


Article

A New Way of Life: The Challenge of Cultural Witness in the Early Jesus Movement

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Abstract: This article portrays innovative and distinct features of the Christ groups of the first decades with the underlying premise that the lived reality of the early Christian communities has the potential to inspire present-day churches in Europe when they face the challenge of cultural witness. People were drawn to Christ groups because they were different from the surrounding culture. Christianity would not have survived if it did not offer a counter-cultural ethical stance; a new social imaginary; alternative membership options; a flexible organizational structure; a holistic worldview; and a creative, innovative communication style—in one phrase: a new way of life.

Keywords: early Christianity; urban religion; social ethics; spirit; group formation; innovation

1. Introduction

Can Christianity in postmodern Europe learn from premodern Christianity in the Roman Empire? Is post-Constantinian Christendom in any way comparable to the early Jesus movement? The way that I phrase these questions already anticipates my response: Indeed, paying a historically attentive visit to the early Christ groups can be a rewarding and inspiring endeavor. Two caveats need to be kept in mind: First, we should not be tempted by the hermeneutical naiveté of inferring direct answers to modern questions from an ancient phenomenon, falling prey to the charm of a romanticized new beginning. Second, the empirical reality of a Christian community, its structure, beliefs, and practices, can never claim universal normativity, not in the first century and not today. However, to the degree that such features witness to the story of Christ, they can be a (less or more) inspiring impulse for those who seek to do just this: reflecting and retelling the story of Christ in their being church.

In what follows, I am interested in innovative and distinct features of the Christ groups of the first decades (cf. [Schliesser 2022](#)). It is my underlying premise that the distinctiveness of early Christian communities, compared and contrasted with other groups in the Roman Empire, promises profit for our present-day ecclesiological reflection. My analytical focus, therefore, is on those “pull-factors” of the early Jesus movement that could be of relevance even for today. Though in this historically oriented study I do not offer straightforward applications, I believe the findings by themselves will capture the imagination of both church theorists and practitioners. In the conclusion, I point to some avenues for further thought and action.

Distinction and innovation point to the driving force of an emerging movement, and for early Christ groups this driving force was, among other things, the concern to witness to Christ (just as a group of devotees to Jupiter would want to reflect the values of their god in their community life). Six distinctive features of early Christianity will be illustrated by way of a journey through the Ancient Mediterranean, from Rome to Greece, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Brief visits to better and lesser-known places of the early Jesus movement exemplify the challenge of cultural witness for the first generations of Christ-believers.



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2. Witness to the Vulnerable: An Ethics of the Protection of Life

Charming medieval alleyways, art workshops, an exciting nightlife: Trastevere is nowadays the liveliest district of Rome. The name Trastevere is derived from Latin, trans Tiberium, “beyond the Tiber,” because, seen from the historic city center, the picturesque neighborhood lies on the other side of the Tiber. In the first century, visitors to Trastevere would be numbed by the horrible stench emanating from the tanneries and brickworks. They would encounter the hustle and bustle of the streets around the countless taverns and stores, a deafening noise from the port facilities on the Tiber, where sailors had been busy since dawn unloading their cargo and transporting it to the merchants. Some, however, might have dreaded the sight of parentless babies abandoned by their families in public places. They knew it would not be long before the child fell into the hands of a pimp who would raise it and train it for prostitution or a slave trader who would sell it for as much profit as possible. The pater familias had the right to give up for adoption, sell, or abandon a new-born child that he did not accept as part of the family. Particularly affected were handicapped children, illegitimate children, and girls.

In the year 1 BC, the seasonal worker (or soldier) Hilarion sent the following lines from Alexandria to his pregnant wife Alis (P.Oxy. IV 744): “Many greetings . . . Know that we are still in Alexandria; and do not worry if they all come back, I remain in Alexandria. I ask you and entreat you, take care of the child, and if we receive our pay soon, I will send it up to you. If perhaps you bear a child and it is male, let it be; if it is female, throw it out” (trans. Johnston 2020, p. 148). Today’s readers can hardly escape the intuitive shock of these statements. However, the end of the letter is quite emotional: “how can I forget you?” and it does not make Hilarion appear as a cold tyrant.

It is disputed how widespread the practice of infant exposure was, but recent research suggests it was an important resource for the supply of slaves and prostitutes. Christian criticism of this practice drew on early Judaism and its appreciation of human life as a gift of creation (Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 3114f.; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2202); some Stoic philosophers reached similar conclusions. One of the earliest extra-canonical Christian writings, the Didache (ca. AD 100), says: “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not sexually abuse children, do not engage in sexual immorality. Do not steal, do not practice magic, do not use enchanted potions, do not abort a fetus or kill a child that is born” (Didache 2:2; trans. Ehrman). Not only do we find here a ban on child exposure but also the prohibition of infanticide and abortion, in fact the oldest tangible evidence of the prohibition of abortion from early Christian literature. Furthermore, the command “do not sexually abuse children” features a striking element: Using the extremely rare verb *paidophthorein*, Christians condemned the practice of pederasty, i.e., sexual intercourse with children, a practice that was widely tolerated socially and praised by poets and writers such as Juvenal, Petron, Horace, and Lucian (Hurtado 2016, p. 167). The emphatic rejection of pederasty demanded a new label for this practice: Christian authors do not speak of “child love” (pederasty) but of “child abuse.”

We stay in the capital Rome and look ahead into the mid-third century. Eusebius reports that the Roman church supported 1500 widows and poor during the episcopate of Cornelius (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6,43,11). This number prompted historians to estimate the size of urban Christianity in Rome. Edward Gibbon calculates that at this time about 50,000 Christians were living in Rome. “The populousness of that great capital cannot perhaps be exactly ascertained; but the most modest calculation will not surely reduce it lower than a million of inhabitants, of whom the Christians might constitute at the most a twentieth part” (Gibbon [1776] 1998, p. 284). Probably, Gibbon’s guess is too high, as Robin Lane Fox (1986) notes, offering a most interesting reason for his assessment: the guess is too high, “not least because widows and the poor were strongly represented in the Church’s membership” (pp. 268–9). Why is that? Why did they become part of the Christian communities? At least one fourth of the women in the Roman Empire were widowed. Widows in need of help received special recognition and protection. They were treated thusly in Jewish communities, but now the ethnic barriers were removed. Conflicts in the congregations

could not be avoided (cf. Acts 6:1–7), and soon further regulations were necessary (1 Tim 5:3–14). Care for widows is a telling example of how Christ groups stepped into the breach where people fell through the cracks of imperial care. In the mid-second century, the satirist Lucian of Samosata mocked the stirring care of the imprisoned Christian Peregrinus (*Peregr.* 12) and the Christian hope for the afterlife as a spiritual resource in crisis situations (*Peregr.* 13). Adolf Von Harnack ([Von Harnack 1908](#)) comments: “He would certainly have made a jest upon it had any occurred to his mind; but whenever this nimble scoffer is depicting the faith of Christians, there is a remarkable absence of anything like jesting” (p. 111). Lucian’s puns are evidence of the resonance of early Christian social ethics. During his lifetime, the “Antonine Plague” was brought in from the East and wiped out a quarter of the entire population. Membership in the Christian network perhaps even increased the chances of survival. Historian Kyle [Harper \(2017\)](#) recently confirmed this assessment: “The compassion was conspicuous and consequential. Basic nursing of the sick can have massive effects on case fatality rates [...]. The Christian ethic was a blaring advertisement for the faith” (p. 156).

Charity in early Christianity did not remain abstract. On the contrary, even outsiders noted that Christians cared for the sick, eased the suffering of widows and orphans, buried the deceased, welcomed strangers, offered spiritual resources in times of crisis, and even loved enemies and adversaries. Painfully, often they failed in their ideals. But they programmatically called for altruistic care for precarious milieus and the marginalized. This, of course, does not mean that the majority culture was cold and heartless but mottos of Hellenistic popular ethics illustrate the distinctiveness of early Christianity: “Aphorisms such as ‘look after your own things’ . . . , ‘look after yourself’ or ‘do good to yourself’ . . . , and ‘look for advantage’ . . . provide interesting examples of somewhat self-centered ethical imperatives which were commonly accepted in the ancient world” ([Winter 2001](#), p. 82). The early Christian “ideology . . . of love and service” ([Ehrman 2018](#), p. 6) could prove attractive in a culture that tended to idealize apathy and to brand empathy as an unreasonable movement of the soul.

3. The Witness of a New Social Imaginary: Transcending Boundaries

In 1929, the so-called Erastus inscription was found near a paved area northeast of the theater in Corinth. It can still be looked at today. The inscription informs us that a certain Erastus laid the pavement at his own expense in return for his aedileship. He took his election as aedile as an occasion to be a benefactor to the city. Historians of early Christianity were thrilled. Incidentally, a man by the name Erastus is mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Romans, written from Corinth. He sends his greetings to the Roman church and is identified as the *oikonomos* of the city (Rom 16:23). This is actually the only passage in the corpus Paulinum in which a (secular) office of a person is mentioned. And the Greek *oikonomos* is most likely to be translated with aedile. So, is the Erastus of the pavement the same Erasmus who is part of the Corinthian Christ group? We will probably never know for sure, and some skepticism is appropriate (e.g., [Friesen 2010](#)).

Be that as it may, we can assume that the Christian Erasmus belonged to the decurial class and was thus part of the social elite ([Weiss 2015](#)). Such details cannot be overemphasized. For a long time, it was considered an incontrovertible truth that the early Christian communities were composed of the socially marginalized, the lawless, the poor, and the enslaved. Nietzsche’s ([1894] 2005) phrase still resonates in the collective memory: “In Christianity, the instincts of the subjugated and oppressed come to the fore: the lowest classes are the ones who look to it for salvation” (p. 18). Since the 1970s, however, scholars tend to think that the early Christ movements of the first century included the middle class of the imperial society and were not simply a proletarian movement of the desperately poor. Our knowledge of the composition of the early congregations, of the social position and status of their members, is admittedly exceedingly slim. Let us stay, for a moment, in Corinth: An interested observer would not have counted the majority of the members among the wise, powerful, and distinguished (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). Nevertheless, he would

have noticed educated and respected people. That there were higher-ups in the Corinthian church—though “not many” (1 Cor 1:26; cf. 3:18; 6:5)—can be inferred not only from the brief remarks about the persons mentioned by name, but also from the social tensions that existed in the church, especially with respect to the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17–22); from the demands made on the rhetorical skill and erudition of a public speech (1 Cor 2:1–5); from civil disputes that were settled in the courts of the city (1 Cor 6:1–8); from the gatherings within the social network, which included banquets and prostitution (1 Cor 6:12–18); from the invitations individual church members received to the temples (1 Cor 8:10); and finally from Paul’s expectation that the Corinthians would be able to make a substantial contribution to the Jerusalem collection (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8–9). The visitor would probably have been surprised by the role of women in the Corinthian meetings, for they prayed and practiced prophecy (1 Cor 11:5). New and unique opportunities for participation opened up for women, which stood out in an urban culture. Wealthy and educated women in a Christian congregation had the opportunity to interact with the intellectual male elite or to seek patronage of a Christian assembly. Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) may have been such a woman, as well as Phoebe, who served as patroness of a congregation in neighboring Cenchræa (Rom 16:1).

Overall, the Corinthian assembly reflects the society in which it is embedded. Christ-believers “would seem to be a mirror and microcosm of the city itself. The majority were poor, lacking education, wealth, and birth, nobodies in terms of public honor; some had fallen below the level of subsistence and depended on the communal meals for nourishment. A few were persons of middling incomes, shop-keepers, perhaps, or merchant-traders” (Welborn 2016, p. 73). This insight is less banal than it appears at first glance. Even though Roman society allowed for social mobility, all areas of daily life were permeated with a remarkable awareness of status. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, while not entailing a social change of status, transcended ethnic, social, and gender differences. The relapse of individual Corinthian Christians into status thinking is immediately and sharply criticized by Paul (1 Cor 11:18–22).

4. Communal Witness: Bridging and Bonding for Christ’s Sake

In recent times, a group of Athenians who worshipped the god of wine, Dionysus (Lat. Bacchus), came into the focus of biblical scholarship. The so-called Iobacchoi ran a cult association that allowed only initiates, i.e., paying members of the association, to enter. Comprehensive regulations, codified in 164/165 AD, structured the life of this group, and it is worthwhile to quote a few sentences (IG II² 1368, trans. Ascough and Kloppenborg):

It is not allowed for anyone to become an Iobacchos unless he has first registered with the priest the customary notice and is approved by a vote of the Iobacchoi, if he appears to be worthy and suitable for the Baccheion. The entrance fee shall be 50 denarii and a libation for one whose father was not a member . . . The Iobacchoi shall meet together on the ninth of each month, on the annual festival, and on the Bacchic days, and if there is any occasional feast of the god. Each member shall speak and act and be zealous for the association, contributing to the fixed monthly dues for wine. If he does not fulfill these obligations, he shall be shut out of the gathering . . . In the gathering no one is allowed to sing, cause a disturbance, or applaud. Rather, with all order and decorum members shall speak and do their parts, as the priest or the head of the bacchic-devotees directs . . . If an Iobacchos dies, a wreath worth up to five denarii and a single jar of wine shall be provided for those who attend the funeral. But no one who is absent from the funeral itself shall have any wine.

Voluntary associations were the most common form of sociality in the ancient world (e.g., Eckhardt 2021). The detailed text of the statutes of the Iobacchoi and numerous other inscriptions from the entire empire pose some interesting questions: Were the first Christian communities a kind of voluntary association? What did they have in common? How did

they differ? Why should anyone become interested in having a closer look and even in becoming a member?

And in fact, a curious observer of the urban religious scenery could easily have come up with the idea that Christ-believers were a new cult association, even though Christ groups did not use common association terminology to designate themselves but rather the political term *ekklesia*. The observer would notice that members of a Christ group gather regularly to have communal meals commemorating the founder and worshipping a deity. Their groups of a few dozen people meet in private homes or inns under the sponsorship of a patron. They call each other “brother” and “sister” and subscribe to high ethical standards. They are just another elective cult and find themselves on the religious marketplace next to other cults. But the points of comparison should not blur the distinctive profile of Christian associations, which would have caught an observer’s eye and might have attracted or repelled him. They programmatically questioned and reevaluated status boundaries and gender roles. Unlike in other associations, membership was free of charge, and members’ missteps were not punished with fines. On the other hand, Christ groups cared for needy network members that extended not only to the local association but also, as in the case of the Jerusalem collection, to members far away. The frequent weekly gatherings allowed less well-off members to eat their fill on a regular basis, and, moreover, they had access to otherwise closed circles when they were invited to the homes of more affluent believers. Unlike other associations, Christ groups engaged in trans-local networking, visited each other, exchanged letters, and supported each other even financially. Most other associations were organized on a local basis, and a member of a Dionysos cult in Athens could not expect to be welcomed as “brother” in the Corinthian Dionysos group. Furthermore, associations did not tend to produce literature so that “the intellectual activities of Christ assemblies are clearly one of their signal *differentiae*” (Kloppenborg 2019, p. xiii). The missionary zeal of the Christ groups is without analogy in antiquity and will have been perceived by some as a “shocking novelty” (Goodman 1994, p. 105). Last but not least, the legal status of Christ groups stands out, which, unlike associations, attracted the attention of the Roman authorities and could be subject to punitive measures.

So, in some sense, Christ groups were just like any other association in the ancient world (e.g., Kloppenborg 2019). But at the same time, they created a novel form of sociality that was at least as innovative and revolutionary as it was conventional.

5. Unimpressive Witness: A Religion without Temple

When the Apostle Paul travelled to Ephesus in the middle of the 1st century AD on his third missionary journey, Ephesus was a flourishing Roman provincial capital. Outside of the city he, like any traveler, was overwhelmed by the Artemision, the temple of the goddess Artemis, the most impressive and most lavishly decorated temple in the Roman Empire—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The building was surrounded by a double colonnade, with 127 marble columns, of which 36 stood in front of the building. According to Luke, the town clerk addressed the agitated citizens of Ephesus: “Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis?” (Acts 19:35). No one could resist the magnificence of the building, a powerful public witness to the great goddess, intimately connected with the imperial cult. How about the Jesus followers? Ephesian Christ groups, like many communities of the early Jesus movements, did not meet in temples or sanctuaries, at grottos or springs, at holy trees or rocks, but first and foremost in houses. Obviously, they could dispense with a sanctuary since they did not need a place to sacrifice. But the reasons go deeper. Holy is not a place or a building, but the community itself. “Christians stood out in a world whose pagan majority, full of ambition, built magnificent temples, while the Jews at least lived in hope of rebuilding their magnificent, immensely large temple” (Leppin 2021, pp. 123–24). Meetings took place where family, professional, or social life took place. Private space became an ad hoc place of worship, table fellowship, and instruction. More recent scholarship is moving beyond the house walls, pointing to other possible venues: “Shops and small workshops,

i.e., *tabernae*, were probably the abodes and workplaces of many urban Christians . . . and thus would have been among the most convenient meeting locales” (Adams 2013, p. 156). The literary sources and the archaeological evidence are notoriously difficult to evaluate, but we can assume that the gathering places of the Christ groups were more flexible than commonly assumed. Theologically, the flexibility goes back to the “metaphorical sacralization” (Bormann 2017, p. 242) of the Christ groups as the “body of Christ” and the “temple of God.” This self-understanding, and not a specific location, secured their identity.

In Ephesus, more than in any other city of early Christianity, there was very soon a colorful coexistence of Christian groups. Ephesus became the melting pot of the Jesus movement. Numerous people and traditions are closely connected with Ephesus: Paul and his fellow missionaries, disciples of John the Baptist, the Alexandrian Apollos, Prisca and Aquila, the Epistle to the Ephesians, Luke’s writings, the Johannine circle, the Nicolaitans (cf. Rev 2:6, 15), the Pastoral Epistles, and finally Ignatius’s Letter to the Ephesians (e.g., Trebilco 2004). This marks a tremendous plurality in the 1st century AD alone. How could such diverse Christianities coexist in one city? Christ groups were faced with a challenging, oftentimes arduous (and not always successful) identity management. Long and bitter struggles over what is “orthodox” were already part of the first decades of Christianity. Overall, however, “From the post-Easter beginnings, groups of Christians with different views and practices of faith lived side by side—in a relatively uncomplicated relationship, despite differing views on the whole” (Lampe 2017, p. 52). Furthermore, Christ groups approached questions of organization and leadership rather pragmatically and “charismatically.” Until well into the 2nd century, the assemblies were characterized by decentralized and flexible leadership structures. They mimicked local organizational structures that they encountered in their polis or in philosophical schools, associations, the synagogue, or the house. Each community created their own leadership structure according to their needs and to the abilities and resources of their members. It is no real surprise, therefore, that Paul and Timothy greet “bishops” in the community in Philippi (Phil 1:1), even if in the undisputed letters of Paul, the title “bishop” is not used and one would expect the singular, after all. For Paul, offices are a “manifestation of the Holy Spirit” and not a form of the Spirit’s deterioration (Lauster 2021, p. 62). A characteristic innovative leap is the principle of personal charisma: authority is not derived from external factors such as status, but from the activity of the Spirit. Women could therefore also assume leadership functions. Such innovations were not only potentially attractive but also conflictual. This is already impressively documented in the New Testament.

6. The Witness of Holistic Faith: Exclusive and Universal

Around AD 109/110, Pliny the Younger: lawyer, author and friend of the Emperor Trajan, crowned his political career when he was made governor of Bithynia–Pontus in Asia Minor (the northern part of modern Turkey). The situation had gotten out of hand, and as a reliable official it was his job to bring affairs back in order. Incidentally, he came into contact with the “problem” of the Christian movement. He turned to Trajan to ask for advice, and their correspondence is not only revealing regarding the legal status of Christians but also on their self-understanding and their way of life—and death. Much ink has been spilled on this correspondence, but for the purpose of this essay, I will let Pliny himself have his say (Pliny, *Epistulae* 10:96, trans. Walsh):

I have never attended hearings concerning Christians, so I am unaware what is usually punished or investigated, and to what extent. I am more than a little in doubt whether there is to be a distinction between ages, and to what extent the young should be treated no differently from the more hardened; whether pardon should be granted to repentance; whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name which should be punished. In the meantime, this is the procedure I have followed, in the cases of those brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they

were Christians. If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished . . . They maintained, however, that all that their guilt or error involved was that they were accustomed to assemble at dawn on a fixed day, to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to avoid acts of theft, brigandage, and adultery, not to break their word, and not to withhold money deposited with them when asked for it. When these rites were completed, it was their custom to depart, and then to assemble again to take food, which was however common and harmless . . . I found nothing other than a debased and boundless superstition. I therefore postponed the inquiry, and hastened to consult you, since this issue seemed to me to merit consultation, especially because of the number indicted, for there are many of all ages, every rank, and both sexes who are summoned and will be summoned to confront danger. The infection of this superstition has extended not merely through the cities, but also through the villages and country areas, but it seems likely that it can be halted and corrected.

Pliny is aware that the Christian movement attracted people of all ages, every rank, and both sexes. He cannot verify that they committed crimes (quite the opposite), but he is appalled by their obstinacy and stubbornness and calls their faith a superstition, i.e., a degraded cult or sect. Apparently, some Bithynian Christians were ready to die for their faith, which did not seem to bother Pliny. The early Christians' readiness for martyrdom is conspicuous. Already, the earliest reflections on the death of Jesus suggest that his followers need to be prepared to die as well. The importance of the martyrdoms of the first decades—Stephen, James, Peter, and Paul—can hardly be overestimated. They contributed decisively to the self-understanding of the Jesus movement, drawing a demarcation line between the faithful on the one hand and the persecutors and apostates on the other. Even if the number of persecuted and killed Christians was lower than the narratives indicate (Moss 2013; Rebillard 2020), they still reflect an attitude according to which faith has a value worth dying for. As Jan Bremmer (2021) recently argued:

[W]hen we see the attachment of the martyrs to Christ and the emotional descriptions of their interrogations, tortures, and deaths in some of the martyr Acts, it is clear that emotions must have played an important role in early Christianity . . . No other cult or religion in the contemporary ancient world knew a comparable devotion with worshipers prepared to die for their faith, except perhaps the Judaeans in their revolts against Rome in the 1st and 2nd centuries. (p. 249)

The readiness for martyrdom is an expression of the exclusive–universal and the eschatological nature of early Christianity; all areas of life, even the boundaries of life, are determined by faith. According to Adolf Von Harnack (Von Harnack 1908), “From the very outset Christianity came forward with a spirit of universalism, by dint of which it laid hold of the entire life of man in all its functions, throughout its heights and depths, in all its feelings, thoughts, and actions” (p. 513). A more recent voice, Bart Ehrman (2018), agrees, “One other feature of Christianity that made it different from all the pagan religions throughout the empire is that it encompassed numerous aspects of life that had always been kept distinct” (p. 127). From its very beginning, early Christianity entertained a “totalizing discourse” (Rives 2011), claiming that believers orient their whole existence exclusively to the new way of life. By contrast, “The pagan gods . . . are not jealous of one another; they form, as it were, an open society,” as historian and anthropologist Walter Burkert explains (Burkert 1987, p. 48). In a religious atmosphere in which elective cults vie for followers and religiously musical people assemble their patchwork religiosity, the early Jesus movement's claim to exclusivity also brought a reduction in complexity. According to these early movements, full membership in the church and in eschatological salvation

consists in a relationship of trust and loyalty (*pistis*) to the Creator and Redeemer—not in philosophical education, ethical perfection, esoteric knowledge, a mystery initiation, nor in belonging to a social class or a religious–ethnic group. This kind of religious allegiance: universalistic, exclusive, and eschatological, is a novelty in the religious landscape of antiquity. Faith as a new and distinct identity marker sums up the nature of Christ groups as networks of trust, held together by a strong sense of belonging, shared ethical values, and mutual reliability (horizontal axis), as well as by the opportunity to enter into a direct, personal relationship with God that lasts beyond death (vertical axis).

7. The Witness of the Spirit and the Spirit of Witnessing: Spirit and Scriptures

A final aspect, notoriously neglected in Continental European scholarship, is the factor of religious experiences. The Jesus movement understood itself as a spirit-driven movement. Believers observed and experienced manifestations of the Spirit, according to the early Christian texts. The extraordinary was normal. The New Testament reports an abundance of individual and collective experiences associated with the Spirit: Epiphanies of the risen Jesus, visions, prophecies, exorcisms, healings of the sick, ecstatic raptures, and glossolalia. Paul stresses that the Spirit also provides gifts of creation, i.e., natural abilities: Wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor 12:8), ministry, teaching, and exhortation (Rom 12:7–8). Those who believe receive the “fruit of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22–23).

It is not a coincidence that the last stop of our trip through the Ancient Mediterranean takes us to the African continent and, from there, back to Europe. Apuleius, philosopher and rhetorician of the 2nd century AD, lived in a city in the Roman province of Numidia (modern-day Algeria) but was a globetrotter who studied in Carthage and Athens and also came to Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt. He is most famous for his novel, *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*), an imaginative portrayal of the initiation of the story’s hero Lucius into the mystery of Isis in Cenchreae (near Corinth). In his less well-known philosophical work *De deo Socratis*, Apuleius brings to life the *daimonion* of Socrates, a supernatural voice unique to Socrates that purportedly gave him advice from time to time. Middle-Platonist philosophers in the 1st and 2nd century penned monographs on the *daimonion* of Socrates and created demonologies to reflect on the role of such inner voices in the human being. According to Apuleius,

[A] human being has no secret from those guardians, either within his mind or without; no, they involve themselves attentively in everything, see everything, learn everything, and dwell in the very recesses of the mind as conscience does. This being that I talk of is a personal guardian, single overseer, household watchman, private caretaker, intimate acquaintance, tireless observer, inescapable onlooker, inseparable witness, who reproves your bad deeds and approves your good ones. (Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis*, 16,5–9, trans. Jones)

The correspondences between the middle-Platonic “demons” and the Christian “Holy Spirit,” which appear striking at first glance, point to substantial differences and highlight the distinctiveness of early Christian pneumatology: While middle-Platonic demonology teaches a hierarchy and plurality of the demons/spirits with the *daimon* of Socrates ranking first, early Christian pneumatology knows but one divine Spirit. The personal *daimones* remain intermediate beings, never becoming an immediate influence or presence of the supreme God. By contrast, the Spirit in Christian understanding constitutes a direct connection between Creator and creature, carrying this idea to the extreme when the Spirit is described as interceding before God with groaning (Rom 8:26–27). Unlike the middle-Platonic individual *daimon* dwelling in a person, most forcefully in a wise man like Socrates, the Spirit in early Christianity functions as an equalizer, as it were, transcending ethnicity and gender, status, and lifeworld. The Spirit is democratized: all Christ-followers, it is believed, experience the Spirit in their reality of life. The Spirit is not merely an inner phenomenon but comes from outside and radically reconfigures the believers’ existence. “Such a transformative efficacy of the Spirit is without parallel in the Graeco-Roman

tradition. It is grounded in the Spirit's connection with a personal and universal God" (Feldmeier 2022, p. 128). Despite all necessary methodological restraint, it cannot simply be argued away that Spirit-talk in fact correlates with Spirit-experience and that religious experience was a decisive factor in the spread of the Jesus movement. Larry Hurtado (2000) points out: "The success of earliest Christianity and its appeal and credibility in the eyes of converts seem to have been heavily connected with its ability to provide religious experiences that correspond to its rhetoric of being 'gifted,' 'filled,' 'anointed,' and 'empowered' by the Spirit of God" (p. 193).

Though it seems counterintuitive at first glance: "The spirit takes form, materializes" (Lauster 2021, pp. 56–57)—not only in social forms but also in literary forms; a new kind of theology, a new self-understanding, and new experiences required new forms of expression. Christ groups, in distinction to mystery cults and other associations, became "early adopters of bookish practices" (Kloppenborg 2019, p. xiii). In fact, they creatively developed and reinvented existing literary genres such as the letter and the biography; Paul's letters represent a new shape of the epistolary genre in terms of length, addressees, and purpose, and soon after Paul penned his letters, Mark created a new literary genre: the Gospel (*euaggelion*). In the first decades of the Jesus movement, there was an apparent urge to literalize and reflect on its founding figure Jesus Christ and on the transformative experiences associated with him. Most interestingly, Christians danced out of line in their choice of medium. They preferred the codex over the scroll. If the illustrious library of Alexandria still existed in the times of Paul and Mark, it would have been stacked with scrolls rather than codices. "About 95 percent of extant second-century AD non-Christian copies of literary texts are bookrolls, and about 5 percent are codices. But at least 75 percent of all second-century Christian manuscripts of any text are codices" (Hurtado 2016, p. 134). Possibly, there was a general cultural trend toward the codex in the 1st century, but it was early Christianity that made it the spearhead of their movement. New wine is put into fresh wineskins. Like the later Reformation with its printing press, early Christianity was media avant-garde and the catalyst of a communications revolution.

8. Conclusions

In the 2nd century, the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* reflects on the way of life and self-understanding of the believers in Christ in their social and cultural context: "Yet while living in both Greek and barbarian cities according to each one's lot and following local customs with respect to clothing and food and the rest of life, they illustrate the admirable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship" (Diognetus 5,4, trans. Jefford 2013). These lines epitomize "the rallying cry . . . 'how do I live a lifestyle that reflects my faith?' " (Jefford 2013, p. 218)—a cry which is as relevant today as it was back then. The times are gone in which Christians could celebrate that "Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth" (Gibbon [1776] 1998, p. 244). The times are gone in which Christians could simply claim to have the better arguments for their faith. The times are gone in which Christians could rest on institutional stability and religious homogeneity. We need to move beyond a naïve philosophy of history, simplistic apologetics, and nostalgia for times past. In fact, some expressions of the rallying call of the first Christian generations might help us to become better witnesses in the twenty-first century (cf. Schliesser 2023).

I will briefly recapitulate the exemplary characteristics of early Christ groups discovered on this virtual tour from Italy to Africa with an attempt to leap over the ditch between past and present, giving voice to a multi-confessional cloud of witnesses.

1. Child abandonment, abortion, and abuse were soon and forcefully denounced by Christians. It can be suspected that the early Christian commitment to the life of the vulnerable and defenseless attracted attention. A simple ethic of the protection of life motivated not only mothers but also girls to consider joining the Jesus movement. Even today, cultural witness needs to recognize the importance of a "contrast ethic" that neither conforms to social mainstream nor adheres to a moralism remote from the

world. It aims for a provocative distinctiveness and divergent priorities, embodying what Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh (2016) has called “the deep solidarity of all human beings”: “The kind of church I dream of goes out into the world and helps to bind wounds by taking on the suffering of others into the suffering body of Christ. All people, Christian or not, are members or potential members of the body of Christ, as Dorothy Day liked to say” (p. 5).

2. Christian existence is an existence “between the times,” as it takes place retrospectively in the light of the Christ event and prospectively in the horizon of Christ’s return. In this cosmic interval, mundane contingencies such as status, ethnicity, and gender can no longer be decisive before God. It should deeply trouble Christian communities if they are no longer a mirror and microcosm of their neighborhood and if they lose contact with some segments of society. Former Lutheran Bishop Wolfgang Huber (2010) expresses his agony in these words: “For we do not know the sorrow of many people, nor their joy. We do not suspect the doubts they carry within them, but we are also unfamiliar with their firmness of faith. We do not appreciate the commitment of the elites and are speechless towards the excluded at the margins of society. Crossing milieu boundaries is what the church of freedom is called to do” (p. 71). One of the main challenges of churches in Europe is to be a corporeal witness of a new social imaginary.
3. Regardless of their self-understanding, Christian communities in Europe are commonly perceived as some kind of voluntary association. They have to respond to the same question as the first Christian communities: why should anyone seek to become a member of this group? Christ groups of the early days constantly negotiated status boundaries and gender roles, they met weekly not only to worship but also for table-fellowship, they cared for the underprivileged and engaged in intellectual conversation about their faith, they maintained relationships to other Christ groups in the region but also internationally, and they engaged in mission. These characteristics were quite distinctive in the Roman Empire, and this distinctiveness is, not least, based on the formative power of the Christian worldview. Quoting Patriarch Bartholomew, Eve Tibbs (2021) underlines the orthodox view of equality and inclusivity as a thoroughly theological idea: “The Kingdom of God is itself a welcoming and inclusive reality, and ‘the whole world is a sacred cathedral; no person is unordained for the kingdom, and no place is unhallowed in this world’ ” (p. 62).
4. Today’s visitors of the Artemision will be gravely disappointed. They will see remains of the temple’s foundations and a bit of rubble. The solitary column erected from composite remains is but a gloomy relic of a grand past. In many communities all over Europe, church steeples are no more than a memento to the formidable history of Christianity in the West. This might be the time when Christians are reminded that their beginnings were humble in terms of their outward representations but most extravagant in their self-understanding as the “body of Christ” and “temple of God.” They had neither power nor means to build temples. And they did not need to. The lack of one central building not only offered accessible points of contact with interested people of the family and professional network but also promoted the emergence of variegated expressions of church, leadership structures, and theologies. Gayle G. Koontz (2020, p. 183f.) recalls the anabaptist ecclesiology of “the church as the visible body of Christ—a community of yielded, regenerated, faithful, committed, baptized believers.” Developed in the sixteenth century, this vision could lead (not only Anabaptist) churches into the future, despite, or rather because of, its inherent fragility and plurality. Plurality can be celebrated and practiced as long as and insofar as it takes place in the light of Christ-faith: less provincialism, clericalism, and confessionalism and more mixed ecology, multi-professional leadership, and generous orthodoxy.
5. “Faith” (*pistis*), a scintillating term including belief, trust, faithfulness and much more took center stage in early Christianity. The discovery of faith in early Christianity

was a *new* discovery in the religious landscape of antiquity; there is an explosion of faith-talk in the New Testament. It is high time that Christ-faith is rediscovered, not only as a mode of receiving salvation, but as a mode of existence that embraces the whole human being and is at work in “networks of trust,” whose witness has the power to impact neighborhoods and all of society. Such communities are neither ashamed of their faith nor shun its costliness, but rather incarnate its provocative, reality-changing power. The site of action of such faith is not the pious soul but the public square. This has been argued and put into practice most perceptively by archbishop Rowan Williams (2013), summarized in his book *Faith in the Public Square*, in which he seeks “to find the connecting points between various public questions and the fundamental beliefs about creation and salvation” (p. 225).

6. As early Christianity was challenged to put its new wine into fresh wineskins, churches in Europe are challenged to rediscover their potential as culturally avant-garde in how they communicate. Inspired by the diverse expressions of Christian life in the early decades, they exercise experimental freedom in questions of organizational structure, meeting place, worship time, liturgy, and forms of communication. Also, faith and experience move closer together. Paul believed in the Spirit because he had experienced the Spirit. His theology is an expression of his experience. It is only fitting that an African theologian has his say in the end. Reflecting on the Holy Spirit in West African Christianity, Ghanaian Pentecostal exegete Michael Wandusim (2023) concludes: “No Holy Spirit, No Ghanaian Christianity.” One does not need to have the gift of prophecy to expand this assessment: no Holy Spirit, no European Christianity, and indeed, no World Christianity.

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