From the preceding sampling of Christian apologetic literature, we can see that there was widespread disagreement among the patristic authors over the propriety of Christians participating in Roman military service. But do these disagreements represent a mere divergence of opinion among a select group of authors or are they a reflection of contrasting doctrinal positions held by competing constituencies within the Christian movement? More importantly, to what extent were the views of surviving Christian authors accepted by ordinary Christian believers? That there was disagreement among Christians on the issues of war and military service should not be surprising as throughout its history the adherents of Christianity have disagreed over a wide variety of doctrinal issues, yet the problems of war and military service did not cause the same level of acrimony as, for instance, the Christological disputes. For most early Christians the foremost theological concerns revolved around determining who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he actually taught. Questions regarding the proper Christian attitude towards the military were secondary and better considered within the broader context of determining the appropriate relationship between the Christian community and the larger, non-Christian world. This, in turn, means that any modern attempt to evaluate the historic Christian perspective on the larger pagan community is relative to what an individual Christian believed Christianity was all about.

Modern scholarship now recognizes that it is no longer possible to speak of a single Christian mindset. Even a cursory reading of the earliest documents of Christianity would portray a movement that over time splintered into various subgroups holding a wide diversity of beliefs and practices.\(^1\) As early as the second century Irenaeus of Lugdunum (Lyons) documented as many as two dozen Christian sects

---

\(^1\) For instance, Gal. 2:4, 13 and 2 Cor. 11:12–15.
which he considered heretical while Hippolytus of Rome, later in the third century, increased this number to over fifty. The lack of Christian unity and the tendency of Christians to splinter into numerous, quarreling sects was also remarked upon by pagan critics of Christianity, such as Celsus. In the past scholars have tended to write-off all these divergent tendencies as evolutionary dead-ends. The traditional historical narrative of the faith usually describes it as a single, unified Christian movement, ultimately destined to coalesce into the institutional church controlled by bishops. Over the past thirty years, however, historians of early Christianity have given more attention to these divergent sects and accorded greater legitimacy to their beliefs. The early Christian (or Jesus) movement is now regarded as a universe of competing and differing ‘christianities’ offering radically divergent views on the most elementary points of doctrine and faith.

The Christian church that eventually attracted the attention of Constantine was an entity that had developed from a long historic process of doctrinal evolution and organizational growth. Much of that growth and doctrinal formation was driven, in large part, by controversy and conflict within the Jesus movement itself. By the fourth century, the institutional church, dominated by monarchial bishops, emerged as the pre-eminent and, presumably, majority form of the Christian movement which was then able to use its domineering position to define orthodox (acceptable) beliefs and ban dissenting Christian groups as heretical. It was only at this time that the church, as a corporate body, attempted to address the issue of military service for church members. Consequently, any modern investigation into the attitudes of early Christians towards war and military service must first recognize that for most of early Christian history there was no single Christian viewpoint on these matters simply because there was no single Christian viewpoint on any aspect of the faith.

Before the reconciliation of the Christian church with the Roman government no Christian leader or ecclesiastic had the power to impose his views on another believer. The only weapon available to the churchman was the power to expel individual members from a congregation under his control. An ecclesiastic might also attempt to limit church membership to those engaged in ‘honorable’ professions, but those individuals who were excluded often had the option of seek-

---

2 Origen C. Cels. 3.10-12, 14; 5.63; E. R. Dodds, Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety (Cambridge, 1965), 103–4.