

A Chaos Theory of Christian Origins and the Public Stake in Religion

Bruce Woll

Is it possible to acknowledge a constructive public stake in the ambiguous resources of religion that is not in any way conditional upon consensus or confession? The events of 9/11 slammed into our consciousness the fact that that the public, in the widest sense of that term, has a stake in religion, its practices, beliefs, and traditions. Religion refuses to stay confined within the private domain. It has returned with a vengeance to public life. But the discussion of the public stake in religion, even after 9/11, remains impoverished. One reason is the constricting influence of Christianity's confessional, monistic model of religion, the dominant model of religion in this society. Another reason is the constraining influence of secularism, which is suspicious, for good reason, of acknowledging any public stake in religion.

It is not only adherents to one or another religious confession who think secularism is being invoked today in ways that diminish the public ethos. For example, atheist William Connolly charges that in recent years secularism has increasingly shown itself to be "insufficiently alert to the layered density of political thinking and judgment," to embody "unacknowledged elements of immodesty in itself," and to exhibit "strains of dogmatism," claiming "to provide a single, authoritative basis of public reason and/or public ethics that governs all reasonable citizens" (1999: 4-5). But minimalist alternatives to secularism, such as the appeal to a civic religion or a minimal moral code leave out the thick, visceral, narrative, ritual, imaginative, and inventive elements which give a religious heritage its force.

The effect of these constraints is that discussion of the public stake in the ambiguous moral-mythic resources of religion tends to be dominated by a handful of conventional stances: suspicion, hostility, or indifference, on the one hand, or confessional, communitarian, ecumenical, or civic religion advocacy on the other. Common to all is the idea that religion is regarded as a source of consensus, if not creedal then at least moral. As a result, they all tend to devalue religious multiplicity.

The central question here concerns the quality of our public-political culture, the range, depth, and character of its moral-mythic resources. Must we choose between secularist or civic religion impoverishment on the one hand and confessionally conditioned richness on the other?

If one of the reasons for the cramped nature of our discussion of the public ethos has to do with the influence of Christianity as our dominant model of religion, then the public has a stake in the ways in which Christianity is represented, such as the ways in which its origins are pictured. The study of Christian origins, however, has also suffered from the tendency to devalue religious diversity and inventiveness that characterizes discussion of the contemporary public stake in religion. Even though recent scholarship on Christian origins has recognized multiplicities and differences from the beginning it has still tended to operate with the notion of a single, unique starting point, a Jesus figure who is *sui generis*. As a result, it has become disappointingly sterile, unable, for example, to break free of the tired Quest for the Historical Jesus, the two-centuries long effort to sort out what can be said about the figure of Jesus with some degree of critical certainty and to pin down that *sui generis* figure.

The argument of this essay is that Donald Akenson, a Canadian historian, has made an important contribution to this discussion in the form of a radical redescription of Christian origins, one that celebrates its mythic richness, inventiveness and multiplicity. Akenson is a disciplinary outsider who comes to the study of Christian origins after a lifetime as a professional historian specializing in modern Irish Diaspora history. He is no stranger to politics and religion, as his 1992 prize-winning study, *God's People: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* makes clear. But he is not a specialist when it comes to Christian origins. His account is best approached, therefore, alongside the equally radical work of an insider, Burton Mack. Their work, I suggest, signals a new era in the study of the historical beginnings of Christianity. Furthermore, both make clear how the question of Christian origins bears on contemporary political democracy.

Akenson and Mack have thrown down the gauntlet before the Jesus Seminar, the group that has championed the latest Quest. Both agree that trying to explain the origins of Christianity historically in terms of some particular quality of Jesus that can be uncovered by historical methods has come up empty-handed and should be abandoned, once and for all. Both take the focus off an imaginary single, pure originating point and step back to reframe the question in expansive ways. Both free up the study of Christian origins from the premise of a *sui generis* beginning. Mack goes a step further than Akenson, suggesting that there was nothing out of the ordinary about Jesus. Nevertheless, both make it possible to conceive of what could be described as a chaos theory of Christian origins.

Chaos theory says that in complex systems, such as the weather or any historical process a tiny event can make a monumental difference, can cascade into global effects. A butterfly flapping its wings in a certain way off the coast of Africa causes a trivial change in the state of the atmosphere. Over a period of time that tiny change cascades until a hurricane flattens the east coast of America a few weeks later. Likewise, instead of starting from the premise that to explain the momentous consequences of the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire one must posit a momentous cause, usually conceived of in terms of something unique or at least extraordinary about the founding figure of Jesus, a chaos theory would find no need to posit some extraordinary origin.

In a direct reference to Mack, Akenson explicitly rejects the conclusion that “because we at present know so little of the religious ideas of Yeshua of Nazareth that, therefore, Yeshua himself was so very little.”¹ He does hold that “if Saul has it right, Yeshua of Nazareth was an ordinary religious man of the later Second Temple era,” but “one who had only one truly distinguishing characteristic, but that one so intense as forever to defy direct description: an incandescent holiness that burned beyond his burial” (*Saint Saul*, p. (183). But nothing in Akenson’s account is inconsistent with Mack’s conclusion that the explanation for Christian origins cannot be reduced to some special or unique quality belonging to the early figure of Jesus. Akenson can say that “although all of the scriptural discussion of Jesus seems to be dependent upon him, in fact his existence as an historical entity depends upon the scriptures: *no writers then no Jesus*” (54. Emphasis in the original), a point which Akenson repeats (210).

Despite their significant agreement, there are striking differences in professional background, audience, and tone. Mack is a specialist who has published extensively in

the field of Christian origins. He writes for fellow specialists. Akenson, on the other hand, directly addresses the “educated non-specialist,” while at the same time engaging specialists on their own ground. He is a master at translating the work of experts in the field for the public. And he is not only clear he is also interesting. Both Mack and Akenson are passionate, but where the tone of Mack’s work is harsh and negative, the voice of a prosecutor bringing an indictment, Akenson’s is affirming, enthusiastic, pulsing with pleasure. Akenson’s two books are a rare combination of scholarship and joy.

Mack

The central contribution Mack makes to a nonconfessional public appropriation of Christian religious resources is to adopt a comparative, ethnographically based theory of myth as his framework for redescribing Christian origins.² His use of myth is important in two ways. First, in place of the quest for “the beginning where the pure, clean impulse of an uncontaminated Jesus can rectify and rejuvenate Christian faith” (2001: 39), Mack focuses the story of Christian origins instead precisely on the mythmaking practices of the many Christian groups and movements evident from the beginning. “To read these texts only in the interest of the quest to know the historical Jesus,” he suggests, “has been to misread them, to misuse them. They simply do not contain the secrets of the historical Jesus for which scholars have been searching. Early Christians were not interested in the *historical* Jesus” (2001: 40).

¹ *Saint Saul*, p. 244.

² Mack takes his theory of religion and specifically his concept of myth from the extensive work of Jonathan Z. Smith, one of the foremost students and theorists of religion today. Compare, for example, Mack, 2001: 91, 70-74, and Smith, 2004, 18.

The effect of this shift in focus is as if one were to switch from a close-up to a wide-angle lens to view a mosaic. If you are trying to examine a specific object or figure, the close-up lens may bring individual stones into sharp relief, but a given object or figure may be lost to view. A wide-angle lens on the other hand will bring into view the whole picture. In the case of the early Christian scene, it will bring into focus the rich variety of “movements, ideologies, and mythic figures of Jesus of that early Christian social-scape” (2001: 35). And rather than ranking them in relation to some presumed pure original, they are all accorded equal status as evidence of original Christian mythmaking. Such an approach for the first time brings the study of Christian origins into public orbit without any confessional conditions.

The second contribution Mack makes to a richer public political ethos is to recognize that mythmaking is an essential element of all societies, *modern* included. Myths define a group’s place and identity in relation to a larger world (2001: 69). They animate societies. Societies cannot do without them. The term “myth” in this sense is not a pejorative. Myths are not true or false, but living or dead.

This use of myth is, first of all, a political definition. It fits that of political theorist, Sheldon Wolin, in his study of what he calls “political monotheism” (and “political polytheism”) in the historical and mythic founding of the United States and in the ongoing re-enactment of that founding in the present.³ Wolin defines myth as stories a collective tells about itself.

Unfortunately, when Mack turns from origins to trace the way in which the Christian myth has played out historically the force of his contribution is weakened. The

static, sterile picture he draws of the Christian myth after Constantine is in sharp contrast to the animated, experimental movement, “bubbling with excitement,” in the first three centuries. According to Mack, the Christian myth developed into a monocratic worldview characterized by a “predilection for monism,” or “mono-thinking,” a “preference for the singular over the many.”

This incurably monocratic, antidemocratic culture has, in Mack’s account, scarcely changed in the last sixteen centuries and as such “is simply not adequate as a mythic imagination for the social formations that need to be constructed in order to assure human well-being in a multiethnic, multicultural world. It cannot be used to celebrate the high moral purposes of the American experiment in nation building, and it cannot be used as the major theme for the history of that experiment” (2001: 191-192).

What is troubling about Mack’s study is that the monocratic myth looms so large in his telling that it comes close to squeezing out even the possibility of any other version of the tradition. “The *early* Jesus movements and the *first* congregations of Jesus *christus*,” he says, “were *all* driven by what might be called a social vision, the outlines of which are formally quite similar.” And in the same paragraph he refers to “the basic ideology of the Jesus movement” (2001: 163. Emphasis added). How does this square with his insistence that the various ways of imagining Jesus, which we find at the beginning, were “incompatible with one another” (2001: 36)?

Beyond the question of the earliest stages of Christian history, however, the notion that a single logic defines *the* legacy of *the* Christian myth strains credibility. Christian fundamentalist groups tend to make the same claim for their particular reading

³ Political theorist Sheldon Wolin describes myths as “stories that collectivities tell about themselves or have told to them. Their main purpose is to fix certain meanings about matters that are alleged to be

of “the Gospel,” part company with and often anathematize every other Christian group. According to one count, there are some thirty-four thousand distinct institutions, denominations, religions, and sects that lay claim to the Christian legacy. Are we to believe that Mack’s monocratic myth underlies all of them in any meaningful sense? Are they all, for example, equally incompatible with a democratic polity?

Mack’s description, in fact, is a photographer’s negative, a reverse image of the fundamentalist’s self-image. The latter’s boast is Mack’s indictment. What the fundamentalist calls Truth, Mack calls “myth,” here using the word in the strictly pejorative sense.

But Mack himself calls attention to at least one alternative reading. African-Americans fighting slavery and later fighting for civil rights “did so”, he says, “by turning the Bible into a charter for liberation” In their struggles “yet another reading of the Christian myth emerged, this one reaching back into the Old Testament to pit the god who ordained freedom against the God who ordained slavery” (2001: 187).

Akenson

The inventiveness and diversity of Christian mythmaking, overshadowed in Mack despite his promising beginning, comes into the full light of day in Akenson. Five features of Akenson’s history, each of which departs significantly from establishment scholarship, serve to cast the inventiveness and multiplicity of Christian origins into sharp relief.

First, he overturns the traditional picture of a moribund Judaism. In *Surpassing Wonder*, Akenson’s history of the formative centuries of Judaism, the leitmotif is

fundamental because they pertain to the identity and flourishing of the whole society” (Wolin 1989: 2).

invention, creativity, and animation. This picture is drawn vividly in his follow-up study of the historical Jesus. Paul and Jesus, he says,

lived in an era that was the most inventive, the most imaginative, most ideationally fecund in matters of religion of any time that is adequately recorded in human history. . . . The perpetual swirl of new ideas, new sects, and the splintering and recombination of old ideas and older factions, is dizzying. Take the twentieth-century American propensity to create new religious movements and to borrow and combine disparate concepts, and compress that amount of creativity into a population one-fiftieth its number . . . and one has an idea what it must have been like. Try to conceive of a mental world so rich with ideas, prophets, factions, priests, savants, and god-drunk fanatics that it was the equivalent of a night-sky kept alight by thousands and thousands of fire-flies, brief-lived, incandescent, luminous. That's what Yeshua [Jesus] and Saul [Paul] witnessed" (2000: 15).

This is the opposite of the common stick-figure picture of the Judaism into which Jesus was born: static, orthodox, and "legalistic," to use the pejorative Christian theological platitude. The idea that Second Temple Judaism was too diverse to fit under the umbrella notion of a normative Judaism is not original with Akenson, but no one has depicted this diversity as vividly as Akenson.⁴

Is this empty hyperbole? Is Akenson willfully turning a blind eye to the traditionalism almost everyone else has seen? Perhaps this is his way of compensating for Christian anti-Semitism, which has certainly played a role in such portraits? Such explanations would overlook the critical fact that Akenson does not deny the traditionalism of Judaism. On the contrary, in a second departure from conventional biblical scholarship, he repudiates "the largely unconscious but pervasive, almost instinctual belief in modern biblical studies that *authors* and *editors* are separate categories of human beings" (2000: 24). Invention and tradition, innovation and

⁴ Jacob Neusner is the primary figure here (See Akenson, 2000: 49). Akenson also cites the support for this view in Norman Golb's account of the Dead Sea Scrolls. (See Akenson, 1998: 201, with reference to Golb, 1995).

conservation, or, as I would add, myth and history can be the work of one and the same writer. The Genesis-Kings history in the form that we have it, for example, is “a mixture of collecting and editing old material,” in which the author added new items, tossing out some and integrating all the material that was kept (2000: 61). It is worth noting in passing that this kind of work, which Akenson calls “world-making,” fits Mack’s concept of mythmaking.

The relationship of invention to tradition is not arbitrary. The four hundred pages of *Surpassing Wonder* are a text-by-text demonstration of the rules that were followed in the writing of these works. The body of rules that Akenson finds at work in this literature make up what he calls a “grammar of invention.” One rule, for example, is “never admit to creativity.” Another is, “do not claim authorship.”

A third departure from conventional scholarship lies in the fact that instead of treating Judaism as “background” to Christianity, Akenson reverses the perspective, bringing Judaism into the foreground. *Surpassing Wonder* is not primarily an account of Christian origins but of Judaism’s origins. Instead of stopping with the founding of Christianity, however, thus relegating Judaism to the status of an “intertestamental” status, interrupting chapters of the real story, *Surpassing Wonder* continues with the establishment of Rabbinic Judaism and the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud, carrying the story through to the sixth century CE. The story of Christian origins becomes a chapter, two chapters actually, within the story of Judaism’s origins.

When he turns attention specifically to the Christian texts, to Christian origins, a fourth dramatic departure from conventional scholarship comes into view. The decisive event in the formation of Christianity, in Akenson’s account, is *not* the birth, life, and

death of Jesus. It is the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred some forty years after the death of Jesus.

In Jewish history, the Jewish War of 66-72 CE during which the Jerusalem temple was destroyed has always been regarded as a watershed event, marking the divide between two eras, Second Temple Judaism before, and Rabbinic Judaism after. Akenson follows this tradition, and then some. In his view, given that the Jesus movement was one of these multiple Judahisms,⁵ the Jewish War was as decisive a watershed event for the Christian church as it was for Judaism. “To use the word ‘trauma’ to describe what occurred would be to miniaturize the event. A Krakatoa-magnitude eruption blasted stone from stone; darkness covered the land; and the rich world of multiple Judahisms [Second Temple Judaism] came to an end” (2000: 51).

The Destruction overshadows the divide between Jesus and Paul, which many New Testament scholars have seen as the first major watershed. The differences between Jesus and Paul fade into the background historically when compared to the fact that both of them belonged to the rich pre-Destruction culture. By contrast, the four canonical Gospels, along with Acts, *in their subsequent form*, belong on the post-Destruction side of the cultural, political, and religious divide, composed, in fact, in response to the Destruction. They come from and reflect an altogether different universe from the one in which Jesus and Paul lived. “The post-70 world – the world that saw the creation of the Christian scriptures and of the Rabbinic texts – was so different from that of Saul and of Yeshua as to be beyond mere comparison: one religious universe had ended, another had begun” (2000: 51).

Few if any origins scholars have emphasized the substantive, institutional, cultural, and religious importance of the Destruction for the very sense of identity of the early Jesus movements. Akenson has, in his bold, fresh narrative strategy wrenched the early years of the “Yeshua” movement out of their familiar Western setting and made it clear that they belong to the story of “Judahism.” If invention, animation, creativity, and freshness characterize the Judaism of the first century, then the inventiveness of the first Christian texts no longer sets it off from Judaism. Rather, these texts become one more variant in the fecund “Pool of Siloam.”

Akenson’s fifth major departure from previous scholarship is his argument that the letters of Paul should be given precedence over all four Gospels as well as Acts as the “touchstone” for judging the value of all other known sources. This conclusion follows directly from the pivotal role of the Destruction as a divide. Paul’s letters are the only sources we have which without dispute fall on the pre-Destruction side. They are the only sources that *share* the particular world of the actual Jesus figure.

Akenson’s view of Paul runs broadside into the flotilla of establishment scholarship. It is important, therefore, to note what is and what is not remarkable about the claim. Akenson’s skepticism regarding the historical value of the canonical Gospels and Acts is *not* remarkable. It is precisely establishment scholarship that has dismantled bit by bit the basis for any presumption in favor of the Gospels as sources by demonstrating that nothing in the Gospels can be taken *at face value* as a reliable account of the historical Jesus. All four shaped their accounts in response to the circumstances at the time of their composition, circumstances that included the destruction of the Temple.

⁵ “Judahism” is one of many terms Akenson uses to disrupt anachronistic habits of reading post-Destruction concepts, ideas, and images back into pre-Destruction times. Another such term is the Hebrew

It is precisely establishment scholarship that has engaged in what appears at times to be a desperate search beyond the canonical Gospels for any shreds of evidence that might shed light on the matter.

It is Akenson's claims regarding Paul that are unconventional. Paul's letters are typically dismissed with the observation that Paul himself seems to have had very little interest in the figure of the pre-resurrection Jesus and did not have much to say about him. But in the hands of the Quest scholars not much is left of the Gospels that can be regarded as reliable information about Jesus either. And Paul offers what none of the Gospels provide, a pre-Destruction witness who shared the same world as Jesus. It makes perfect sense, then, to consider Paul's letters.

Conclusion

In the beginning, according to Mack and Akenson, there is multiplicity, not singularity, multiplicity without a single, pure, *sui generis* originating point. Original multiplicity without one single Jesus figure that can be recovered as the explanatory cause of Christianity subverts original authority. That is what makes their work a valuable heuristic model, or tool to think with, about the public stake in religious pluralism. It is the renunciation of presumptive authority lodged in religious tradition that frees it for public appropriation. The value of a religious legacy lies in its richness, not its rightness, in the possibilities, textures, and images its myth and ritual suggest, rather than in its right answers.

In the current political climate, when the mythmaking machinery of Hollywood and the advertising industry has been honed to perfection and is merging, with less and

less accountability, with politico-religious propaganda machines, it seems like pouring oil on a blazing fire to urge *increased* attention to myth in the public sphere. But the response to runaway mythomania cannot be to bury our heads in the sand by pretending mythmaking can be excised from politics, leaving only “rational” discourse.

The contention of this essay is that mythmaking can, and must, be held accountable. Here again Akenson’s work offers a model, by tracking the rules that controlled mythmaking in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, rules that, as we have noted, made up a “grammar” of invention. Accountable invention today follows different rules. Our grammar of invention, as exemplified by the historiographic work of Mack and Akenson, makes use of all the methods and tools of critical historiography. It is anything but arbitrary. The same patient, laborious turning over of the soil, the archives, records, traces left behind, that nourishes new vision, also nourishes the questions, doubts, and critical re-search that holds vision accountable. The moral passion of skeptical historiography undermines idolatrous constructs that turn vision into dogma, hope into intolerance, and confidence into rigidity. It is precisely their insistence on the canons of critical historiography that grounds the radical work of Mack and Akenson for example.

Despite their achievement, however, neither Mack nor Akenson bring out the moral ambiguity of Christian mythmaking. Neither of them do justice to the potential of myth to be put to opposite epistemological, moral, and political uses. As already observed, Mack’s account of monolithic Christian myth leaves almost no room for it to function as an oppositional political or cultural resource. The brilliant spotlight Akenson sheds on religious invention and multiplicity is consistent with the idea of morally contradictory christianities, since moral conflict has after all been one of the engines of

religious invention. But his enthusiastic celebration of invention and diversity does not allow their morally dark side to come into view.

The record flatly contradicts the notion that Christianity has ever provided any society with an unambiguous moral consensus. Christianity, on just about every moral issue in history, has found vociferous, militant adherents on all sides, from slavery, to civil rights, to anti-Semitism, to the Cold War, adherents, who promoted their contradictory positions in the name of Jesus, God, and the Church, promoted by leaders, not merely isolated individuals.

The moral ambiguity of the Christian tradition is not occasional, or confined to marginal matters. It goes deep, all the way down, all the way back. A case can and has been made that the idea of monotheism has played a positive moral role historically. But the “jealous” God has also been invoked to play a morally vicious role as well, legitimating intolerance, bigotry, violence, and murder. It has united, but it has also divided. It has healed, but it has also been invoked to commit violence. If it has played a role for good, it has also played a role in evil.

As for democracy, if Christian beliefs and practices have been invoked in support of democratic principles and values, the enemies of democracy in such contests have over and over again invoked the same Christian tradition. If Christianity is to be given credit as one of the sources of modern liberal democracy, it must in all fairness be assigned the blame for many anti-democratic polities.

The lesson is that religion, Christian or any other, must *earn its way*. It cannot lay claim to a morally privileged voice. It cannot enter the public arena with any presumptive

moral authority. Christian traditions are too important, too valuable, to be left to Christians.

A superb example of how an approach that meets these conditions can use the materials of Christian myth to nourish a democratic, anti-monocratic, political ethos is provided by non-Christian, indeed, atheist, William Connolly. In *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Connolly 1993) Connolly reinforces Mack's view concerning the monocratic influence of Christian myth on American political thought and practice. His explicitly a-theistic, critical readings of three texts from the Christian mythic heritage, Augustine's *Confessions*, *Job*, and the myth of *Genesis* are directed against the presence of the "Augustinian imperative" in political liberal thought. At the same time, however, Connolly acknowledges "cautiously drawing sustenance" from particular strands within the thought of Augustine (1993: 132) in order to cultivate precisely a democratic alternative to Augustinian "mono-tonists," who claim a "monopoly of mystery" (1993: 113). Connolly is after an ethos of "care for an enlarged diversity of life in which plural constituencies co-exist in more creative ways than sustained by a communitarian idea of harmony or a liberal idea of tolerance" (1993: 151).⁶

It is only by renouncing privilege, authority, and position, that the moral, ethical, imaginative, institutional, and practical resources of a religious heritage, in short, its *mythic* resources, become accessible to public thought and decision-making, and in fact, may *acquire* authority in particular circumstances and in response to certain questions,

⁶ Another powerful use of Christian origins for political theorizing is to be found in Hannah Arendt's reference to the "miracle-working faculty" of Jesus in connection with her concept of action and "natality" in her stunning chapter on action in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998: 246-247). A third striking

just as any other resource. Authority is not given. It must be constructed, negotiated, deserved, “earned” as the Smith-Barney ad says.

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