
This edited volume is the result of work centered in the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies during the past five years, especially the Collegium’s international symposium on “Body, Mind, and Society in Early Christianity” in August and September of 2005. Essays include those by editors Luomanen, Pyysiäinen, and Uro, as well as Luther Martin, Istvan Czachesz, Kimmo Ketola, Hugo Lundhaug, Vernon K. Robbins, Philip F. Eisler, Raimo Hakola, Jutta Jokiranta, and Troels Engberg-Pedersen. The work is described as “rooted in an on-going exchange of ideas between historians and cognitive scientists of religion” (vii), particularly those who live and work in Scandinavia and, to a certain extent, those in Britain.


The volume’s methodology is surprisingly coherent, given its diverse authorships and relatively newly articulated approach. Like similar approaches in North America and France, essays within this volume concentrate on social analysis, social identity, and social practice. In contrast to much French and North American work, this volume assumes religion as a final category, both for analysis and as descriptor of what “early Christianity” and “early Judaism” were. The book’s essays appeal to a very particular mix of science, although this mix is characterized in the book as science in general. The scientific mix that matters for this project is social psychology of religion—or what it refers to as “cognitive science”—and occasional neurology. Most of the essays appeal to naturalized categories of analysis and assume that “science” has established a universal analytical vocabulary.

The scientific analysis in the book rises above historical particularities, and seeks to minimize socio-cultural differences both synchronically and diachronically. It sees itself as a pioneering initiative that integrates science and the study of early Christianity and Judaism. This initiative involves and is invested in a sympathetic comparison between early Christian (and Jewish) social phenomena and patterns observed by
modern social psychology and neurology. Pyysiäinen, for instance, first asserts that “cognitive psychological arguments can help us explain the ways the human mind channels the cultural transmission of religious traditions. Stories of a certain kind become widespread because they have a natural appeal to the human mind” (66). He then explains stories of appearances of the risen Jesus in the first century: “We need not rely on mere intuitive speculations on what the disciples must have felt, thought, and done. Instead, we can rely on empirically tested theories” (68) about appearances of dead people in other ages.

Given the volume's strong interest in social identity and practice, its deafening silence about structuralism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminism, and post-modernism (except for occasional sentence-length put-downs) is curious. As such, this new initiative seems to propose itself as an alternate universe of social-scientific analysis, without ever articulating a sustained examination and critique of the already established discourses of post-structuralism and postmodernism on the very same subject matter. This avoidance applies both to the larger social analysis in post-structuralism and postmodernism as well as to those fields’ particular addresses to issues of early Christianity and Judaism.

With the exception of Martin's article, the essays show almost no interest in historiography. Although their use of established text-critical disciplines is evident and accomplished, they assume that the analytical categories of “science” and “history” are self-evident, and do not need to be cross-examined. So Hakola's approach to differences among Jewish and Christian communities of the first and second centuries grounds itself in the “science” of “the social identity perspective” (265), which shows that “it is only natural that different groups tend to seek distinctiveness and define themselves as unique” (265).

To this reviewer, the volume's regular appeal to science is ironic on at least two fronts. First, it lacks the self-awareness that science has its own power interests and creates categories that are far from objective. The telling critique of American social science interests in Christian origins by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (particularly in her Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation) has even greater relevance to this work. Second, its rigor of scientific analysis and theory is relatively thin throughout the volume. There are few extended arguments at all, and—as noted earlier—the range of scientific fields is extremely limited.

Perhaps the major benefit of this work to readers interested in a more self-critical analysis and in a broader set of theories of social identity and practice is its relatively sustained presentation of several English theorists (for example, E. Thomas McCauley and Robert N. McCauley) and a scholar of early Christianity (Philip F. Esler). Although these approaches are quite different from the post-structuralism and postmodernism efforts in North America, this volume offers a chance to see how these approaches might inform social analysis of early Christianity and Judaism.

For North American readers, however, the curiosity of a project on early Christian and Jewish social identity and practice—one that is done in isolation from postmodern optics—remains surprising. For those unsympathetic to North American interest