CHAPTER 6

Introduction

How to write a genealogy of religion? This is the problem that still confronts a variety of scholars today who, despite having read their Foucault and Barthes on such topics as the death of the author, despite not succumbing to temptations to side with William James et al. by presuming that some experiential big bang in the heart of a so-called religious genius started it all, and despite having also pondered the implications of Hayden White’s critique of history writing, nonetheless still fall back into old habits—habits like stringing together narratives of causality and development that reach out to us today from a pristine point in the dimly lit past. That is, the quest for origins, despite harsh criticisms from the last few generations of scholars (notably the early twentieth-century functionalists, intent on unseating the Intellectualist tradition that came just before them), remains the predominant mode of discourse in our field—what else is the requisite “survey of the literature” in a dissertation but a chronological narrative of origins that, over the bodies of dead scholars and, often, long-forgotten debates, points the way to the telos, which is none other than one’s one thesis statement? All roads lead to each of our own Romes, after all. So, while historians, many of whom are well aware of such critiques, “may… resolve to suspend the origin-quest indefinitely…the suspension or the renunciation of the hope of satisfaction does not automatically shift and upgrade their scholarly enterprise to a new operating system,” as Tomoko Masuzawa insightfully phrased it in her article “Origin” in the Guide to the Study of Religion (2000a: 222). “[B]ut rather,” she concludes, “it makes the same old system all the more opaque, as the latter becomes partially occluded by denial.” My goal in the following chapter is to make that opacity somewhat more transparent, at least in one subfield of the wider study of religion: Christian origins.

The occasion for writing this unpublished paper was an invitation extended by my colleague, friend, and sometimes co-author (e.g., Arnal and McCutcheon 2013), William Arnal, who co-organized a panel for a Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) at its 2013 conference in Baltimore, MD (though he was unable to attend). Part of the third phase of an earlier, and quite successful “Redescribing Christian Origins” project1—though the current effort has been renamed as “Redescribing

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1 The effort was entitled “Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins”; see Cameron and Miller 2004: 1 ff. for some of its organizer’s thoughts on the project’s rationale. It was then followed by a second phase, organized by Barry Crawford and Chris Matthews.
Early Christianity”—this panel was to be devoted to the topic, “What Does It Mean to ‘Explain’ Earliest Christianity?”—a meta-question, at least as I read the invitation, that, I thought, was not sufficiently addressed in the previous phases of what has turned out to be an ongoing project. That is, given the effort it took for a small group of scholars just to stop employing the New Testament’s own picture of the world and its narration of events (if it is even accurate to think that there such a thing as one coherent view in that collection of texts) as if they amounted to disinterested history and thus provided a reasonable enough starting point for a historically rigorous developmental narrative of the origins and subsequent rise of the Christian church (as many scholars still seem to presume), it might have been too much to hope that, at least at earlier stages of such a redescriptive project (i.e., it was begun, formally, in the early 1990s, though based on much work done sometime before, of course), the very presumption that such a narrative was even possible could itself be called into question. Instead, the move was made to try to get behind the texts commonly known as the gospels and the epistles (by focusing on non-canonical texts and social context), to see them as the products of other, prior movements which were engaged in various forms of situated and interested social experimentation with rhetorics (what the earliest members of this group called “mythmaking”) and organization (termed by them “social formation”). Knowing much about the social, political, economic, and intellectual context of the time was therefore assumed to be crucial, should a convincing picture of turn-of-the-era Palestine emerge, one capable of helping us to account for how the various and diverse Jesus movements, that some now think existed then, sooner or later coalesced into this thing we today know as Christianity—or so it was thought.

But despite what surely strikes some as a rather dramatic shift—when viewed in certain ways it is, of course—the explanatory task set before scholars of Christian origins strikes me as not all that different from the goal of those from whom they seek to distance themselves (i.e., New Testament scholars—whether humanistically or theologically inclined). For both groups are trying to account for how some coherent “we” arrived here today, devising a developmental narrative to get from an alpha, then and there, to an omega, here and now. That one might attribute this sequential development to any number of seemingly different factors (from divine intervention, of course, to thoroughly naturalistic social factors, or even outright historical accident) doesn’t distract me from seeing in both efforts the same quest for origins that so many of us today dismiss without giving it a second thought—if, that is, we see it in the work of our intellectual predecessors (such as E.B. Tylor spinning elaborate yarns, over a hundred years ago, about some speculative “savage philosopher” inventing the idea of a soul, a double, or a life force to come to grips with what we now know to be just a dream he had). I have placed this chapter