” demonstrates their perfection:

It is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit. As also David says, when entreating His manifestation, “Thou that sittest between the cherubim, shine forth.” For the cherubim, too, were four-faced, and their faces were images of the dispensation of the Son of God. For, [as the Scripture] says, “The first living creature was like a lion,” symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power; “the second [living creature] was like a calf,” signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order; but “the third had, as it were, the face as of a man,” —an evident description of His advent as a human being; “the fourth was like a flying eagle,” pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. For that according to John relates His original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Also, “all things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.” For this reason, too, is that Gospel full of all confidence, for such is His person. (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8)

Like a pure Platonic form, the Word is one and the Gospel is one with four manifestations. But unlike a Platonic form, it is clearly manifest here and now in the apostolic tradition. The heretics who deviate and corrupt this pure, changeless form correspond to the imperfect shadows on the cave wall.

As King demonstrates, Irenaeus’ model has not only had a great influence on the scholarly construction of gnosticism, but it has set a course for all succeeding Christianity. Christianity has sought to define its pure essence and to eliminate those who did not conform.

On a personal note, my doctoral dissertation was on the debate between Adolf von Harnack⁸ and Alfred Loisy⁹ concerning the essence of Christianity. Ironically, Harnack, a Protestant and defender of Marcion, sought the pure es-

8. Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*

9. Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*. My introductory essay to the reprint of this book in the Lives of Jesus Series attempts to situate the debate between Harnack and Loisy in its historical context.

sence of the Gospel, while Loisy, a Roman Catholic, maintained that Harnack's pure essence was an illusion. Harnack employed the analogy of the fruit with its seed. Remove the fruit and find the seed, the pure essence. Loisy thought maybe Harnack's fruit had metamorphosed into an onion—one kept peeling away the layers until there was nothing left. For Loisy the more correct analogy was the tree that organically grew from an acorn. But the acorn was not the essence of the category "tree," only a beginning, and the tree was constantly changing.¹⁰

Darwin as Guide

It is important to appreciate the fundamental intellectual debt of Western thought to the doctrine of essentialism. Showing that Irenaeus was wrong and that we should not use dogmatic categories is not sufficient. We need to be careful not to fall into an unthinking essentialism of our own. I take King's study of the *Secret Revelation of John* to be an effort to do just this. She analyzes it on its own terms, not as a representative of some "type" or "essence" of a religion.¹¹

But Irenaeus has implanted essentialism in the DNA of Christianity, just as Plato has embedded essentialism into the DNA of Western thought. It constitutes a major struggle to free ourselves of this intellectual habit. An example from biological science demonstrates the power of essentialism and the effort required to overcome it.

According to Ernst Mayr (1904–2005), Charles Darwin's rejection of essentialism was a critical aspect of his achievement, and the lingering strength of essentialism was central in preventing biologists from accepting Darwinism. Mayr was in a unique position to pass judgment on this issue. The opening paragraph of the Wikipedia article "Ernst Mayr"¹² summarizes his importance:

[He] was one of the 20th century's leading evolutionary biologists. He was also a renowned taxonomist, tropical explorer, ornithologist, and historian of science. His work contributed to the conceptual revolution that led to the modern evolutionary synthesis of Mendelian genetics, systematics, and Darwinian evolution, and to the development of the biological species concept.

A long time professor at Harvard, he was one of the most important formulators of the Darwinian synthesis that triumphed in modern biology in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹³ Mayr sets the problem up as follows:

10. King takes note of this debate in a long endnote and devotes chapter 3 to Harnack. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 291 n. 14.

11. See in this issue, Kotrosits, "But What Do We Call It? The *Secret Revelation of John* and Crises of Categories."

12. See "Ernst Mayr" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst_Mayr].

13. De Queiroz, "Ernst Mayr and the modern concept of species."

Hindsight suggests that enough facts were available soon after 1859 to have permitted the universal acceptance of Darwin's theories, yet they were not universally adopted until about 80 years later. What could have been the reason for this long resistance?¹⁴

Mayr suggests a number of factors slowed the acceptance of Darwin's theories until the late 1940s. Early on, the literal interpretation of the Bible was certainly important. But Mayr does not think this was all that critical, as evidenced by the rapid acceptance of Darwin's theory of common descent.¹⁵ Much more important for him was the dominance of essentialism:

Essentialism was the almost universally held worldview from the ancients until Darwin's time. Founded by the Pythagoreans and Plato, essentialism taught that all seemingly variable phenomena of nature could be sorted into classes. Each class is characterized by its definition (its essence). This essence is constant (invariable) and sharply demarcated against all other such essences.¹⁶

For Mayr, Darwin's real intellectual breakthrough was his rejection of essentialism, which is also what delayed Darwinism's acceptance by biologists for eighty years. Darwin was in point of fact rejecting the common sense of his day, the common sense of most of Western intellectual history, and the common sense of most folks until this very day.

Dictionaries are predicated on essentialism. In defining each and every word, they provide the user with the word's essence. But modern dictionaries also demonstrate the triumph of Darwinism. They provide multiple definitions and, over time when new definitions arise, they duly record them. Language mavens (linguistic conservatives) often become agitated over a dictionary's refusal to support the "correct," that is, the essential, definition.¹⁷ I. A. Richards labeled this "the proper meaning superstition," the insistence that words have one and only one proper meaning. He marked that this understanding of words assumes "that water, for all its virtues, in canals, baths and turbines, were really a weak form of ice."¹⁸ He was attacking the rhetoric of his day that was gov-

14. Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 74. Mayr is referring to the acceptance by sciences, not the public at large.

15. Common descent is part of evolutionary theory but was accepted by many biologists while rejecting the mechanisms that Darwin proposed. Thomas Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, disagreed with Darwin on the issue of essentialism. See Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 79; Browne, *Charles Darwin*, 92-93, 104-6.

16. Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 74.

17. See Skinner, *The Story of Ain't: America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published*. Morton, *The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics*, with its editorial panel on usage was a conservative reaction to Webster's Third International.

18. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 48. For the significance of Richard's argument, see Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 264.

erned by essentialism precisely during the eighty-year period that essentialism also was blocking the acceptance of Darwinism by biologists.

Darwin rejected looking for the essence and studied instead a population. "What we find among living organisms, he said, are not constant classes (types), but variable populations."¹⁹ Darwin was not seeking the essence of a species, some eternal, unchanging (fixed) form, but variability in a population. Where species had been fixed in the older essentialist model, species now became a problem: just what was it? To this day this is a debated problem in biology and its related disciplines. The answers are not a matter of essence, but of statistics. The most popular, but by no means universal,²⁰ understanding of a species is the one originated by Mayr:

Perhaps the most widely accepted species concept is known as the Biological Species Concept (BSC). According to this definition, proposed by the evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr in the mid-20th century, species are groups of actually or potentially interbreeding natural populations which are reproductively isolated from other such groups.²¹

In developing his model for evolution, Darwin introduced the concepts of population thinking, chance, and history. Natural selection is the process that makes evolution work. Population thinking, chance, and history refuted essentialism. They eliminated in one fell swoop Plato's forms, Aristotle's essences, the common sense of essentialist thinking that had dominated and in many ways continues to dominate the West.

Is the evolutionary biological model applicable to the study of early Christianity? There is much we can learn from it.²² Understanding and adopting its anti-essentialist method is an important corrective to our essentialist heritage. As King has shown, modern scholarship on gnosticism has been led off track by falling prey to Irenaeus' dogmatic categories of heresy and orthodoxy. That is, scholarship proceeded along an essentialist line. What King appears to me to be proposing is a model based on population thinking. There is a population with variability. Within that population there will be a great deal

19. Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 75.

20. As a birdwatcher this debate affects the identification of birds. For example, are the Eastern and Western Meadowlarks two species or one? They are now classified as two separate species, although in the field they can only be distinguished by voice. Historically they were one species that was separated by the last ice age into the eastern and western populations. But should you be birding in an area where the two populations meet, you will encounter mixed birds that confound classification. This is true of a number of birds, e.g., the Dark-eyed Juncos, Northern Flickers, Eastern and Spotted Towhees, etc. Classifiers are divided into lumpers (those who want to reduce the number of species) and splitters (those who want to increase the number of species). Thirty years ago the tendency was towards lumping, but now with DNA testing the tendency is toward splitting. So it is highly debatable as to how many species of birds are endemic to the continental United States.

21. *Encyclopedia of Life* [<http://eol.org/info/468>].

22. See Stuart-Fox, "Two Views," for an intriguing survey of the issues involved.

of similarity, seldom (if ever) identity, and at its edges a great deal of difference. King has begun to suggest a way to describe the variability in that population. But what is missing (it seems to me) is the process, the equivalent of natural selection. Taking King's work seriously requires reconsidering more than the category of gnosticism. We must abandon the use of the essentialist model, and with it go many, if not most, of our categories.

Example: Debate at Antioch

The debate between Cephas and Paul at Antioch as Paul reports in Gal 2:11–21 provides a good example of how essentialist categories have distorted our understanding. I will follow Brigitte Kahl's "Peter's Antiochene Apostasy: Re-Judaizing or Imperial Conformism?" because I find it the most convincing and cogent analysis of this confrontation in Antioch²³ and because it was positively received in an earlier meeting of the Christian Origins Seminar.

The traditional interpretive model employed to understand Paul was essentialist and juxtaposed Christianity to Judaism, gentile to Jew, faith to works, uncircumcision to circumcision, and freedom to slavery. This model has been used to understand Paul's accusation against Cephas: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:14 NRSV). Hans Dieter Betz's analysis of this passage in his *Hermeneia* commentary on Galatians is typical of the traditional understanding:

By changing back to the observance of Jewish custom and law, the Jewish Christians have only reversed their emancipation from Judaism. When they gave up the observance of the Torah, they also admitted that as a Christian one can be saved without the Torah. Returning to the Torah cannot simply eliminate that first step of denying the existence of Torah observance.²⁴

As Kahl shrewdly notes about Betz's analysis, "to live like a Gentile" means "to live like a Christian."²⁵ Cephas' hypocrisy lies in asking gentiles to live like Jews. Betz's interpretation keeps the traditional model firmly in place, equating gentile with Christian and understanding it to be opposed to Judaism. Betz clearly sees Cephas and Paul at the meeting in Jerusalem abandoning Judaism in favor of Christianity (shifting from one type or essence to another), but then at Antioch Cephas reneges. That model, however, is an inappropriate, anachronistic misreading of Paul. Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity,²⁶ nor did Christianity even exist in this period. The essentialist categories "Judaism" and "Christianity" have misled Betz and distorted his reading.

23. I have dealt with the episode in Antioch in a fuller fashion in my *The Real Paul*, 77–90.

24. Betz, *Galatians*, 112.

25. Kahl, "Peter's Antiochene Apostasy," 30.

26. Stendahl, "Call rather than Conversion," 7–22; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 133–36; Scott, *The Real Paul*, 73–76.

Moreover, Kahl notes that this reading destroys the rhetoric of Paul's argument. Since Paul is confronting Cephas face to face, one expects a strong rhetorical attack. Instead as Kahl remarks, "Paul all of a sudden becomes exceedingly polite, diplomatic, and pussy-footed."²⁷ Instead of confronting Cephas, Paul gives him "a limp and very strangely worded applause for being a good Christian." This misreading results from misunderstanding the Greek *ethnikōs* as "gentile," that is, Christian, not Jewish.

The rhetoric of Paul's argument would suggest that *ethnikōs* should be understood in a negative sense as an insult to Cephas. Actually this Greek word root does have a negative sense in the NT. The root *ethnik-* is used four times in the NT, always in a negative sense, which illustrates Paul's usage.

And if you greet only your friends (*lit*: brothers) what have you done that is exceptional? Even the pagans (*ethnikoi*) do as much, don't they? (Matt 5:47 SV)

The contrast between brothers and pagans makes it clear this is a contrast between insiders and outsiders or, as we might say colloquially, between "us and them":

And when you pray, you should not babble on as the pagans (*ethnikoi*) do. They imagine that the more they say, the more attention they get. (Matt 6:7 SV)

Then if he or she refuses to listen to them, report it to the congregation. If he or she refuses to listen even to the congregation, treat that companion like you would a pagan (*ethnikos*) or toll collector. (Matt 18:17 SV)

In each of these cases the *ethnikoi* are those outside, foreigners, and they are viewed as negative examples, definitely lower in status from the perspective of honor. One should do more or better than these foreigners, the pagans (or nations), do. The implication is: we are better. In Matthew's gospel this negative view of the nations/*ethnikoi* leads directly to the gospel's conclusion: "make all the nations (*ethnē*) your disciples" (Matt 28:19 BBS). Thus Matthew's community/readers who have seen the nations as their inferiors are now told that their fate lies among them—they are to make them their disciples. Even though Matthew's gospel was written considerably later than Paul's letter, his usage helps us understand how this *ethnik-* word group is employed.

Not as a Jew

When Paul says that Cephas is living like one of the nations and not as a Jew (*ethnikōs kai ouchi Ioudaikōs*), he is not commending Cephas but condemning him. The next verse exposes the Jewish presupposition: "We may be Jews by birth and we may look at people of the nations as ignorant and corrupt" (2:15

27. Kahl, "Peter's Antiochene Apostasy," 31.

SV). From the Jewish point of view, the nations are natural-born sinners, and literally in the Greek Paul refers to them as “sinners” (*hamartōloi*; Gal 2:15 BGT). Kahl draws what is the “natural interpretation” of Paul’s condemnation of Cephas:

You, Peter, have made a big public show of being a Jew, but in fact I, Paul, tell you, you live like a Gentile sinner, a *goy*: *ethnikōs*. And as a Jew, as you and I know, you should not. You should live *Ioudaikōs*, **not** *ethnikōs*.²⁸

In Kahl’s reconstruction of events, Cephas (and I would add James) has become concerned about the ramifications of these mixed meals in Antioch. How will the imperial officials judge them? Kahl catches the claustrophobic atmosphere of life in the Roman Empire:

In a situation where everything is over-determined and colonized by civic religion and most of all imperial religion, nothing, not even Jewish law, Jewish identity, and the Jewish God can escape the omnipresent grip of the Roman empire and its idols: *Sin*, in Paul’s terminology.²⁹

The perspective from Jerusalem may have had to shift when confronted with the realities of Antioch. Eating together in Syrian Antioch in the period after the meeting in Jerusalem sometime in 47–48 CE is a very different situation than in the Jewish homeland where Judaism is the dominant religion. The young movement is still experimenting. In Antioch the Roman imperial presence is much more prominent than in Judaea and Galilee. As James, and then Cephas, see the situation, the mixed meals in Antioch are too dangerous. They are apparently withdrawing from the meals to minimize the danger. They are proposing that those of the nations have three choices:

1. They can perform some of the rituals that are required by the imperial religion as part of one’s civic duties. Judaism had long worked out an accommodation on this issue.
2. They can become fully Jewish by accepting circumcision.

The first option does not appear to have been seriously considered. For Cephas and James the second solution, circumcision, is a pragmatic solution to a dangerous situation, a solution that has the advantage of fitting with established tradition. If neither one of these options is accepted, then the third choice would be obvious:

3. Cephas and the Jews must withdraw from table fellowship.

Paul rejects this offer from a Jewish perspective and accuses Cephas of behaving not as a Jew, but as *goyim*, *ethnikōs*, a heathen. Ironically both Paul and Cephas

28. Kahl, “Peter’s Antiochene Apostasy,” 31.

29. Kahl, “Peter’s Antiochene Apostasy,” 31–32.

see themselves as acting from a Jewish perspective. For Paul the proposal of Cephas is idolatry; it violates the oneness of God. For Jews the defining characteristic of the nations is that they worship idols. In Paul's earliest letter he commends his converts as having "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9 NRSV). Or again in the debate about food offered to idols, Paul's position appears clearly:

What is my point? That meat sacrificed to a pseudo-divinity really is what it is alleged to be, or that an idol is what it is alleged to be? Not at all. My point is that such sacrifices are actually offerings to demons and not to God. I don't want you to become involved with demons. (1 Cor 19:19–20 SV)

Paul argues that the solutions offered by Cephas and James return the nations back to the worship of idols. Their solution acknowledges the primacy of the idol Caesar against the call of the one true God. God has called the nations from the worship of idols to the worship of the one true God in the name of the Anointed. Any backtracking on this call is a violation of God's oneness, an act of idolatry.

Kahl's proposal moves away from the essentialist categories of Christianity versus Judaism as represented by Betz's analysis. She examines the passage on the basis of its rhetorical expectations. In her analysis it turns out not to be a debate about Christians abandoning the freedom of the gospel and falling back into Jewish practice, but to be intra-Jewish debate on how to deal with the Roman empire in a context in which Jews and members of the nations are eating together in the name of the Anointed.

Kahl has examined the population and taken the language it used seriously, trying to understand it within its own context and not in the context of later theological debates, as was the case with Betz. She saw that population as mixed, made up of Jews and members of the nations who were eating together while not observing required imperial demands. She does not assume that these are Jewish Christians who lapse back into Judaism. She analyzes the situation within its context. The driving force becomes the empire. Meeting or not meeting the demands of the empire is what drives the debate forward.

Marcion

Jason BeDuhn in his penetrating study of Marcion, *The First New Testament*, has drawn an inference not unlike King's. I quote DeDuhn's conclusion because its points are so reminiscent of King's:

In short, the acceptance by modern researchers of the claims made about Marcion's handling of the texts included in his New Testament is an example of uncritical adoption of polemic as history. First, Tertullian and his associates in this charge against Marcion are working from an anti-Marcionite bias that

shapes their assumptions. Second, they are writing from a position in time that makes it impossible for them to have any sure knowledge of the state of either anything like a New Testament canon or its constituent books at the time of Marcion. Third, we know for a fact that several of their assumptions are incorrect: there was no New Testament canon before Marcion, from which the latter rejected parts unsuited to him; there was no larger Pauline corpus from which Marcion excised the Pastorals; there was no universal, undisputed orthodoxy from which Marcion diverged. All of these are anachronisms that Marcion's later critics project back into the circumstances of his activity. In many cases, Tertullian and Epiphanius claim erroneously that the particular wording of the Evangelion or Apostolikon is Marcion's invention, when in fact we find the same wording in catholic biblical manuscripts. The almost canonical status afforded the accusations made against Marcion, therefore, shows a remarkable lack of critical historical assessment among modern researchers.³⁰

In BeDuhn's reconstruction Marcion turns out to be not a deviation from pure orthodoxy, but a creative force in the transformation of the movement. The question that now needs to be on our agenda is what drove Marcion in the creation of his NT? And what drove Tertullian and Epiphanius to attack him?

Other Problematic Categories

I suspect a major driving force in the period after 70 CE in the emerging self-understanding of Christianity was hostility within the empire to Judaism. At least I would propose as a hypothesis that the Christian movement's response to the empire's hostility to Judaism is a major force in the evolution of Christianity.

This reminds us that Judaism itself is a problematic category. Jacob Neusner has long rejected the notion of normative Judaism and has argued that scholarship needs to "learn how to respect the plurality of Judaic religious systems and speak of Judaisms, not Judaism, or 'a Judaism' when we mean a specific religious system."³¹ Normative Judaism is a type of essentialist thinking applied to Judaism, just as orthodoxy is a type of essentialist thinking applied to Christianity. Daniel Boyarin has been pursuing the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity in an especially intriguing way.³²

Let I be accused of Christian exclusivism, Christianity itself is a problematic category. If gnosticism is problematic, then Christianity is equally so, since Christianity created gnosticism as "the other" as a way to identify itself. The

30. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament*, 31.

31. Neusner, "Defining Judaism," 6–7.

32. See especially Boyarin, *Dying for God and Border Lines*.

same of course can be said *mutatis mutandis* about Judaism. Pagan³³ and gentile³⁴ are likewise problematic.

This list of problematic categories could and should be extended, and we must begin to come to terms with how to name things. But we need a descriptive method that considers the variation in a population and is not worried about the essence. We must lay out this variation within the population as it develops over time, showing how change responded to various influences, both internal and external.

To move forward, we need to invent our categories anew and discover our method. But King has clearly demonstrated that the essentialist categories are dead.

33. "Pagan" is an especially problematic term, since it was only used in the Latin west by ecclesiastical writers. In the East, Hellene or *ethnikos* ("gentile") was used. *Paganos* continued in its secular sense. See Peter Brown, "Pagan," 625.

34. As Christopher Stanley points out, "in social terms, there was simply no such thing as a 'Gentile' in the ancient world." Stanley, "Neither Jew nor Greek," 105.

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