CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

The publication of *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (2010) marked the climax of professor Räisänen’s public career. He had actually just retired, and the monograph he had prepared for more than two decades starts with an apology for the delay.¹ As we turn to the analysis of Räisänen’s final *tour de force* we need all the results garnered in the preceding chapters. His monograph gathers together most of the themes he has held as essential in biblical studies. In order to understand Räisänen’s line of thought in the *Rise* one needs to remember his hermeneutics of the chain of interpretation. This alone is not enough though since Räisänen’s focus on contradictory diversity could be explained by his history-of-religions approach. The Bible for Räisänen, as we have claimed, is as full of contradictions and legendary formulations as the Quran was for Reimarus.

Since this “history of early Christian religion,” which Räisänen has intended to write from the days of his *Beyond*, is based on Wrede’s terminology and aspires to replace traditional New Testament theology, the theoretical problems created by the Wredean tradition follow him into this work. How to abandon New Testament theology without abandoning the treatment of theology? Wrede was consistent in moving to a completely other area but Räisänen, in this description of “Christian beliefs,” focuses on “thought world.” Can the inherent theoretical contradictions be overcome in the process itself?

Räisänen has intentionally used Berger’s sociology of knowledge approach, and some of his conclusions can be understood only through a Weberian background. This cannot explain everything, though. Räisänen’s dependence on Bultmann and the demythologizing project must also be borne in mind. All this would be incomplete, however, if one were to miss Räisänen’s Remarian intention to attack the early Christian *Systema*, the set of distinct beliefs and doctrines. For Räisänen, the “thought world of early Christians” was filled with problematic views of God and this world.

¹ “It is with relief that I give this book up for publishing, for I have been working on it far too long.” Räisänen, *Rise*, xvii.
Therefore, in this last monograph, he suggests that Christianity cannot be considered a revelation based true religion that really transmits propositional knowledge about God and humanity: in particular a call to repentance, forgiveness and salvation (to which his main chapters refer).

8.1. Choosing between Poststructuralism and Historicism

Considering the theoretical discussion in the preceding chapters one needs to ask where Räisänen stands in relation to the two very different approaches that affect his thinking: Theissen’s semiotic reading and Berger and Luckmann’s poststructuralist theory on the one side, and the whole “pre-structuralist” historical-critical tradition promoted by distinguished scholars from Strauss to Bultmann to Funk on the other. What does the Wredean approach mean in practice? Considering Räisänen’s Religionsgeschichte (the comparative religion), the case is anything but clear. If he is interested in particular texts and the separate early Christian groups behind them, he should then focus mainly on these distinct groups. This, however, is not what he does in his books.

In principle, a history-of-religion approach, as a “history of ideas,” should describe the symbolic world created by these alleged early Christian groups. Questioning the boundaries of the canon certainly points in this direction. Räisänen has spared no effort in developing his theory about the sociology of knowledge of early Christianity but what one would really expect to find first is an analysis of such groups and their emergence. If Räisänen has set out to investigate the ways they create their symbolic world, he would need a historical point of departure. Only in this way he could explain the experiences that motivate the appearance of new symbols. This, however, is not what we find in his Rise. His monograph may cause a certain frustration in readers as the table of contents still faithfully follows the loci of medieval dogmatics.

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2 Räisänen lists his principles also in his Challenges and reminds his readers that his work (1) “is not limited to the canon and,” (2) “makes no distinction between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’.” Also other principles are mentioned. Räisänen, Challenges, 176.

3 This has been noted for instance by Moxnes who, commenting on the Beyond, already says that a thematic presentation of early Christian thought “falls within a paradigm that is much used in presentations of New Testament theology (the very phenomenon he purports to go ‘beyond’).” Moxnes, Moving Beyond, 264. Räisänen, answering Moxnes in the same collection, admits that neither his brief outlines nor his later work (referring to the Rise) reveal any deviations from a thematically arranged “New Testament Theology.” He has used “conventional catchwords” but, in the final analysis, he does not use “-logies” in headings. Räisänen, Moving Beyond, 438–439. Without any further apologies he admits