

Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 26: The "Afterlife" of the New Testament and Postmodern Interpretation Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rfst-152/lecture-26>

Overview

How did a small group following an apocalyptic prophet in Palestine become Christianity - what is now called a "world religion"? This small movement saw many changes in the second, third, and fourth centuries, from the development of different sects, philosophical theologies, and martyrology, to the rise of monasticism, and finally to the ascension of Constantine to the throne and the Christian Roman Empire. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that the term "world religion" came to be used and Christianity was categorized as such.

1. Christianity in the Second Century: Gnostics, Philosophers, Martyrs, and Apologists

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* Okay, last lecture of the semester. We're going to talk about the big question, how did this little group of Jews following a prophet, an apocalyptic prophet, around Galilee, who was then executed shortly thereafter in Jerusalem, become what we now call a major world religion. How did that happen? Because the whole first hundred years we've talked about in this class of what we now call Christianity. Of course it's not even called "Christianity" until the letters of Ignatius. There's no term "Christianity" in the Bible itself, and as I've said, the Apostle Paul certainly did not use the term "Christian." He probably would have rejected it because that would imply that he was doing something else besides just bringing the Gentiles into Israel. He thought he was continuing Israel, not making another religion. How did this rag tag bunch of people following Jesus, and then these different house churches become what's called now a major world religion? We'll talk a bit about that today, and then I'm going to talk in the class with a little bit of stuff on theory of interpretation that we've hit on over the semester.

[2] I should also remind you that at the end of the class we'll be passing out the instructions for your final exams. I'll leave about ten minutes or so of time for us to talk about that so you'll

have plenty of time to ask questions about the final exam once you get the instructions. Finally, since this is your last chance, be sure and stick up your hand if you want to ask a question or make a comment. This is time if you want to throw things and rebel against the course. This is probably the best time to do it, it's your last chance. So ask any questions you want also about any of these topics, and we'll talk about that.

[3] From the teachings of Jesus to the gospel about Jesus, that's one of the first things that happens. We've already seen that going on. The historical Jesus, and if you really have not had enough of this and you want to take a historical Jesus course, I'm going to be teaching a seminar for undergraduates on the historical Jesus in the fall, open to anybody, and we'll have a full semester to deal with these problems of the historical Jesus in a seminar setting. The historical Jesus did not talk about himself as the Christ. We just don't have him doing that except in the Gospel of John. It may well have been that he thought he was the Messiah or that he was preceding the Messiah. Somebody must have thought that he was a Messianic figure because that's what the Romans executed him for. Either he may have thought he was the Messiah or some of his disciples may have hoped that he was the Messiah, but he didn't go around preaching about himself. The topic that Jesus talks about the most in the Synoptic Gospels is actually the

kingdom of God, this thing that was expected to happen in the future. The historical Jesus first is talking about some gospel that it's good news but it's about this coming kingdom of God that's going to—when God's going to break in.

[4] Very quickly after his death, as we see already by the letters of Paul, the earliest material in the New Testament, the gospel of Jesus, the good news he proclaimed became the gospel about Jesus. In other words, the good news was who was this man, and what does that mean for us? That's the first major change that happens in early Christianity on the way to becoming Christianity.

[5] You've seen the growth of the Pauline churches, so the first thing that happens is it moves out of Palestine and it moves throughout the Greek speaking world in the west, and very early, we don't know by whom, a church was planted in Rome because it's already there by the time Paul writes to the Romans. It's been there for years. We've seen how there's a diversity of early Christian groups. In fact your final exam will require you to choose one of two questions. It will require you to address this issue that we've been hitting on all semester long about how diverse this early movement was, what did different groups look like? We've also talked in the last lecture about how did some of the institutions of the church start gradually being developed, such as having a bishop, having priests, having deacons, and then the establishment of the Lord's Supper as a piece of liturgy and ritual that becomes celebrated throughout these different groups, the practice of baptism being pretty much universally practiced by these groups very quickly.

[6] We also have seen part of the beginning of the rise of Christian scripture. We've not gotten to the Canon in this course, the actual development of the Canon, because that doesn't happen until the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, when the list of these books that become the New Testament canon become more solidified. But we've seen the beginnings of this. We've seen how different Gospel writers will use other Gospels. We've seen how the writer of 2 Peter will talk about Paul's letters as scripture. So we've seen a collection of Paul's letters coming about, and we've seen

the Gospels coming about as a collection in the second century.

[7] Then one of the major things we've seen the beginnings of that will become more and more important for the nature of Christianity later is its separation from Judaism. As I've repeated several times in this course, the earliest people who followed Jesus never thought they were starting a new religion. They thought they were simply continuing the right behavior of Judaism. Paul himself thought he was continuing Judaism. It's just that he thought he was bringing non-Jews into it in a fairly new way. We've seen the beginnings of how, in the letter to the Hebrews, we've seen the sermon end with the author making this weird statement about, "let us go outside the camp," as Jesus was executed outside the city of Jerusalem, and the sacrifices were done in Exodus outside of the camp, so we now as followers of Jesus should go outside the camp, sounding like he's meaning we're going to leave Judaism, we have a now superior liturgy. In the second century this separation of the church from the synagogue will start becoming clearer in certain places, and, finally, what you'll end up with, after the fourth, fifth, and sixth century is a Christian church that's not Jewish and Rabbinic Judaism that comes to look more like what Judaism has looked since that time, even different from the Judaism as it was in the time of Jesus.

[8] The second century therefore sees some important changes. First, as I've said, Christianity is still remarkably diverse even in the second century, and it does grow. How quickly it grows numerically is really impossible to say. We don't have the kind of demographic data to know how much numerical growth there was in the Christian church in the second century, but we can obviously tell it's happening in different places by, if nothing more, an increase in written literature that comes about in different geographical locations during the second century.

[9] Connections among these different groups also started growing. As I've tried to make clear, we don't really have any reason to believe that the churches that Paul founded were that closely connected to, say, other churches that may have existed in Syria, or in Egypt, or in Italy. Paul did want his churches to remain

closely connected to the church in Jerusalem, and that's precisely why he started this collection, among the predominantly Gentile churches, of money to give to the poorer church in Jerusalem. Paul already was starting this connection, and he's writing letters back and forth. We've seen already that other churches seem to be writing letters back and forth. These connections start coming a bit more networked in the second century also.

[10] We've also seen how Christian churches start, in the second century, imitating Roman political and social structures. They start imitating the Roman household and their government, which is having the monarchical bishop, the one ruling bishop over a town area, and we call it the monarchical bishop because the bishop becomes like a king, a monarch, the single bishop over a town. That starts happening in more places in the second century. We've already seen it a bit in the letters of Ignatius; it becomes a lot more prevalent by the time you get to the end of the second century.

[11] Jewish Christianity starts dying out. In the second century we do have some Jews who follow Jesus; they take Jesus to be the Messiah. Some of the don't seem to believe Jesus is divine. They just—they take him to be a great prophet and maybe even the Messiah but not—that doesn't make him God necessarily. And these Jewish churches are still there in the second century. We gradually see them become less and less visible after the second century.

[12] We've already seen some other things in the second century that are going on. I've talked in the class about Gnosticism. So the Gnostics—there was no church of the Gnostics, there was not a movement that had a sign and website somewhere that said Gnosticism, but we use the term as an umbrella term for Christians who held onto certain kinds of mythological views about Genesis, and angels, and the creation, and different divine figures. That's one thing that becomes more visible. In fact, we believe that most of the texts that we find in the Nag Hammadi Library, we know that the library itself seems to have been written in the fourth century, the actual texts, but we believe that a lot of those texts were written originally in Greek in the second century, and then they were translated into mostly Coptic by the

fourth century. This literature, which modern scholars place under the bigger rubric of Gnosticism, starts being written in the second century with these elaborate mythologies, with different layers of heavens, with different angels or beings ruling those different layers, and different mythologies about creation and how the created world came to be.

[13] There is also a very important figure that some people will call Gnostic, but we now tend not to. Valentinus was a Christian scholar who lived in Rome in the middle of the second century, and he gathered around him other Christians, and they indulged in sort of a very philosophical way of thinking about Christianity and the Gospel. They look Gnostic in some ways, but they don't seem to have a belief in two gods, necessarily, that other Gnostic groups do. Valentinus, though, represents another kind of Christianity that becomes very visible in the second century, and it remains important for a couple of centuries after that until all these kinds of Christianity are declared heretical later in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries and they're run underground. Valentinus is a major figure because you can see him, and he's a highly educated—we don't know a whole lot about him historically, biographically, but you can just tell from pieces of the history that he must have been a highly educated, philosophically educated individual, who was trying to raise the mythologies that he found in Genesis and in the Bible to a level of higher philosophical platonic speculation, so that becomes very visible.

[14] We've already talked also about Marcion, and I've said that a lot of scholars take it that when Marcion came up with his own Canon of the New Testament, his list of the New Testament, which included the Gospel of Luke, which he edited to take out all the Jewish stuff in it that he thought shouldn't be there, and the letters of Paul which he also edited and just that list of things was his sort of New Testament, his Christian Canon, and he threw out the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, because that was too Jewish. Marcion also then is being kicked out of the church in Rome and being declared a heretic in the second century, but he founds churches that exist then for a couple of centuries after his death, especially in the eastern part of the empire. These are all different kinds of Christianity that are really

boiling up in the second century as—churches are trying to figure out what does it mean to be Christian but not necessarily Jewish anymore.

[15] One of the other figures that we haven't talked about is Montanus. This was a prophet who went around declaring that he had a special gift of the Holy Spirit, maybe even that he was the Holy Spirit, there were two women who also followed him, and they all claimed to have prophetic gifts and to be able to have the Holy Spirit and God speak directly through them. They developed quite a following, they were very ascetic, very strict, so they forbade marriage, and these sorts of things. So they were practicing a certain kind of early asceticism and monasticism but with this very strong prophetic stream of it also. They were very active in the second century also, and then people like Augustine would later have to sort of fight with these people.

[16] You also have in the second century the first people that we really can say are Christian philosophers. You could say that Paul had a rhetorical education. Every once in a while you can see stuff in Paul's letters that looks a bit like what you'll see in say philosophy, stoicism perhaps. A friend of mind, Troels Engberg-Pederson, a professor at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, has written a lot trying to prove that Paul's ideas are heavily Stoic and probably deeply influenced by Stoicism itself. Most of us don't buy that, but we think you might see traces of Stoicism in Paul's writing. You might say that you see traces of Platonism in, say, the letter of Hebrews, or in the Gospel of John. But you don't find any New Testament writing that looks like it would have come out of a real philosophical school. It doesn't have that high level of philosophical speculation or knowledge that we have.

[17] In the second century, we do have, though, some individuals arising who style themselves as Christian philosophers, and they style Christianity as itself a philosophy. One of the most famous is Justin Martyr. "Martyr" of course is not his last name, and it's not like Justin H. Martyr. Martyr is his nickname because he was martyred around the year 150 in Rome. Justin claims, and we have several writings of him that survived, along with an account of his martyrdom. Justin claims that he shopped around when he was a young man in

all the different philosophies and he couldn't find any that really satisfied him until he found this Christian teacher. And he attached himself to that Christian teacher, and that teacher introduced him to the philosophy of Christianity. You have a person who goes around in robes, he grows his beard long, he carries scrolls around so he can look like a philosopher. At his trial, when he's being condemned, he defends himself as a philosopher like philosophers that had to defend themselves against Roman emperors often in the first centuries. Justin Martyr is one of the first truly sort of philosophical Christians.

[18] Another that existed a little bit later than this is Clement of Alexandria. He was probably head of a catechetical school, a Christian school in Alexandria in Egypt. He wrote toward the end of the second century, so around the year 200 is when he's writing. And Clement also clearly has a very good philosophical education. His writing is excellent, he tries to make Christianity—for example he downplays apocalyptic kinds of stuff in Christianity because he knows that doesn't look very philosophical. He downplays the emphasis on poverty, and there are lots of parts in the New Testament that basically teach that if you're rich you won't go to heaven. Remember how the letter of James basically seems to condemn rich people just out of hand, not just rich people when they're evil and not using their money badly, but just by being rich itself, you're condemned in some early Christian documents. Clement writes against that kind of stuff. He writes stuff showing how you can be a rich person and enjoy nice things, and still be a Christian. So he's writing at the end of the second century, again, making Christianity into something that looks much more like a philosophy.

[19] These things are going on in the second century and that's going to change Christianity to a great extent because what becomes traditional orthodox Christianity is heavily influenced by philosophy, especially by the Platonism that's around in late antiquity. The very notion, for example, of the immortality of the soul that you get in a lot of popular Christianity, it comes from Platonism more than it does from anything in the New Testament.

- [20] The other development that's going on at this time that will become very important is martyrdom. I've talked about that last time, and of course Justin Martyr is one of the examples of this. So there's no general empire wide persecution of Christians in the second century, but you do have sporadic persecutions arising against Christians in certain areas. In Rome, at certain times, you will have certain people martyred, usually leaders, or bishops, or people like Justin Martyr who are key figures. Martyrdom, therefore, starts developing its own ideology and its own theology in the second century, which will become very important for later monasticism and the how Christianity develops in the Middle Ages. You have this idea I've talked about last time, that martyrs are especially close to God. Martyrs go straight to heaven, they don't have to go paradise or any place else first, they go straight to heaven on being killed. Confessors, that is, people who are condemned to martyrdom but not martyred, also become especially important, as figures who are considered to be closer to God.
- [21] These attacks on Christianity and the way Christians respond to it with this sort of martial, almost warlike ideology of martyrdom—the martyr becomes a soldier in the army of God in the way it's depicted in the second century. This is even picked up by enemies of Christianity. Galen was a very famous doctor. Galen was the most famous medical writer of antiquity and tons and tons of his medical writings still survive, and it takes forever to read through them, even in an English translation much less in Greek and now in Arabic translation that survived. Galen actually mentions Jews and Christians in a few places in his writings. One of the things he says is that he thinks Christians are stupid. He thinks they're crazy because they believe in a God who gets angry. God doesn't get angry! That goes against the very definition of God. He believes that Christians are superstitious, uneducated. He thinks that it probably only succeeds with the gullible. But he still admires Christians because of the way they face death. Even Christians' enemies recognize that they had a certain bravery and courage in being totally willing to face death.
- [22] Celsus was a contemporary, also living in the middle of the second century, he wrote against Christianity also and wrote against Christians and he will admit, though, that they seem to have a certain bravery. He just says they're foolhardy in being willing to throw themselves on a sword the way they do, and throw themselves to the beasts as we've seen Ignatius do in his letters, let the beasts come to me. So Celsus and Galen admire Christians for the courage and the almost military discipline they have even though they despise them for being, they believe, gullible, superstitious bumpkins. So you have for the first time in the second century, also then, educated non-Christians taking notice of the movement and writing about it and having an idea about it.
- [23] Then in response to this kind of thing you have the beginning of apologists, people like Justin Martyr himself, who wrote an apology for Christianity against its detractors. Either against the governmental type detractors who said it was seditious because it wasn't loyal enough to the emperor, or philosophical detractors who said it was superstition, and Celsus famously said, the only people these people can convince are old women, and slaves and kids. No educated man would fall for all this bunk. You have Christian apologists, therefore, writing apologies in the second century, trying to defend Christianity against these attacks. All of that's already in the second century, one hundred years after Jesus, this little Palestinian movement is turning into something that's going to start looking more recognizable to us. But it still takes a long time.
2. *Christianity in the Third Century: Asceticism, Monasticism, and Persecution*
- [24] In the third century you have developments that are very important. You have the real rise of monasticism. Now all the way through the beginning of Christianity we've seen that some Christians practiced asceticism. You know the word asceticism just comes from the Greek word for "exercise." It's come to mean any sort of self-discipline for a higher good: the avoidance of sex, the avoidance of food, as much as possible, the avoidance of wine, drinking only water. So different groups in the ancient world including some Jewish groups will be called, for example, "water drinkers" because they will avoid wine. It's not because they felt like these things were in themselves sinful. It's that they were using these

deprivations of pleasures in order to train the body and train the soul. Again, they were borrowing from Roman military imagery and military ideology.

[25] St. Anthony becomes famous, he's not necessarily but he gets the reputation later for being the first one to go out in the desert and live totally by himself and discipline his body. He gets attacked by demons all the time. Demons are always going out to the desert to find him, and disguising themselves as young lovely girls or boys, and trying to seduce Anthony. And so he has to fight these demons all alone out in the desert in the middle of the night. How do you fight demons like that? Well, you buffet your body, you buffet your soul, and you make your will strong. How do you do that? You avoid sex, you avoid desire, you avoid rich food, you avoid wine, so training the body and training the will, like a soldier or an athlete, they use both these athletic imagery and soldier imagery, to describe the training. This all becomes a highly elaborated ideology and theology starting in the third century. You have not only groups of monks and sometimes nuns living together, that's one kind of monasticism we call cenobitic, *koinonia*, monasticism, that is monks or nuns living—not monks and nuns living together, although that seldom happened but sometimes did—but usually monks living together or nuns living together. Then you have with this movement, like I said with Anthony, of some monks going off into the desert and living alone and that sort of thing. You have both these forms of monasticism starting to develop in the third century.

[26] This will become hugely important, as you know, for Christianity all the way through the Middle Ages. You couldn't have had Europe, as we think about Europe. You couldn't have the learning, the vast learning and the texts, and the classical stuff, all the classical texts, the passing on of literature and in philosophy from antiquity; you couldn't have had any of that without monasticism through the Middle Ages. That begins in the third century when you have these movements really taking off, and they become hugely important and hugely popular for people.

[27] You also have in the third century the first really empire wide persecution of the church. An attempt to actually destroy it and get people

to de-convert and to denounce Christianity and to sacrifice to the emperor, and this happens with the Emperor Decius, so we call this the Decian Persecution. It happens around the time the year 250, so right in the middle of the third century. And this is the first time that there is an empire wide attempt to suppress the Christian church.

[28] Also in the third century you have one of the most brilliant and famous Christian scholars of all of history actually, Origen. Origen was later considered to be a heretic for some of the teachings that he came up with—for example he taught that even Satan could be converted in the end. He believed that all created beings would be brought back up somehow into God in the end. And he had views about the nature of God and the nature of human beings that later would be deeply suspected of being not quite orthodox enough. In his own day, though, in the third century, he was completely orthodox. He had actually been trained in probably the catechetical school in Alexandria that I mentioned before that Clement probably headed up. He started his own school, then, in Palestine, and that's where he spent the rest of his life in Palestine. Origen was a great biblical commentator.

[29] He was the first one, for example, who took all the different versions of the Old Testament, for example, the Hebrew of it, the Septuagint, which was the most famous Greek translation, but then parts of other Greek translations like by Theodosian or Aquila, and he would put these in parallel columns. This was a remarkable sort of technology for studying the Bible: to be able to have all these things in parallel columns to be able to compare side by side. He did that sort of thing; it's called the Hexapla because it had six columns of the Old Testament. He wrote reams and reams of commentaries on different books of the Bible, most of which don't survive, but we do have quite a bit of it. Origen practiced this way of interpreting scripture I had illustrated for you from the medieval period, that scripture always has more than one level of meaning. In fact, you remember you read some Origen's commentary when you read that chapter from my book, *Pedagogy of the Bible*.

[30] Origen represents, in the third century, a new very, very strong rise in the level of Christian biblical scholarship. He's also very

philosophically educated, so he's part of that too. The tradition of commentary and high level of Christian scholarship also becomes much more visible in the third century than it had been before, especially through people like Origen.

3. *Christianity in the Fourth Century: Constantine and the Church Councils*

[31] The fourth century, then, brings us to basically where I'm going to stop, because it's in the fourth century that you have the triumph of Constantine. He beats all the rivals to the throne. The Roman Empire, by this time, by the year 300, has been divided up into two different basic empires, the west and the east. There was an emperor for each one and then there was also a Caesar for each one, so there are four rulers who ruled the Roman Empire in the year 300. Two emperors, one in the west and one in the east, and two Caesars, one in the west and one in the east. Constantine went to war with the other guy on the other side, and he won. He was actually in the west in the beginning. He won. He reunited the empire, east and west. He built his new Rome. He didn't take Rome anymore as the capital. He moved the capital to Constantinople, named after him of course, the city of Constantine, what we call Istanbul, or Byzantium was its ancient name also. This is basically where we start talking about the beginning of Byzantine Christianity because it's named after the town Byzantium or Constantinople, or Istanbul. That becomes the capital of the Roman Empire that goes on for them.

[32] Constantine also wanted to stop all this feuding about what was orthodox Christianity. So he uses the power of the emperor's throne to force bishops to come together in several different councils. The most famous of which, in 325, is the council of Nicaea, and of course this is where we get the term the Nicene Creed, which if you're Roman Catholic or Episcopalian or several other kinds of Christianity, you may recite the Nicene Creed on certain holy days or in church. This is the longer creed, which talks about Jesus being fully man, fully human. It brings in the Trinity, so you have Trinitarian theology becoming a bit more solidified at the council of Nicaea. It didn't win the day because throughout the fourth century you still had fights among

different bishops, some people not accepting the Nicene Creed. Years later you had another creed pronounced at Chalcedon, so that's called the Chalcedonian Creed. And all of these were attempts though promoted by the emperors. The emperors wanted to use Christianity to solidify a one empire again and to keep it from being split. You couldn't do that if you had different groups claiming to represent the right Christianity and claiming that everybody represents the wrong Christianity. That was the real push for what counts as orthodox Christianity and the bringing of more unity to Christianity.

[33] What we have not seen in this semester is what you would call correct Trinitarian doctrine in the New Testament, it's just not there. You've got all kinds of views about Jesus that would later be declared heretical. They're still there in the New Testament, and what Christians do is that we just read kind of carefully and interpret it a little bit slickly so that it makes it look more orthodox than it actually is. That's because there was no orthodoxy that could claim to rule different Christians who called themselves Christians throughout the empire. This is what starts changing in the fourth century. Like I said, they don't succeed. So you have debates about orthodoxy for centuries, but it's with Constantine in the beginning of the fourth century, and he had a long dynasty. His progeny, his sons, and then their sons, and their sons retained the throne for years after that. So you had this Constantinian dynasty that was able to bring a good bit of solidity to the Roman Empire in the fourth century that it hadn't enjoyed in the third century. And therefore, they used this to sort of bring about orthodox Christianity as the single form of Christianity. That's the most important change, therefore, for the fourth century.

4. *Christianity as a "World Religion"*

[34] After that, of course, as you know from your history, the empire splits again. Later you have this split between eastern Christianity, which is represented by those churches we call Orthodox, located mainly with the authority of the Greek Orthodox church, but of course you have Orthodox churches in each of the nations of the east. So you have Russian Orthodoxy, Greek Orthodoxy, Syrian Orthodoxy, and you

have different Orthodox communities in the east and then Roman Catholicism in the west. And that split of course is still with us. That starts happening in later antiquity.

[35] But notice it's still not what anybody would call a world religion. Now the very term "world religion" is something that has only come about in the twentieth century. It was a term that was invented when Christians were exploring around and seeing that there were other ways of being religious, and how do you want to categorize these things? Around 1900, some scholars invented this concept: well, there are world religions and then there are local religions. African religion is not a world religion; it's just a certain different kind of paganism, they thought. They thought that Judaism is not a world religion. It's a religion of the Jews, and by its very definition it's an ethnic religion. Therefore, it's not a religion that is for anybody in the world. That's why Jews don't go around missionizing and trying to convert everybody in Asia to Judaism, or everybody in Africa to Judaism. But they said Christianity is different. Christianity believed that it was the one true religion, and therefore launched in the nineteenth century all these missionary activities. It was in the nineteenth century that you had mainly Protestants that in the nineteenth century really trying to convert the whole world to Christianity and sending out missions. This of course had started in the beginning in the seventeenth century with Roman Catholics, in North America and South America, trying to convert the Indians and trying to set up colonies. The conversion of the Indians in North America and South America, mainly by Roman Catholics to Roman Catholicism, and then later the attempt in the nineteenth century by Protestant churches to convert people all over the world really does make Christianity start looking like a worldwide phenomenon.

[36] That's not really until the nineteenth century that that happens. Before that, Christianity is basically the religion of Europe. That's why Europeans, still to this day, even if they're not religious, even if they don't consider themselves Christian, they may consider themselves completely atheistic, but they see Christianity as part of the very fabric of European identity. This is what's leading to the big debate about whether to admit Turkey into the European Union. There are a lot of people

in Europe, even good liberal people, who are open minded and don't necessarily have anything against Islam, who don't want to have Turkey as part of Europe. One of the main reasons is because it's not a Christian nation. It doesn't have this—of course most of their nations aren't really Christian in the sense of having the majority of people observing Christianity, but they still have this idea that what it means to be European is some connection, historically, with Christianity. That's quite true, because Christianity was not a world religion; it existed in Europe until the modern period.

[37] But with the idea that there are other world religions, that had to do with colonialism. Christianity starts defining itself as a world religion. So the first scholars who talked about this term said, well there's only one world religion, Christianity. All the rest are local religions linked to some particular geographical area. Then they started saying, well, okay wait a minute, they kind of liked Buddhism, they thought it kind of looked a bit like Protestantism. So they said, we'll let Buddhism be a world religion also. So for a while around 1900, the two world religions recognized were Christianity and Buddhism. Then gradually they started saying, well maybe Islam is because you don't have to be an Arab to be Muslim, and you can see Muslims existing all through Asia and that sort of thing, and Africa. So maybe Islam is the third world religion. Then kind of more for ideological purposes they said, we'll let the Jews in, so Judaism can be a world religion also, because you don't actually have to be in one location to practice it. Hinduism was a problem because the very word "Hindu" is a made up term for a religion because it just means Indian. Hinduism is a modern invention, a label to put over whatever people in the subcontinent practice that relates to something that we would call gods. We're going to call that "Hinduism." So "Hinduism" gets invented in the twentieth century, and then that gets to be another world religion.

[38] Then you get this ideology. If you had taken a class in world religions or Introduction to Religion in, say, the year 1980, you would have probably read a textbook that would probably list as the undisputed world religions five: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Now does Confucianism

count? Well, some textbooks would say no. What do you do with paganism? What about people who just worship all kinds of gods of trees, and rocks, and things?

[39] So this whole category of having “world religions” and having a list of them becomes something that really is only developed in the academic study of religion in the twentieth century. If someone asked you the question, how did this little movement, started by this Jewish prophet in Galilee, how did it become a world religion? You really—the most honest question is to say, well it didn’t really happen until scholars invented it in the twentieth century because that’s when the very category of “world religion” came about for us to use. Of course if you wanted to say, well when did you start having Christians all over the world, not just in Europe? Well you’d have to say starting in the seventeenth century with missions to North and South America, and then really in the nineteenth century with the missionaries, especially from England and North America, going to China, and going to Japan, and going to all over Africa. When you talk about, when did this thing become a world religion? Probably about the nineteenth century would be a good answer, but that’s counterintuitive to most of us. The last question I’m going to talk about is—nah, we’re out of time.

5. *The Growth of Christianity before Constantine and Q&A*

[40] I was going to talk about why did Christianity grow before Constantine? Obviously with Constantine you get the emperor promoting this religion now. There are various theories about what caused it to grow before that. Some people have said because they forbade abortion and birth control, contraception. Most early Christians seem to think that contraception was wrong and abortion was wrong, and putting out infants was wrong. Some people will say, well, it’s because they promoted the family. I don’t particularly buy that because we’ve got all these monks and nuns running around too not reproducing. Some people have even said, well, when Christians themselves write in this period about why they grow and why people are flocking to them it’s because we’re better healers and exorcists. We’re better than

Asclepius at healing people and exorcising demons. So Ramsey McMullen, retired historian right here at Yale, has written famously about this that, apparently, in the second and third century Christians were just really damn good healers and exorcists, and that may be why they grew. The question of why Christianity grew before then is a hot one that a lot of historians are even right now debating.

[41] Are there any questions about that? I’m going to cut the lecture there because I want to pass out the final exams. I think we’ve talked enough about in previous classes the difference between historical interpretation and theological interpretation, and modern interpretation and post-modern interpretation, that was what I was going to end up on but I believe we’ve covered that enough, and you can always ask me questions about that later at some point if you like. Let’s pass the exams out please. Any questions while they’re doing that? This is your chance. Yes sir?

[42] *Student:* Can you talk a little bit about [inaudible]?

[43] *Professor Dale Martin:* Why we think Rome was persecuting Christians? Was your question, what evidence do we have that they were doing it or why were they motivated to do it?

[44] *Student:* [Inaudible]

[45] *Professor Dale Martin:* Why were they motivated to do it? It’s a very good question, and you’ve got to realize that so much of the power of Rome was built on the ideology of the emperor. Romans really did believe that they were the most pious nation on earth. This is why whenever the Roman army went to another country they would always sacrifice to the local gods, because they believed the local gods protected them and caused growth. The Romans would sincerely believe that if you don’t sacrifice to the gods, if you’re not a pious person, the gods may punish you. Well, what happens then if you have a bunch of these Christians running around who refuse to sacrifice to the gods, refuse to sacrifice to the emperor? Not only is it a threat against the emperor himself, it’s a threat against all the people, and it’s also just a matter of patriotism. What would happen to you, right after 9/11, or

even now, if at a Yankees game when they stand up and we're going to sing "The Star Spangled Banner," if you refused to stand up, you sat down, you kept your baseball cap on your head, and you started singing "Happy Birthday" instead. You're going to get beat up because the locals just won't like it. Well that's the way it was a lot with early Christians. It was the locals who felt like what they were doing was dangerous. It tore against the social fabric of Roman society, and it offended the gods. They had a lot of reasons to try to suppress Christianity. Yes sir?

[46] *Student:* Do we know why Constantine converted?

[47] *Professor Dale Martin:* Do we know why Constantine converted? He says it's because he saw a vision right before the battle. Scholars debate that. Some scholars say he converted because he looked around and he saw that this was, although it was a minority movement, there was no way that this was a majority, it was a vibrant movement that was going on in Rome, in the Roman Empire, and maybe he said, that's something I can use. He was already an admirer of the sun god, and he was moving toward a certain form of monotheism where the sun was the only god. Some people say it wasn't that big of a jump for him to switch that to Jesus, and so some people say, he had this political idea that it would be a smart thing to do and that he made up the vision later. There are different reasons. We don't really know truly his psychological motivations for conversion. Okay—yes sir?

[48] *Student:* What's the nature of [inaudible]?

[49] *Professor Dale Martin:* The question was what was the nature of persecution? Was it really throwing Christians to the lions and that sort of thing, or was it more like destroying Christian texts? It was different things at different times. A lot of times it was crucifixion or killing people, torture to get the people to confess, sometimes, especially in the Decian Persecution, there was an attempt to force priests and bishops to turn over Bibles and Christian literature. And in fact, people could save their lives by giving up Christian books or Christian Bibles, and they would be destroyed by the authorities. It took different forms like that, and sometimes it was just less overt pressure. You couldn't get promoted,

you couldn't do certain things, sometimes people would try to get you out of the Roman army if they found out you were a Christian, and so it took different forms. Yes sir?

[50] *Student:* [Inaudible]?

[51] *Professor Dale Martin:* The institution of what?

[52] *Student:* [Inaudible]

[53] *Professor Dale Martin:* The papacy? He asked about the institution of the papacy. It was originally simply the Bishop of Rome. But as you might imagine, pretty early in Christianity in the third century, the bishops of the most important cities just became more important. The Bishop of Jerusalem was important because Jerusalem was important. The Bishop of Alexandria was important because Alexandria was important. The Bishop of Constantinople was important because it was Constantinople. Likewise, the Bishop of Rome was important, and there was struggling among different major bishoprics about which one would be leading. Rome was still considered the center of the earth for a long time, and so gradually it just became so that the Bishop of Rome just sort of held preeminence among all other bishops, and it was informal in how it developed. The real recognition of the Bishop of Rome as sort of the Pope, in the way we think of it, that actually develops in the Middle Ages. You don't, for example, have papal infallibility declared as a doctrine until the early twentieth century. So when we think of the Roman papacy now as being sort of the infallible Pope who has kind of has full say over everything, that really is almost a development that starts more in the medieval period and comes into the modern period. In the beginning he was just recognized as the head—the sort of recognized, more respected bishop.

[54] Alright, let's talk about the finals. You have two questions on your final and you get to choose Option A and Option B. I'm not going to read all of this; you can talk to your section leaders, email them, talk to me, and email me if you have questions about this. The things that I want to stress are a few things. Don't go to the library. If you need things like a concordance, that's great, use a concordance. Use a Bible dictionary if there's something

you just don't know the meaning of a word or a concept, but don't go look up commentaries because already we've gotten papers from some of you that it's clear that what you did was you went and read some book somewhere in the library that told you about something in the New Testament. Chances are it's bullshit because there's been more shit written about the Bible than any other topic in the world for the last 2000 years. Even if you're taking this semester course you may not be able to tell the good stuff from the bad stuff, so you don't need other scholarship to answer these questions. These questions are designed so that you can use Bart Ehrman's textbook, the tools we've shown you, and the notes from class, and just your own brain and the primary text you've been reading. You can answer these questions yourself with what we've given you in class. That's one the main things is: don't try to go to the library to get answers to these questions. Use your brain.

[55] I'm going to stress the length. We've always said eight pages, but some of my teaching fellows have been complaining that you all have creative ways of either stretching or shrinking eight pages, and so there's a word limit, 2,500 words. So we're still looking for eight pages, double spaced, but not to exceed 2,500 words. Use your word counter on your software now. The papers are due by 5:00 p.m. Monday April 27th. You may email them as an attachment to your teaching fellow, if the teaching fellow has given you permission to do that, and I think they all did. If you want to turn in a hard copy please do so at the Religious Studies Department on 451 College Street.

[56] Both of the questions address the kind of issues we raised all semester long, so they shouldn't really be a surprise. Several times we've talked about how did Christianity spread geographically, and when I gave the lecture on Acts, I explained how Acts gives you a schematic outline of the growth of

Christianity. Taking that one lecture on Acts and the readings that you've done with that, and then pull things from other lectures and from other things in the semester, sort of thinking about, well, now what kind of Christianity would promote the sort of letters of John, what kind of Christianity would look different, and use other of these writings to say, well, I think maybe this kind of Christianity may have developed a bit differently. You can focus on doctrinal issues, you can focus on social structures or forms, you can focus on ideologies, and many of the issues that we've raised throughout the semester, it's your choice. The main thing is to show how Christianity did not develop in the smooth schematic way that it's presented in the Book of Acts.

[57] The second question, I've given a couple of lectures where I've stressed a whole lot more Christology, what Christology is, the nature of Christ and how different early Christian documents seem to be working with different Christologies. You're given three columns of text, primary text, and it's a Chinese menu kind of thing. You have to use at least one source from column A, at least one source from Column B, and at least one source from Column C, and you can use any others too. You're not restricted to this but you have to use one of each of those sources in order to construct this answer of illustrating the diversity of Christology's in early Christianity.

[58] Any questions? We do not accept or read late papers. They just get a flat zero. If you do need an extension, ask for it ahead of time, not at 5:00 p.m. on Monday. All right, your teaching fellows have the authority to work with me and grant you an extension, but you have to ask for it ahead of time. Otherwise we expect those papers to be done by 5:00 p.m. Monday.

[end of transcript]