



Why study Early Christianity?

Do you have to be a history buff? Besides being in the list of courses required for seminarians, how is it relevant to our contemporary culture? This issue features brief reflections about our own faith from two different angles. The first has to do with our salvation articulated from the perspective of the Greek patristics, and the second concerns the process of our historical self-understanding.



What keeps me busy . . .

- Maria Verhoeff

Currently, I am preparing an article for the research program “Gemeenteopbouw en Gezagsstructuren” on the application of priestly terminology to the offices of the early church. The answer to the question “In what way is the use of priestly terminology justified?” will serve the ecumenical dialogue. Other related questions include, “Is the office holder a priest only in a metaphorical way, as offering spiritual sacrifices? And if so, what would still distinguish him from the priesthood of all believers?” I am still struggling with a lot of these questions.

Now, for my doctoral studies I spent the last two months focusing on patristic soteriology. How did the Greek fathers

understand deification or participation in God? This is especially interesting because the concept is so different from our western, juridical approach to understanding our salvation. The idea of deification in Eastern theology is often written off as a kind of mysticism, as if it had claimed that the believers would be ‘absorbed’ into God. Patristic writers including Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and many others, however, held to a far more personal understanding of deification; it was conceived as sharing in the personal communion with the Persons of the Trinity, based on the reality of our adoption as a child of God. Until now I’ve only read secondary literature, and I look forward to the lectures on this subject by Dr. Fairbairn. I will then enjoy reading the primary sources of one of the church fathers named above.

Studying the church fathers is for me to discover their ideas, thoughts, and concepts which otherwise would receive too little attention in our own day. Indeed these are the fathers of the church, and how they approached many issues, helps me to get a better grasp of Scripture. So it keeps me busy with pleasure!

History as Challenge

- Geertjan Zuidwegt

When asked, I would prompt “The Early Church: History *as* Challenge” as a more appropriate title for the upcoming ETA conference on early Christianity. The relationship between history and challenge as suggested in the present title “The early Church: History *or* Challenge” appeals to a popular feeling of dichotomy between history and significance.

During my studies here I gradually came to see that this dichotomy hardly exists, rather, history and church tradition present a direct and radical challenge to our faith. The uncritical appeal to Scripture I was brought up with—without any investigation into its earliest development and reception—started to disturb me. It is in this process that I developed an interest in the Early Church as presenting the first reception and apprehension of Jesus and his teachings. In RCEC I would like to research toward enriching our understanding of Early Christianity and thereby our understanding of our own faith.

In the ECL project I will write an article for the first part of the book, elucidating the nature of the particular “grid” through which many see the Second century Christianity, the grid that results from the victory of the Church with Constantine. Important aspects under consideration will be the influence of politics and power in church, church tradition, and historiography in the church. While in much of modern research socio-political factor is the primary or even the sole explanation for this “Constantinian shift,” I will investigate the unique nature and the role of the “Christian religion,” as a significant factor of its own in history. I believe the results of research like this can help us better understand the development of orthodoxy in the first centuries of Christianity and assist us in our own process of belief-formation.



From this issue on we are inviting students and faculty to write notes, annotations, and reviews, either on some of the current books (published, 2000 and beyond) broadly on Early Christianity or on topics that you find helpful for your own specific study projects.

Holmberg, Bengt, *Sociology and the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

This volume is one of several voices calling for a major revision of sociological studies of early Christianity. Trained as a sociologist and with a Ph.D. in NT, he reviews several areas of sociological analyses of the 70's and 80's and offers substantial critiques on the basis of sociological methodology (often harmonizing with a more evangelical point of view). For instance, after first describing the need for sociology in the NT, he discusses the shifting consensus that the first Christians were probably on a higher social level, while also suggesting several ways to improve on this new consensus. Second, he analyzes scholarly depictions of Christianity as a millenarian sect, pointing to the limitations of both the millenarian model as well as the church-sect. Earlier sociological methods, it turns out, were often based on medieval or 20th century studies, which cannot help but distort 1st century evidence, since the models were not sufficiently cross-cultural. Third, the connections between beliefs and social world, between symbolic world and social structures receive critical attention, showing e.g. how the multi-functionality of beliefs makes it impossible to draw one-to-one correlations between beliefs and social structures. This study is helpful to get acquainted with late 20th century social science research in

the NT, and also with its substantial limitations.

Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

This book seems like a direct response to Holmberg's call for revision. Digesting epigraphic inscriptions 'in bulk,' Harland (as well as Kloppenborg, Ascough and others) draws from another layer of (and often neglected) evidence for social structures compared to what we usually find in literary texts. He is able to reconstruct social structures in Asia Minor, his area of focus, offering a contemporaneous social model to compare with synagogue and church. Harland, too, is a critic of 20th century scholarship as he debunks one long-held scholarly consensus after another. Associations are lively institutions which participate in civic life, rather than last ditch efforts to halt the decline of the Greek polis; people could be part of several different associations, each with different social networks, so that Jews or Christians would not be expected to cut all association ties besides synagogue or church; associations should be described by the social network into which they tap, not by a stated purpose (religious, professional, etc.); gods and emperor were honored at the same banquets where social gatherings took place, revealing the mix of religious, civic and professional elements in many associations; there is no such thing as 'typical' Christian terminology for church organization, since *ekklesia*, *presbyteros*, *diakonos* and even *synagoge* are all in evidence among other associations; Jews and Christians honored the emperor, as their inscriptions and literature demonstrate, without worshipping the emperor as god; the nature of persecution of the early Christians is to be found in their monotheism, rather than in refusal to participate in emperor worship (which served at the most as a litmus test to positively identify a Christ-believer).

Harland's book is a significant advance over earlier social scientific studies of the NT world, since he develops models of associations and civic interaction, not based on sociological models of other cultures or eras, but based on epigraphic evidence of the very time period and region discussed. This opens the way for better social scientific studies with models that carry less risk of distorting the evidence, and with opportunity to conduct regional or even local studies instead of covering the whole Mediterranean world with vague generalizations. For those studying the social world of early Christianity this study is a landmark one cannot avoid, both in terms of its social models as in terms of its methodology.

- Jack Barentsen

RCEC discussion mtgs are open to all (✓ your calendar)

Mar 15	Apr 19	May 31
Sept 6	Oct 11	Nov 15

Place: Staff Room in Peda

Time: Thursdays 13:00-14:00

Please join us with sac lunch

RCEC is designed to encourage research in a variety of areas in Early Christianity, and therefore inviting any ETF student who may be interested at whatever stage in this area. Publications, lecture presentations, discussion meetings, and other events will unfold as we are building a base for ongoing research among the ETF student body, alumni, and faculty.



• **Business mtgs:**

14:00-15:00 (in Dec - TBA)