

# EARLY CHRISTIAN PLURIFORMITY

## 1. Introduction

This book is about the earliest history of the Christian movement. It will pay special attention to the wide variety of creeds and doctrines held by first and second century groups of followers of Jesus. As we will see, after the first centuries the multiplicity of Christian groups and beliefs gradually decreased, giving way to a less multifarious and varied mainstream Christianity. As a result, the texts of several early Christian groups were no longer read and copied. Eventually they disappeared almost completely from history – until, that is, by mere chance several were rediscovered in the sands of the Egyptian desert, notably the gospels of Thomas, Mary (Magdalene), Philip and Judas, the Secret Book of John, a Revelation of Peter, and two Revelations of James.<sup>1</sup> These “new” sources enable us to see more clearly the striking pluriformity of early Christianity.

We should also not forget that early-orthodox theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 140-200) were still familiar with the pluralistic Christianity of the first centuries. However, Irenaeus and his predecessors and successors treated the pluriformity of the early Christian movement in characteristically dogmatic terms, claiming that there was only one truth and labelling all kinds of different Christian beliefs as aberrations of this one and only truth. In this book we will try to approach the same phenomenon from a historical rather than a confessional-theological viewpoint.

Let me introduce the theme of early Christian pluriformity by summarizing and comparing the ideas about God and Jesus held by two different groups.

Many Christians of the first centuries (Gnostics, Marcionites) believed that there were two Gods: the supreme God (the God supposedly revealed by Jesus) and a lower, incompetent, even demonic God who was regarded as the creator and ruler of the present material and perishable world. As a rule, these Christians identified the inferior God with the God of the Old Testament. Accordingly, they were convinced that after the revelation brought by Jesus, the Jewish Scriptures no longer had any revelatory or normative value. In sharp contrast, other groups not only believed that the biblical God was the only God but also that followers of Jesus should live in accordance with all the instructions which this God had imposed on his chosen people, including those relating to circumcision, Sabbath observance, clean and unclean food.

Christians affiliated with the first type of group could not believe that the earthly body which the Saviour had put on upon his descent into the lower world had

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<sup>1</sup> The texts are included in Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

anything to do with his divine identity. For this reason they also rejected the idea that the Saviour could be humiliated and killed on a cross.<sup>2</sup> What was crucified in their view was just the body of Jesus, an earthly body moulded by the creator. On the other side were those who emphatically denied Jesus' divine origin and nature and who considered the attribution of divine powers to Jesus a blasphemy. In their opinion, Jesus was the son of Joseph, a prophet sent by the biblical God to His people and/or the Messianic redeemer of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The adherents of both categories of thought were convinced that their beliefs were in full accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Indeed, they all claimed to be the true followers of Jesus. How can we explain this wide divergence of beliefs among Christians of the first centuries? How did these different factions or schools defend their particular views vis-à-vis other early Christians?

As noted above, the pluriformity of Christian groups and beliefs gradually decreased after the first centuries. This, too, calls for an explanation. In this introductory chapter we will examine the significant part played by the apostle Paul. To a large degree, the doctrine of the later Church was based on his preaching of redemption through Jesus. Whereas, as we will see presently, Jesus was the initiator of a religious reform movement within the Judaism of his time and his environment, Paul opened his Christian communities to everybody who believed in Jesus. There are strong reasons to consider him, rather than Jesus, as the founder of Christianity as a non-Jewish world religion.

We will discuss these issues in chronological order:

1. Jesus' mission and programme.
2. Various reactions to Jesus among his first followers.
3. Paul and the emergence of mainstream Christianity.

During the first centuries, Christianity spread very fast all over the Roman Empire and outside. Why was it so much easier for the Christian message to attract people in ancient society than it is now in our part of the world? At the end of the present chapter we will also deal briefly with this question.

## **Jesus**

The New Testament gospels remain the prime sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus.<sup>4</sup> It should be borne in mind, however, that they were composed some forty to sixty years after the death of Jesus and more than twenty years after the dissemination of Paul's letters. The way in which Mark, the first evangelist, highlights aspects of Jesus' life and death already betrays the influence of the apostle Paul. The gospels were certainly at the basis of further interpretations of Jesus. In the present context, however, it is important to regard them primarily as early products of Christian reflections about the meaning of Jesus' life and death, and therefore as expressions of early Christian pluriformity.

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<sup>2</sup> See below, chap. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See below, chap. 5.

<sup>4</sup> The historical Jesus is understood to mean Jesus as far as he can be approached by historical research.

Jesus' words and the stories about his deeds and about his suffering and death were transmitted orally before they were committed to writing by the evangelists. Very quickly, these oral traditions spread beyond their original Palestinian homeland. This required translation in the broadest sense of the word – those who transmitted the stories in a different cultural environment had to explain to their addressees why the message of Jesus was of topical and urgent interest to them in their particular situation. It was necessary to use their language and to reword Jesus' teachings and the meaning of his life and death with reference to their realms of thought. Two examples may suffice to illustrate this.

The story to the effect that Jesus was begotten by a divine father must have sounded very familiar to an audience living in the Graeco-Roman world where all kinds of stories were told about heroes and demigods born from the union of a divine father and a human mother.<sup>5</sup> While it is not hard to see in the story of the virgin birth of Jesus an attempt to explain the superior importance of Jesus to people from a pagan-Hellenistic background, it would be difficult to trace a specific form of historical reminiscence underlying this tradition.

A very different example is the highly negative picture of the Pharisees – not to mention that of the Jews in general – in the gospels. This picture is likely to have developed some twenty to thirty years after Jesus' death when for various reasons early followers of Jesus and other Jewish groups drew apart.<sup>6</sup> In the course of the transmission, the Pharisees were depicted more and more as the standard opponents and enemies of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

When we try to approach the gospels as sources of historical information, we should constantly be aware that they inform us first and foremost of the views relating to the life and death of Jesus cherished by his followers in the period when the texts were written. Only when we have a sufficiently clear idea about these later developments can we try to reconstruct what Jesus said, did and suffered forty to sixty years earlier.

However, this is a far from easy task. In his seminal book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (original German edition 1913), Albert Schweitzer demonstrated convincingly how arbitrary scholars can be when they attempt to distil historical data from later interpretations. In addition, theologians and historians seem to be irresistibly inclined to fill the gaps in their knowledge of Jesus from their own store of favourite ideas and convictions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Charles H. Talbert, "Miraculous Conceptions and Births in Mediterranean Antiquity", in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan (eds), *The Historical Jesus in Context*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006, 79-86.

<sup>6</sup> The followers of Jesus were blamed, among other things, for their admission of uncircumcised Gentiles to their communities (see below), for the increasing divinization of Jesus, and, perhaps, for their refusal to become involved in the Jewish War against the Romans in 64-70. For their part, the followers of Jesus could blame other Jews for their rejection of Jesus and his message. See further James D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism*, London: SCM, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2006.

<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, Christians scorned the Pharisees; on the other, Jews rejected Paul and his ideas. This had tragic consequences for the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. For, as will be argued further below, Paul's interpretation of Jesus underlies the beliefs of mainstream Christianity, while synagogal or Rabbinic Judaism developed from the Pharisaic interpretation of the Torah.

<sup>8</sup> This tendency did not stop after the publication of Schweitzer's book. In recent publications, for instance, Jesus tends to be presented as a spiritual, mystical, or even Gnostic teacher. No doubt, this picture is closely connected with – and inspired by – current interest in spirituality and mysticism.

Yet in recent years some progress has been made in the quest for the historical Jesus. To an extent this is a result of the manuscript discoveries mentioned above. It is noteworthy, too, that since the Second World War, much more knowledge has been gathered about forms of Judaism at the time of Jesus. In addition, other methods of investigation have been introduced, notably socio-scientific approaches. Nevertheless, every pronouncement relating to the historical Jesus includes an element of speculation. It goes without saying that this also applies to what is said below about Jesus.

Schweitzer censored the work of many Jesus scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but he did not leave it at that. He, too, attempted to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus. Against the then prevalent views of liberal theologians, he insisted that Jesus was first and foremost a herald of the Kingdom of God. Aspects of Schweitzer's reconstruction have been criticized but in essence his "solution", as he called it, turned out to be directive for Jesus research throughout the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> In fact, there still are several New Testament scholars who hold to Schweitzer's interpretation and regard Jesus as a characteristically apocalyptic prophet.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, God's Kingdom (or God's reign) must have been a central notion in Jesus' words and actions. In his time this was a well-known concept. For centuries, the Jewish people had looked forward to the moment when pagan empires like those of the Greeks and the Romans would no longer suppress Israel and the rest of the world. Many Jews hoped that the Creator himself would soon resume His rule. God's reign was associated with notions such as peace and justice and also with joy and abundance. Jesus proclaimed that this Kingdom was near. But contrary to what Schweitzer has argued, Jesus may not have been referring to its nearness in a merely temporal sense. I shall now discuss two aspects of Jesus' activities with a view to clarifying his notion of the nearness of God's Kingdom.

Apparently Jesus was inspired – if not possessed<sup>11</sup> – by his vision of God's Kingdom, to such a degree that he even experienced it as a power within himself by which he was able to cast out evil spirits.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to say how we should imagine this phenomenon, although we can find various reports of exorcisms in anthropological studies, mainly – but not exclusively – in studies about non-Western cultures.<sup>13</sup> Soon Jesus' exorcistic and healing actions would be interpreted as proof of his divine power (see below), but this is hardly what they meant to him himself. His healing activities did not demonstrate who he himself was, rather they demonstrated what the nearness of God's Kingdom meant to the people around him. We should also remember that healings and exorcisms were not Jesus' sole privilege. We can

<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer was not the only one, or even the first, to point to this central issue of Jesus' message. Most notably, the study by Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1971; German original *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900) deserves to be mentioned.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus. Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1999; Robert J. Miller (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Jesus. A Debate*, Santa Rosa CA, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus' family feared that he was out of his mind and his opponents (the scribes) said that Jesus acted through the power of the Devil (Mark 3:21-22).

<sup>12</sup> "If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come unto you (Matt. 12:28; cf. Luke 11:20).

<sup>13</sup> Arthur M. Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980; John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament. Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

infer this from a tradition to the effect that Jesus instructed his disciples that their proclamation of the near Kingdom be accompanied by healings and exorcisms.<sup>14</sup> The Kingdom of God was near not only in the words of Jesus and his disciples but also in their deeds.

What is more, Jesus summoned his addressees to lead their lives in this world in total conformity with the values and the standards of the fully different reality of God's Kingdom. This involved a different way of thinking and behaving. It is in this sense that people were called on to "convert". We have no reason to assume that Jesus' audience was asked to change to a sober and austere lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they were called on to live in anticipation of the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom that was not characterized by austerity and restraint. Jesus himself associated it with drinking wine<sup>16</sup> and enjoying copious meals.<sup>17</sup>

In the world soon to be reigned over by God, the contrast between the rich and the poor would be counterbalanced or even turned upside down.<sup>18</sup> Jesus illustrated this aspect of God's Kingdom by his association with social and religious outcasts and by the congratulations he directed at the poor and the hungry. A rich man first had to sell his property and donate the profit to the poor. In sight of the near Kingdom, Jesus and his disciples were not attached to worldly goods and social certainties.

Jesus offered his followers a social alternative: a community of people who were prepared to live in accordance with his vision of the near reality of God's Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> They would leave behind their places of residence, their occupations and their families, but in return they received many more houses, fields and families.<sup>20</sup> They had given up their possessions and forgiven other people's debts. They shared food and formed an open community without power relations.<sup>21</sup> Their leaders should not behave as the rulers of this world who exercised dominion over their subjects but as servants of the others.<sup>22</sup>

The vision of the near Kingdom of God inspired many followers of Jesus in several periods of Christian history. More and less favourable examples could be mentioned.<sup>23</sup> Yet the impact of this ideal was not as great as one might expect if we assume that the call to lead one's life in this world in total conformity with the values of the future Kingdom of God was a central issue in Jesus' message. This could be the result of an early preference for Paul's interpretation of Jesus.

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 10:7-8; Mark 3:14-15; Luke 9:2 and 10:9.

<sup>15</sup> The distinction between John the Baptist and Jesus is emphasized in Matt. 11:18-19 and Luke 7:33-34.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 14:25. In Jesus' company his disciples did not fast (Mark 2:18-20).

<sup>17</sup> The stories about Jesus' meals with a great mass of people symbolize this. Significantly it is reported that there was plenty of food.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 21:31, "Toll-collectors and whores go into the Kingdom of God before you".

<sup>19</sup> Jesus called on the poor of Galilee to join this community. Matt. 6:33: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. And all other things will be added to you". (In the Gospel of Matthew, sayings of Jesus are often interpreted in a moralistic and spiritualizing way. Compare for example the "beatitudes" of Matthew with those in Luke.)

<sup>20</sup> Mark 10:30. Note that there is no mention here of fathers (cf. the next note).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Matt. 23:9, "Call nobody father upon the earth". No doubt this prescription is connected with the patriarchal power of fathers in ancient societies.

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 20:25-27; Mark 10:42-44; Luke 22:25-27.

<sup>23</sup> In my view, a good example is the movement of Friars Minor initiated at the beginning of the 13th century by Francis of Assisi.

## Diverse responses

Soon Jesus' followers and adherents would think differently about his words and deeds, and about the meaning of his death. This was due partly to the multi-interpretable and perhaps controversial character of his prophetic activity, and partly to the above-mentioned circumstance that traditions about Jesus were transmitted in various cultural contexts.<sup>24</sup>

Followers of Jesus in Palestine seem to have continued his prophetic proclamation of the near Kingdom of God.<sup>25</sup> In all likelihood they were more interested in Jesus' future appearance as a heavenly judge than in the meaning of his passion and death. Those who rejected this message were threatened with an imminent Judgment Day. This group of preachers of the Kingdom of God remained within the margins of the Jewish tradition.

Followers in the cities of the Graeco-Roman world turned in other directions. In this cultural environment various stories were told about miracle-workers and divine interventions. Jesus, the prophet of the near Kingdom of God, was regarded here primarily as a mighty healer and saviour. Other circles were interested not so much in Jesus' miraculous deeds as in his teachings. Jesus was seen primarily as a bringer of divine wisdom. Traces can be found particularly in the gospels of John and Thomas. Still others had no special interest in Jesus' teachings nor in his miraculous deeds. Their attention was focused on the redemptive meaning of Jesus' martyrdom. Here we come close to Paul's preaching. They emphasized that Jesus had suffered all kinds of humiliation even unto an ignominious death on a cross. But God vindicated Jesus and raised him from the dead.

This last tradition is hardly compatible with the belief in Jesus as a mighty saviour. But as early as in the Gospel of Mark these two traditions are brought together. In the first part of the gospel, Jesus is pictured as a successful miracle-worker. At the same time it is intimated to readers that they will be able to know Jesus (and that they will be permitted to proclaim him) once they have heard the last part of the gospel dealing with his suffering and death.<sup>26</sup> It is possible to surmise here the influence of the apostle Paul. Furthermore, readers are expected to follow Jesus in situations of persecution and distress.<sup>27</sup>

A critical attitude towards the picture of Jesus as a mighty miracle-worker occurs in some other New Testament passages, for instance in the stories about Jesus' temptation by the devil in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: Jesus is God's Son not because of his mighty deeds but because of his obedience to the Father.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Helmut Koester, "The Structure and Criteria of Early Christian Beliefs", *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, 205-231.

<sup>25</sup> The following summary is based on studies by Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971 (German original: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1934), Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of the early Palestinian Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985 (German original: *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung: ein Beitrag zur Entstehung des Christentums*, München, 1977), and the essay by Koester referred to in the preceding note.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Mark 5:43; 8:30 and particularly 9:9.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 8:34; 10:29 ("with persecutions"); 13:9.

<sup>28</sup> Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.

These diversifications, not only relating to the person and the mission of Jesus but also to the interpretation of the Scriptures and the organisation of the Christian community, increased at the beginning of the second century. Some followers of Jesus still wished to remain within the religious borders of Israel while others unhesitatingly used Hellenistic models in order to describe Jesus as a divine figure who descended to bring God's truth to misguided humanity.

### **Paul and the emergence of a Christian mainstream**

As indicated above, the apostle Paul does not seem to have been particularly interested in the words and deeds of Jesus. His attention was focused on Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul was a younger contemporary but he did not know Jesus in person. Unlike what we might expect, he did not attempt to become informed about Jesus by his family (for instance by his brother James) or by his first disciples. Paul claimed that God had granted him a vision about the risen Jesus and that he had received his commission to preach about Jesus among the nations directly from God. Consequently, he was not dependent on other people for his knowledge of God's intentions with Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

It was important for Paul to maintain his independence vis-à-vis James and the first disciples of Jesus for he had come into conflict with these "pillars" of the community in Jerusalem concerning the admittance of non-Jews to the churches founded by him. James, Peter and John held the opinion that Gentiles who came to believe in Jesus should become members of the people of the Covenant. This meant that they should keep the Sabbath day holy, obey the Jewish food laws and, last but not least, that men should be circumcised. These customs had a biblical foundation but over the course of time they had served to separate the Jewish people from the pagan outside world.

Paul was convinced that it was not necessary for Gentile believers in Jesus to adopt the Jewish way of life. In his view, belief in Jesus was enough. Many centuries later, Martin Luther would insist that according to Paul's preaching everybody will be justified by faith alone (*sola fide*). However, Paul did not discuss the general theological question of how people will be saved, either by obeying God's commandments or by trusting in His goodness. Instead, the discussion focused on the admittance of Gentiles to the Christian community. And, contrary to what Luther suggests, Paul was in conflict not with Jews in general but with Jewish believers in Jesus.

In his former life, Paul, as a zealous Pharisee, had persecuted followers of Jesus. We may take it for granted that he did not do this without any reason. In all likelihood he was informed about some of their convictions. However, after the vision granted to him, he changed his opinion. Now he acknowledged that the ones he had

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<sup>29</sup> See for example the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

persecuted were right: the Jesus who died a violent death on a Roman cross was not rejected by God. Paul now believed that Jesus was God's special envoy. God had commissioned Jesus to redeem humanity – Jews and Gentiles alike – from the powers of sin and death. A few observations may clarify Paul's change of belief.

Just like other Jews, Paul was convinced that initially the creation was good. The one who was blamed for the emergence of sin – and with it, death – into the world was Adam, the first human being.<sup>30</sup> Sin, in Paul's view, was a cosmic power that took humanity into slavery.<sup>31</sup> He believed that before the near end of this world God had sent Jesus to free humanity from this evil. While "the first Adam" had brought sin into the world, Jesus, as Adam's counterpart, had freed the world from sin. In Paul's view, this was the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross.

Among the Gentile nations Paul proclaimed that everyone who sought alliance with Jesus would die a symbolic death with him and subsequently share in his resurrection. This was confirmed ritually by baptism by immersion. The person who was to be baptized undressed, was purified in the water, and dressed again in white clothes. In Paul's view, the Christian community consisted of people who albeit living in this world were freed from the powers of sin and death.

Since Paul was convinced that Jesus, as the new Adam, represented all human beings (not only Jews), he believed that as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection, the boundary wall between Jews and Gentiles had lost its former function. He could no longer regard the Jewish Law, the Torah, as a way leading to eternal salvation. As he argued in his Letter to the Galatians: if righteousness could be realised by the Law, Christ had died in vain (2:21). Those who wished to join the Christian community just had to have faith in Christ and be prepared to symbolically participate in his death and resurrection. Paul did not allow further conditions.

Paul's views of Jesus and the character of the Christian community underlie the early-orthodox Church. To a certain degree, emerging mainstream Christianity was able to incorporate deviating beliefs, but these beliefs were also partly pushed aside or even condemned and branded as heretical. As a result, many early Christian writings giving expression to "heretical" ideas were no longer read and copied.

In a long and complicated process, orthodox theologians and Church leaders established which texts had to be valued as directive and normative for the Christian community and which had not. Apparently it was not possible to agree upon one gospel text because in the meantime several gospels were circulating as reliable and authoritative testimonies about Jesus. Therefore it was decided to include four gospels in the canonical collection of apostolic writings.<sup>32</sup> Gospel texts that were at odds with the orthodox doctrine – like the Gospel of Thomas and the Christian-Jewish Gospel of the Hebrews – were left out of the canon.<sup>33</sup>

However, even within the canonical collection of books we find diverse confessions of faith. Upon closer examination, there appears to be more pluriformity in the New Testament than there was in the orthodox Church of the third and fourth centuries, the community, that is, which canonised this collection of books. Several

<sup>30</sup> See Rom. 5:12 and 1 Cor. 15:21-22.

<sup>31</sup> Even a good and holy thing as the Torah was misused by sin (Rom. 7:11-13).

<sup>32</sup> But as late as in the fifth century, Syrian churches preferred to read a combination of the four gospels, the so-called *Diatessaron*.

<sup>33</sup> In his *Church History* (beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century), Eusebius of Caesarea calls the Gospel of Thomas and some other early Christian writings "heretical fabrications" that cannot even be classed with the apocryphal texts because they are "absurd and impious" (III 25.7).

ideas in the New Testament – not to mention the Old Testament – would be labelled as heretical if they were advanced by Christians of the third century or later. I need mention no more than the observance of the Torah advanced by Jesus according to Matthew 5:17-19, the open community around Jesus, the charismatic leadership in the Christian community championed by Paul, the rejection of a special priesthood in the people of the new covenant according to the Letter to the Hebrews and the Revelation of John.<sup>34</sup> This canonical diversity enabled later Christian movements to deviate from the orthodox mainstream and yet to claim canonical authority.<sup>35</sup> As the saying goes, even the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose.

In Late Antiquity, the Christian Church seceded from Judaism. Paul's message concerning the redemption which Jesus Christ had achieved for all humanity through his death and resurrection became a central issue in the new religion. Of course Christians were supposed to behave in conformity with their beliefs.<sup>36</sup> They were convinced that this life was just a prelude to the truly blissful life in the hereafter.<sup>37</sup>

## Two observations in conclusion

Pluralism and diversity have characterized the Christian religion from the very beginning.<sup>38</sup> In the fragmented and pluralistic society of the 21st century, Christianity might have more chance if this character trait was valued more positively, if Christian theologians and Church leaders would acknowledge the fact that their religion can manifest itself in many shapes at the same time, and if they deliberately left room for a variety of creeds, symbols and values.

My next observation may seem to contradict this, but its purpose is merely to suggest where this room might be found. It is doubtful whether Paul's interpretation of Jesus – however fascinating it may be to theologians – appeals to people educated in the Western world. This interpretation is likely to be too mythical and it is too closely connected with an ancient world view – a view of the world, that is, in which there can be a first Adam through whom sin and death came into the world, and a second Adam, Jesus, who freed humanity from these evils. In our part of the world, the vision of the near Kingdom of God and the way of life it requires are more convincing and cogent. A non-Pauline Christianity – and, accordingly, a Christianity that is more related to Judaism and Islam – might have greater possibilities here and perhaps also in other parts of the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, London: CSM Press, 1985, 94-95.

<sup>35</sup> See further below, chap. 2, pp....

<sup>36</sup> This was already emphasized by the apostle Paul in Rom. 2:6-13.

<sup>37</sup> The sociologist Rodney Stark argues that in the ancient world Christianity was an attractive religion just because it made high demands of its members. He also points to aspects which made it especially attractive to women. *The Rise of Christianity: a Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> The ecumenical movement of the last century did not pay sufficient attention to this feature.