

Examining Ehrman's thesis of alternate Christian church history in the perspectives of counterfactual reasoning and the false dichotomy of diversity vs. unity

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Abstract

Influential writer Bart Ehrman argued that the current form of Christian faith was not the only version during the early church's era. On the contrary, different gospels and epistles that contain diverse or even conflicting views were circulated around the early Christian community. But this diversity gradually disappeared when "proto-orthodoxy" was established by Ignatius, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. Further, after Constantine legalized Christianity the church leadership started suppressing dissident voices. In Ehrman's view, the victors "rewrote" the church history. Hence, Ehrman urged readers to consider the alternate reality: What might have happened if some other form of Christian theology had become the dominant one? Although it is tantalizing to consider the otherwise, counterfactual reasoning cannot violate the minimal-rewrite criterion. The forgotten books were excluded for sound reasons. When the victory is well-deserved and the alternate reality is highly impossible, there is no need to ask a counterfactual question. Further, unity vs. diversity is a false polarity because one can never see an either-or outcome in any intellectual history. Although there were conflicts among early Christian groups, the church embraced both unity and diversity.

Examining Ehrman's thesis of alternate Christian church history in the perspectives of counterfactual reasoning and the false dichotomy of diversity vs. unity

Chong Ho Yu

Popular writer and Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman had written a series of books to challenge conventional Christian orthodoxy.¹ In his view, the current form of Christian faith was not the norm or the only version during the early church's era. On the contrary, different gospels and epistles that contain diverse or even conflicting views were circulated around the early Christian community, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of James, the Gospel of Peter, and many others. But this diversity gradually disappeared when "proto-orthodoxy" was established by Ignatius, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. Further, after Constantine legalized Christianity the church leadership started unifying Christian theology and suppressing dissident voices. These alternate gospels and epistles "were rejected, scorned, maligned, attacked, burned, and all but forgotten—lost."² The thesis of Ehrman could be boiled down into this statement: the victors "rewrote" the church history. Hence, Ehrman urged readers to consider the alternate reality or the counterfactual history: What might have happened if some other form of Christian theology had become the dominant one?

The thesis proclaimed by Ehrman is not entirely new. As early as 1934 Walter Bauer had introduced a similar idea in *Orthodoxy and heresy*. According to Bauer, before the fifth century there wasn't a unified orthodoxy as what the Christian Church accepts today. Instead there were competing versions of

¹ The following are some examples. This short essay focuses on the first and the second books: *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2003a; *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2003b [set a and b if it's published at the same year and avoid confusion in the future quotation]; *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2006; *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*. Cary, NC : Oxford University Press, 2012; *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012.

² Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 1.

Christianity scattering throughout the Roman Empire. What was regarded as orthodoxy later was the version of Christianity centered in Rome. Today the term “heresy” carries a negative connotation, but according to Bauer the original meaning of this term simply means “choices” and the so-called “heretics” were the “orthodox” as they established themselves first in the community. Later the Roman Christians considered themselves the orthodoxy and since then “heretics” became a pejorative stigma.³

Nonetheless, new discoveries after Bauer provide this controversial claim with more ammunition. In 1945 the Nag Hammadi library, a collection of Gnostic texts, was unveiled in Egypt and subsequent research on these documents seems to support Bauer’s thesis. In 2006 the National Geographic Society announced the discovery of the Gospel of Judas, a gospel adhering to the Gnostic tradition, in Middle Egypt near Al Minya. After examining the content of the Gospel of Judas, Elaine Pagels, an expert on Gnosticism, and Karen King, an Ecclesiastical historian, re-asserted the diversity of early Christianity. They wrote, “We can see now that the burning issue in the Gospel of Judas was one that the church fathers took pains to avoid addressing by diverting attention to other concerns.”⁴

Excellent scholarship had been done to dispute Bauer’s claim. For example, it was found that Bauer’s assertion that the heretics were usually the majority was exaggerated and the importance of the Roman church was also inflated.⁵ However, it is out of the scope of this short essay to revisit those studies regarding Bauer’s thesis. Hence, the discussion below would focus on Ehrman’s notion only. In the following I will investigate the counterfactual church history suggested by Ehrman and the validity of diversity vs. unity/orthodoxy.

³ Michel Desjardins, “Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Hairesis in the Early Christian Era,” *The Second Century* 8 (1991): 65-82. Desjardins went even further to trace this line of thought beyond Bauer by saying that Tübingen critics had applied Hegelian dialectic to view early Catholicism as a synthesis of Palestinian and Hellenistic forms of Christianity.

⁴ Elaine Pagels & Karen King. *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity Together* (New York: Viking, 2007), xvi.

⁵ Desjardins, 70-72; Rowan Williams, “Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?” In *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams, 1-23. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Counterfactual history

Minimal-rewrite rule

By employing the strategy of counterfactual history or thought experiment, Ehrman implied that the current view of Christianity might be a historical accident. In other words, things would have happened differently. He wrote, in *Lost Christianities*,

I can point out that if some other form of Christianity had won the early struggles for dominance, the familiar doctrines of Christianity might never have become the “standard” belief of millions of people, including the belief that there is only one God, that he is the creator, that Christ his son is both human and divine. The doctrine of Trinity might never have developed. The creeds still spoken in churches today might never have been come into being. Or it might have come into being with an entirely different set of books, including, for example, the Gospel of Thomas instead of the Gospel of Matthew, or the Epistle of Barnabas instead of the Epistle of James, or the Apocalypse of Peter instead of the Apocalypse of John.⁶

As a philosopher I can see that this counterfactual question itself is questionable. To be fair, counterfactual reasoning or thought experiment is a legitimate approach in philosophical discourse and study of history,⁷ but its implementation should not violate the minimal-rewrite rule, also known as historical consistency. To be more specific, the counterfactual history should be based upon antecedents

⁶ Ehrman, 2003a, 6.

⁷ In philosophy there is an approach called counterfactual causation, also known as possible world semantics. See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001; Robert Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might be: Metaphysical and Anti-metaphysical Essays*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2003. In study of history it is called counterfactual history. See Philip Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, & Noel Geoffrey Parker, *Unmaking the West: "What-If?" Scenarios That Rewrite World History*. Michigan, IL: University of Michigan Press, 2006; Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives And Counterfactuals*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

that require alternating as few well-established historical facts as possible.⁸ For example, Arthur Walden asked what would have happened had the Nationalist won the Chinese Civil War. After World War Two ended in 1945, the support for the Chinese Nationalist Party was in all-time high. Even Stalin did not expect the Chinese Communists could win and take over China. Taking the advantage of being a victor of the Sino-Japanese War, the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek airlifted his best troops into Manchuria, the Communist's stronghold, in an attempt to unify China once and for all. In 1946 the Nationalist army gained an upper hand and Chiang's victory seemed to be possible. However, the US envoy General Marshall forced Chiang to halt his advance in Manchuria. As a result the Communist army got an opportunity to regroup and reverse the tide later. Walden changed just a few elements in the historical setting: What would have happened had the Nationalist army kept the momentum or ceased to fight in Northeast China after losing the initial momentum? He speculated that there would have been no Korean War and no Vietnam War.⁹ Simply put, a counterfactual question is admissible as long as the alternate outcome is highly possible without a major revision of historical events.

Now consider this counter-example: during the 1970s and 1980s the US Big Three automakers lost a large portion of the market share to their Japanese rivals. One might ask, "What would have happened to the US economy had the Big Three maintained their hegemony in the auto industry?" To make this counterfactual question answerable, one must imagine that in the 70s and 80s American engineering, management, and marketing competencies had outperformed the Japanese, otherwise the US automakers would not have a chance to win at all. Additionally, one might imagine that the oil crisis never happened and thus fuel-efficient small cars could not have been popular. Needless to say, it takes

⁸ Philip E. Tetlock & Aaron Belkin, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996): 18.

⁹ Arthur Walden, "China without Tears: If Chiang Kai-shek Hadn't Gambled in 1946." In *What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, ed. Robert Cowley, 377-392. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006.

bold and even unrealistic imaginations in too many aspects of history, and thus in this case the minimal-rewrite criterion cannot be met.

Is it possible that today the Gospel of Thomas and other lost books instead of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark are included into the canon? How likely can the alternative become reality without violating the minimal-rewrite rule? In the beginning of his book “Lost Christianities” Ehrman listed the date of the rejected books under his consideration. The Gospel according to the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Epistle of the Apostles, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Nazarenes, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of the Savior were written in the second century. The Gospel of Philip was authored in the third century while the Gospel of Nicodemus was compiled in the fifth century.¹⁰ In “Lost Scriptures” Ehrman discussed some other alternate gospels and epistles. The Gospel of Truth was written sometime before 180 AD.¹¹ The Second Treatise of the Great Seth dates from the third century.¹² The Infancy Gospel of Thomas began to circulate during the first half of the second century.¹³ The Acts of Thecla was in circulation near the end of the second century.¹⁴ Obviously, all of them appeared later than the 27 books included in the New Testament. The alternate reality could hardly be materialized unless one adds certain bold assumptions into the equation, such as pretending that the forgotten books were written in the first century.

Interestingly enough, Ehrman seems to be contradicting himself when we compare his claim in “Lost Christianities” and “Did Jesus exist?” side by side. In the latter he asserted that the messages in the Gnostic gospels are not harmonious with the messages given by Jesus in the first century, and thus it is likely that Gnostic writers put words into Jesus’s mouth.¹⁵ In this case, the so-called “lost Christianities”

¹⁰ Ehrman, 2003a, , xi.

¹¹ Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 2003b, 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper One, 2013).

are not “lost” at all, because they were not in the rightful place and hence they had never been displaced. Asking whether the rejected texts could have replaced the 27 New Testament books to be the canonical texts is like asking whether the US automakers could have defeated their Japanese competitors in the 70s and 80s. In short, when the victory is well-deserved, it may not be necessary to ask a counterfactual question.

Perplexing writing in forgotten books

Besides appearing later, those alternate gospels have other problems that hinder themselves from being widely accepted in the early Christian community. Indeed Ehrman had pointed out some of the issues. He wrote, “And there is scarcely any religious literature written in any language at any time that can be more perplexing and deliberately obscure than some of the Gnostic writings of Christian antiquity.”¹⁶ Ehrman didn’t provide any example. In the following I cite several passages from the Gospel of Thomas and readers could see why this type of writing was rejected by the early Christian Church.

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter [the Kingdom].”¹⁷

Jesus said, “If the flesh came into being because of spirit, it is a wonder. But if spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth has made its home in this poverty.” Jesus said, “Where there are three gods, they are

¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

¹⁷ Thomas, Mary, John. *The Gnostic Gospels of Thomas, Mary and John* (Loretto, PA: Start Publishing LLC, 2013), Kindle Locations 126-130.

gods. Where there are two or one, I am with him.”¹⁸

Jesus said, “He who has recognized the world has found the body, but he who has found the body is superior to the world.”¹⁹

The gospel of Mary is another good example. The following passages quoted from this Gospel are like riddles:

The Savior said, “All natures, all formed things, all creatures exist in and with one another and will again be resolved into their own roots, because the nature of matter is dissolved into the roots of its nature alone.”²⁰

The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth the arousing of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the wisdom of the folly of the flesh, the seventh is wrathful wisdom. These are the seven participants in wrath. They ask the soul, ‘Whence do you come, killer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?’ The soul answered and said, ‘What seizes me is killed; what turns me about is overcome; my desire has come to an end and ignorance is dead. In a world I was saved from a world, and in a “type,” from a higher “type” and from the fetter of the impotence of knowledge, the existence of which is temporal. From this time I will reach rest in the time of the moment of the Aeon in silence.’”²¹

Questionable ideas in lost or forgotten books

In addition to the confusing writing style, the content of the Gospel of Thomas indicates that its idea is closer to Greek philosophy than the first century Christian thought. For example,

¹⁸ Ibid., Kindle Locations 145-148.

¹⁹ Ibid., Kindle Locations 280-281.

²⁰ Ibid., Kindle Locations 414-415.

²¹ Ibid., Kindle Locations 444-450.

Simon Peter said to Him, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”²²

Although the English translation of the Gospel of Thomas argued that Thomas contains more primitive materials than the New Testament Gospels,²³ the preceding text does not seem to be an original Christian idea at all. Rather, it resembles the Greco-Roman idea that courage was associated with “manliness”. In the Greco-Roman culture, the passion for honor was rooted in a desire associated with the essence of male. In later years Stoic philosophy of *virtus* (to play the man) influenced the development of the Christian theology of martyrdom.²⁴ For example, in 203 Perpetua was sentenced to death for her Christian faith, and in a vision before her martyrdom Perpetua turned into a man.²⁵ Although it is possible for early Christian groups to praise a woman as a courageous man, it is very curious to associate salvation with gender change (“For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”)

While some writing of the forgotten books is not as perplexing as the Gnostic Gospels, the content is incompatible with the Christian belief, and therefore they were rejected for a good reason. Take the First Epistle of Clement as an example. This letter, dates from the late first century or early second century, was written to the Corinthian church. Its fatal flaw is the use of an improper metaphor to illustrate resurrection:

²² Ibid., Kindle Locations 354-356.

²³ Ibid., Kindle Location 33.

²⁴ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 28-29.

²⁵ Mary Lefkowitz & Maureen Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece & Rome* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 317-318.

Let us consider, dear friends, how the Master continually points out to us the coming resurrection of which he made the Lord Jesus Christ the first fruit when he raised from the dead. Let us observe, dear friends, the resurrection: the night falls asleep, and day arises; the days departs, and night returns....Let us observe the remarkable sign that is seen in the regions of the east, that is, in the vicinity of Arabia. There is a bird that is named the Phoenix. This bird, the only one of its species, lives for five hundred years. When the time of its dissolution and death arrives, it makes for itself a coffin-like nest of frankincense and myrrh and the other species, into which, its time being completed, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays, a certain worm is born, which is nourished by the juices of the dead bird and eventually grows wings. Then, when it has grown strong, it takes up that coffin-like nest containing the bone of its parent, and carrying them away, it makes its way away from the country of Arabia to Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. There, in broad daylight, in the sight of all, it flies to the altar of the sun and deposits them there, and then it sets out on its return. The priests then examine the public records of the times, and they find that it has come at the end of the five hundredth year.²⁶

The implicit worldview of the preceding passage is a cyclical cosmology: the day comes after the night, and the night comes after the day. And needless to say in the Phoenix mythology the long-lived bird is cyclically regenerated. However, the Christian cosmology entails a linear progression, in which the universe has a definite beginning and a conclusive closure, not a repeating cycle. Indeed no other book in the New Testament adopts anything similar to the Phoenix analogy or the day-night cycle for explaining resurrection.

The Letter of Barnabas, which was written around 130 AD, was another “lost book” that contains problematic messages. There are sound reasons for rejecting this book as a part of the canon, and

²⁶ Michael W. Holmes (Ed.). *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 79-81.

Ehrman had provided the readers with the details. He wrote, "Its basic thrust is that Judaism is, and always have been, a false religion. According to the author, Jews violated God's covenant from the very beginning (4:6-8); they have, as a result, never been God's people or understood their own Scriptures. For this author, the Jewish Scriptures can be understood only in the light of Christ; indeed, for him, the Old Testament is a Christian, not a Jewish Book."²⁷ Obviously, the radical view that totally breaking Christianity away from the Jewish tradition is contradicted with Jesus and Paul, who adopted the fulfillment position (NT fulfills OT).

The author of the Epistle of Barnabas urged Christians not to be "proselytes to the Jewish law" (2:20) and at the same time the author re-interpreted the Jewish law by superimposing his view on it. For example, eating the hare is forbidden by the Jewish law because the hare is a symbol of adulterer; the hare reproduces off-springs rapidly (9:7). Further, this book carries other disturbing messages, such as giving a definite end time whereas Jesus refused to tell people the date of his second coming: "Consider, my children, what that signifies, He (God) finished them (creation of the universe) in six days. The meaning of it is this: that in six thousand years the Lord God will bring all things to an end...Therefore, children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, shall all things be accomplished" (13:4-5).

It is not surprising that the approach of downplaying the Jewish tradition expressed by the Book of Barnabas could not be the dominant view in Christianity. Once again Ehrman's own writing had answered the question why such radical view was unwelcome in the early church. In "Lost Christianities" he discussed the doctrines of Ebionites and Marcionites, standing at the two polar ends of the spectrum. Ebionite is a group of Jewish Christians that insisted upon following Jewish law and rituals. On the other

²⁷ Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 2003, 219.

end, Marcion, the founder of Marcionism, totally rejected the Old Testament. Both movements failed in the battles for orthodoxy. Ehrman wrote,

“What if it had turned out differently? What if the Ebionites had won these battles, or the Marcionites? From a historian’s perspective, with all the advantages and disadvantages of hindsight, it has to be admitted that it is difficult to imagine either of these groups establishing itself as one of the dominant religions, let alone the official religion, of the Roman Empire in the way proto-orthodox Christianity eventually did.”²⁸

Ehrman pointed out that Ebionites did not offer anything newer than Judaism while Marcionites was too new. In the ancient world it was the old that was respected and nothing new could be considered valid. And thus Marcion’s failure was attributed to his disconnection with the Jewish tradition.²⁹ Those alternate gospels were forgotten for good reasons, but they were not lost or displaced because they had never occupied a competitive or popular position.

The most disturbing content found in the alternate gospels is the story told by the Secret Gospel of Mark. According to this gospel, Jesus raised a young boy from the death. This young boy loved Jesus so much that he asked Jesus to stay with him. Six days later the boy visited Jesus in the evening. He wore nothing except a linen garment and they spent the night together. Why was this gospel rejected by the Christian church? The answer is obvious.³⁰

As mentioned before, some of those “lost” books in the early church were recovered in 1945 and 2006. One of the lost sources of early Christian writings is called Q, a hypothetical source which is said to be the template of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Ehrman pointed out that based on the content of the Gospel of Thomas, which did not mention Jesus’s death and resurrection, “the author of Q, too, may

²⁸ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 2003, 110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁰ Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 2003, 87.

have thought that it was the sayings of Jesus that were the key to a right relationship with God...Many people still today have trouble accepting a literal belief in Jesus' resurrection or traditional understandings of his death as an atonement, but call themselves Christians because they try to follow Jesus's teachings. Maybe there were early Christians who agreed with them, and maybe the author of Q was one of them."³¹ First of all, the Q source is a hypothetical document and no one knows what Q exactly contains. Second, even if Q de-emphasizes Jesus's death and resurrection, this type of argument from silence is faulty. One cannot leap into a hasty conclusion just because something is absent from the text. Further, Dunn asked, "What if Q was dug up from the sands of Egypt? Would it not have to be included within the NT canon?" The answer given by Dunn is "Not at all." His rationale is that the correct decision was already made in the early church.³² In short, the victory of the canon is well-deserved and the probability of adopting those alternate gospels by the early church is extremely low.

Unity and diversity as a false dichotomy

At first glance, Ehrman and other critics posited a serious challenge against the Christian orthodoxy. If many alternate versions of Christianity are found in the early church history, does it mean that there was no unified Christian belief? However, how diverse is diverse? How unified is unified? What degree of diversity can negate unity? And what degree of unity can supersede diversity? When we carefully examine intellectual history, we can see that unity vs. diversity is nothing more than a false dichotomy. Consider the development of Communism. Chinese's interpretation of Communism (Maoism) is vastly different from the Russian version. Moreover, Yugoslavia (Titoism) and Romania chose their own routes that are independent from China and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that there is a set of common cores or a unified theme among these Communist countries. In a similar vein, the quantitative research tradition, commonly known as the statistical approach, originated from diverse

³¹ Ehrman, 2003, 58.

³² James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 419.

and competing schools of thought, such as the Fisherian legacy, the Pearsonian approach, and the Bayesian school. Nonetheless, in spite of its diversity and competing claims, one can see a set of obvious common themes in quantitative research methodology, such as looking for precise measurement and empirical substantiation. Like the debate among early Christian leaders regarding canons and other issues, statisticians argued against each other on many matters, such as the nature of probabilistic inferences, the role of the degrees of freedom in Chi-square analysis, the structure of hypothesis testing, and many others.³³ Arguing is a normal process of any intellectual movement. Even though Christianity is said to be a revealed religion, it doesn't mean that the development of Christian ideas must be free of any argument or diversity (Apparently Ehrman made such assumption). While Ehrman accused the Christian church of rewriting history, indeed one can easily find diverse ideas in any intellectual movement to challenge any existing view of history.³⁴ The right question about the history of the early church should be: how can diversity and unity coexist?

Canon within the canon

In his seminal book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, James Dunn correctly pointed out that in the New Testament writings there is a golden thread: Christians believed that God raised Jesus from the dead.³⁵ Nonetheless, Dunn realized that there was no single normative form of Christian beliefs in the first century; rather, there were many expressions of Christianity within the New Testament. To illustrate the spectrum of unity and diversity, Dunn introduced the term "a canon within the canon." To

³³ Chong Ho Yu, *Philosophical Foundations of Quantitative Research Methodology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006).

³⁴ Furthermore, homogeneity/heterogeneity is definitely a false polarity in mathematical philosophy. In applied mathematics and statistics, there is no such thing as perfect normality or absolute homogeneity. Although normality and homogeneity of variance are required in many parametric statistical tests, it is absurd to declare that a data set is non-normal or heterogeneous whenever a slight departure from normality or homogeneity is found. The proper question is: what degree of heterogeneity or variability is acceptable so that we can still treat the data as homogeneous? This indirectly supports the claim that unity/diversity is a false dichotomy.

³⁵ Dunn, 2006, 439. In a similar vein, Rowan Williams asserted that the unity that matters in the early Christian Church is grounded in Jesus Christ, 1989, 4.

be specific, no Christian group treated the NT writings as uniformly canonical; rather, they chose a particular emphasis and this focus became a canon within the canon.³⁶ Based on the concept of a canon within the canon, Dunn asserted that there existed unity in diversity among the early church communities. In other words, the church canonizes both unity and diversity.³⁷

Disagreements are visible

In Ehrman's view, the diversity in the early church was suppressed in the name of unity or orthodoxy. He maintained that the victors "rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all."³⁸ This statement is strange because conflicts could be easily found in the New Testament, and as a matter of fact the church by no means buried the history of the controversy. Acts 15 is a clear counter-example against Ehrman's claim. It documents the first council in Jerusalem, which was held to rectify the tension between gentile Christians and Jewish Christians regarding the issue of following the Torah and circumcision. And the final decision was to allow diverse lifestyles: Gentile Christians were not obligated to follow the Jewish custom while Jewish Christians could continue to embrace their tradition. Additionally, conflicts and disagreements among Christians are also recorded in the second century literature. In two cases mentioned by Eusebius the bishop of Rome is censured.³⁹

Searching for identity instead of true doctrine

Did the "proto-orthodox" writers, such as Ignatius, Tertullian, and Irenaeus, attempt to marginalize other church groups, such as Gnostic Christians? Church historian Jacquelyn Winston (personal communication) warned that modern people tend to superimpose our categories into ancient history.

³⁶ Dunn, 2003, 408-409.

³⁷ Ibid., 413.

³⁸ Ehrman, 2003, 4.

³⁹ Williams, 1989, 13.

Thus, before answering the above question we have to put ourselves into the shoes of Tertullian. According to Markus, Tertullian and his contemporaries regarded Gnosticism as a “school” rather than a “church.” In Ehrman’s view Tertullian’s endeavor is devoted to establish orthodoxy, but indeed Tertullian’s concern is about seeking for a true Christian identity while Christianity was facing persecution by the Romans. In other words, the pressing issue was to define the hallmark of Christianity among its rivals, not to formalize the true doctrine. In fact, at the time of Tertullian the wide spectrum of Christian beliefs was well-recognized, and Tertullian didn’t attack every branch of Christianity that was different from his own.⁴⁰ Why Gnosticism? As mentioned before, at the time of Tertullian Christians was under persecution. In respond to this crisis Tertullian encouraged his fellow Christians to eagerly desire suffering for Christ because they would gain “an eternal crown of angelic essence, citizenship in the heavens, glory everlasting.”⁴¹ Needless to say, Gnosticism that denies Jesus’s crucifixion and suffering would discourage Christians from being martyrs by following Jesus’s footsteps.⁴²

Conclusion

The main points of this short essay can be summarized as follows: although it is tantalizing to consider the otherwise, counterfactual reasoning cannot be well-applied into all situations. Asking whether those Christian writings that are dated between the second and fifth centuries could become the orthodoxy is like asking whether the American automakers could have dominated the vehicle market in the 1970s and 1980s or whether the Japanese Empire could have invented the atomic bomb and won the Second World War. A counterfactual thinker must follow the minimal-rewrite criterion. The

⁴⁰ Robert Markus, “The Problem of Self-Definition: From Sect to Church.” In *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition: The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, Vol. 1, ed. E. P. Sanders, 1-15. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.

⁴¹ Thomas Heffernan and James Shelton, “The Vocabulary of Imprisonment and the Theology of Martyrdom in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14(2006): 217-233.

⁴² In a similar thread, Rowan Williams argued that in a counter-society, a minority group living in a hostile world, looking for self-identity is more important than establishing the true doctrine. This phenomenon is known as “anthropology superseding cosmology”, 1989, 8.

forgotten books were excluded for sound reasons, and indeed Ehrman's own writing had pointed out the problems in those forgotten sects. Specifically, some of them used unclear sentences whereas some promoted beliefs that are incompatible with original Christian ideas. In short, the victory of the current form of Christianity is well-deserved.

Second, unity vs. diversity is a false polarity because one can never see an either-or outcome in any intellectual history. Arguing is a normal process of many intellectual movements. Even though Christianity is said to be a revealed religion, one cannot assume that there should be only one view throughout the early Christian church. Although there were conflicts among early Christian groups, the church embraced both unity and diversity, and operated with "a canon within the canon". There is no evidence that early Christians tried to hide disagreements or to rewrite history through the lens of unity. Seeing church history in terms of establishing orthodox doctrines is to project our current concepts into the ancient mind. Indeed early church community might care more about building a self-identity in a hostile environment than fighting for the so-called true doctrine. Hence, readers are encouraged to examine Ehrman's notion with caution.

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