

DIE FRÜHEN CHRISTEN

HARTMUT LEPPIN

DIE FRÜHEN
CHRISTEN

VON DEN ANFÄNGEN BIS KONSTANTIN



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UNLIKE THE PAULY-WISSOWA AND THE FIRST EDITION of the *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, the latter has a proper lemma ‘Christianity’ since the second edition of 1970.¹ Naturally, the two most recent authors, Jill Harries and Gillian Clark, also want to inform the readers about early Christianity. That is not the best part of this lemma which, like the previous, somewhat pious one by the late William Frend (1916-2005), is better on the later stages than on the beginning of the Christian movement. It is obvious that ancient historians have long had trouble in finding ways to integrate Christianity into the history of the Roman Empire. The best exception to this rule was Robin Lane Fox’s attractive *Pagans and Christians* (1987), although perhaps somewhat more favorable to

1. Harries and Clark, 2012.

the former than the latter. It is therefore a great pleasure to be able to welcome a book on the first centuries of Christianity until Constantine that is written by an ancient historian from a sympathetic but also critical perspective. Hartmut Leppin (1963) is one of Germany's most distinguished ancient historians, whose work has been repeatedly awarded prizes, amongst which the prestigious Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz-Preis (2011). So how does he approach the subject and what do we learn?

Leppin does not give us a linear narrative, but his aim is to show how the Christians adapted themselves to the world in which they lived without recurring to a teleological approach that culminates in Constantine. As Jesus was not a Christian, he leaves him aside, but his Prologue starts with the experience of the resurrection, as it was a subject of interest for the earliest Christians. Subsequently, he discusses how Christians defined themselves against pagans and Jews (Ch. 1), the ways Christians organised themselves and their authorities (Ch. 2), the everyday life of the Christians, from sexuality to secular and religious entertainment (Ch. 3), and their relationship to the political powers (Ch. 4).

In his book, Leppin offers many striking vignettes, and it is one of its attractions that he gives us a polyphonous impression of early Christianity. He persuasively applies the Wittgensteinian concept of "family resemblance" to the formulation of who was an early Christian in order to be as inclusive as possible.² As such, most Christians would have accepted Jesus as a very special figure next to God, rejected animal sacrifice and performed baptism and the Eucharist, although in many different ways. Leppin rejects the term "Christianities" and is reticent in using "Judaism", as the former suggests local borders where these often did not yet exist, just as the later suggests an often non-existing uniformity. Given his sensitivity to terms, it is not surprising that Leppin also avoids using "Gnosticism", but prefers "the Gnostic spectrum".

For his sources, Leppin uses contemporary texts as much as possible, both canonical and apocryphal. An exception is the *Traditio apostolica*, which, although being an amalgam of ordinances of several centuries, even up to the fourth or fifth century, also contains earlier material.³ Admittedly, it is impossible, as he stresses, to list all the secondary literature in a field that yearly produces hundreds of contributions.⁴ Still, he succeeds in giving a plausible picture of this important heritage of antiquity and in bringing to life the *Fremdheit des Vertrauten* of those early followers of Jesus.

2. For the concept, see Ginzburg, 2004.

3. See now Messner, 2016-2017.

4. In my review, I will limit myself therefore to pointing to some additional recent literature.

In the Prologue (23-31), Leppin starts with the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is typical of his approach that he compares Jewish and pagan parallels, such as Enoch and Romulus, in order to elucidate the *Verständnishorizont* of the contemporaries.⁵ He also rightly notes that the resurrection was a bone of contention for the early Christians, who certainly were not unanimous in its interpretation.⁶ All Christians, however, like many of their contemporaries, believed in an immortality of the soul and most of them in an hereafter with rewards for the faithful and punishments of the sinners, such as pictured in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Yet as the belief in the immediate return of Jesus lost its credibility, Christians had to focus on the here and now without, however, losing sight of the life hereafter. To be an early Christian, Leppin concludes, was not an easy matter.

But what made somebody a Christian? Leppin begins with baptism (23-42), which was an individual decision by which people joined the Christian congregation, but at the same time put at risk their ties with families and neighbourhoods, whose festivals they were now supposed to avoid. It is typical for Leppin's approach that he also pays attention to those of the Gnostic spectrum who slighted the christening. In other words, it was not the ritual itself, which was not that different from many pagan types of washing, but its consequences that now put the Christian at risk of persecutions.

Baptism enabled the Christians to participate in the Eucharist (43-54), the main act of the Christian services, although teaching was also an important part. Many Christians in Asia Minor performed the Eucharist with water instead of wine. Yet the Greek novelist Achilles Tatius, who wrote in Asia Minor around 160, clearly knew of a performance with wine together with the institution narrative,⁷ a narrative that seems to have been absent from most early celebrations.

This Christian celebration separated the Jesus followers from the Jews (54-68), as the former met on Sundays and celebrated together with non-Jews. Relatively early, the Jesus followers were now called "Christians", a name they only gradually adopted and long remained the term used by outsiders.⁸ I would not say, though, that Ignatius was the first to use the terms *Christianismós* and *Ioudaismós*. Recent studies have

5. For the parallels, see now the learned study of Cook, 2018; see also Bremmer, 2018.

6. Cf. Kinzig, 2013.

7. Cf. Friesen, 2014, but see also Bowersock, 1994, pp. 125-132. Friesen discusses Achilles Tatius II 2, 5 – 3, 1: και ὁ Διόνυσος ἔφη: "Τοῦτό ἐστιν ὀπώρας ὕδωρ, τοῦτό ἐστιν αἷμα βότρυος". ἀγεί πρὸς τὴν ἄμπελον ὁ θεὸς τὸν βουκόλον, καὶ τῶν βοτρυῶν λαβῶν ἅμα καὶ θλίβων καὶ δεικνύς τὴν ἄμπελον, "Τοῦτο μὲν ἐστίν", ἔφη, "τὸ ὕδωρ, τοῦτο δὲ ἡ πηγὴ". ὁ μὲν οὖν οἶνος οὕτως ἐς ἀνθρώπους παρήλθεν, ὡς ὁ Τυρίων λόγος. Ἑορτὴν δὲ ἄγουσιν ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνῳ τῷ θεῷ.

8. See, most recently, van der Lans and Bremmer, 2017 and Bremmer, 2017a, pp. 7-12.

demonstrated that the traditional dating of Ignatius is wrong and that he should be assigned to the period of 160-170.⁹ That means that both terms were probably coined by Marcion, as has recently been persuasively argued.¹⁰ In any case, the terms show that the ‘parting of the ways’ was well on its way in the middle of the second century. We can see this clearly in Justin Martyr, to whom Leppin dedicates several interesting pages, but also in Marcion, who may well have been very influential in this separation process between Jews and Jesus followers.

Marcion’s textual work on the Gospels and the letters of Paul may have also stimulated the increasing authority of the Gospels and the writings of the Old and the New Testament (equally a coinage of Marcion). Yet the borders between Jews and Christians long remained porous. Of several second-century writings it is hard to say if they are Jewish or Christian, and some were clearly Christianised in the course of time, such as the highly interesting *Acts of Pilate*, which, in their original version (ca. 160?), must have been a Jewish critique of emergent Christianity.¹¹ Still, preservation of their Jewish heritage and anti-Judaism long went hand in hand. Food was not only a problem for the early Christians in relation to the Jewish law, but also in connection with the pagan sacrifices (68-76), and fasting, part of the Jewish heritage, became increasingly important in later times.

With their Jewish and pagan contemporaries the early Christians shared a belief in the effectiveness of miracles (76-84), which Leppin illustrates with the famous scene in Acts (14.11-20), when the inhabitants of Lystra call out, in their Lycaonian language, Paul and Barnabas Zeus and Hermes. Here I would note that the fact that the inhabitants do not speak proper Greek basically labels them as peasants, who still believe in an actual epiphany of the gods, something Greek intellectuals had long given up: in the Greek novel it is always the less educated or socially inferior who believe in a real epiphany.¹² As the famous scene of Vespasian in Alexandria shows, belief in healing miracles was even current at the imperial court.¹³ The Christians naturally could not accept pagan miracles as divinely sanctioned and ascribed them

9. See also Leppin, pp. 186-187; add to his bibliography: Hübner, 1997, reprinted with Addenda et Corrigenda in Hübner, 2018; Lechner, 1999; Vinzent, 2019. The debate has been overlooked by Boyarin, 2018, who also, unconvincingly, suggests that Ignatius did not know written Gospels.

10. Lieu, 2015; Vinzent, 2016, pp. 344-345.

11. Dubois and Roquet, 2018.

12. Hägg, 2004, pp. 141-155 (“Epiphany in the Greek Novels: The Emplotment of a Metaphor”) at 146.

13. Leppin, 2013.

to magic. By labelling magicians also as heretics, as in the case of the famous Simon Magus,¹⁴ they killed two birds with one stone.

The early Christians not only shared miracles with their contemporaries, but they also celebrated festivals (84-92), some of which survived for a surprisingly long time,¹⁵ and feared demons (92-104). Leppin well sketches the widespread belief in demons, which were especially popular in the Gnostic spectrum. I would add that they seem to have been more popular in the East than in the West, since the Romans had less space for intermediate supernatural agents than the Greeks. Demons were one of those areas where Jews, Christians and pagans made use of one another's traditions, however baffling their beliefs sometimes may seem to us.

The earliest Christians did not bother much about burials (104-122), but since the late second century we can observe Christian graves in Phrygia, which shows that Christianity was not only an urban religion. Inscriptions show the variety of Christian beliefs, also regarding their eschatology. In Rome, the famous catacombs may well have helped to bolster the structure of one Christian congregation, and in the course of the later third century the Christians, too, began to bury their dead in sarcophagi, just like their pagan contemporaries – a sign of the penetration of Christianity into the higher classes.¹⁶

Leppin concludes the first chapter with a discussion of the early Christian meeting places (122-133). The Christians prided themselves on the absence of churches and altars and met in private houses, but at the turn of the third century we begin to hear about churches. The notice of a church in Edessa in AD 201, though, is hardly believable, but probably an example of the way the 'Edessene elite was legitimising its Christian history with the mention of state archives that past generations had helped to create'.¹⁷ After Gallienus, Christian churches must have become more widespread. Leppin follows the model that after Constantine churches penetrated more and more into the centre of Rome, but more recently doubts have been cast on this model.¹⁸

The second chapter starts with the problem of the early Christian offices (135-44). Leppin sketches the difficulties the early Christians must have had in organising their congregations and the gradual disappearance of prophets (158-72).¹⁹ In a nuanced manner he notes that *Amtscharisma* did not always replace *Personalcharisma*

14. For Simon Magus, see most recently Eastman, 2016; Mastrocinque, 2017; MacRae, 2019; Bremmer, 2019c.

15. Graf, 2015.

16. Note also Ossewaarde, 2012.

17. *Contra* Leppin, p. 125. Cf. Camplani, 2018, p. 240 (quotation).

18. Arbeiter, 2017.

19. Cf. Bremmer, 2016, reprinted in Bremmer, 2017a, pp. 81-95.

in a linear manner and that we always have to reckon with the re-activation of the latter. In the beginning, women (145-58) were important as patronesses but also as deaconesses, with widows and virgins, albeit often from the higher classes, also occupying significant positions. Even though the early Church offered better *Handlungsspielräume* for women than pagan society, males still kept controlling them.

Very interesting is Leppin's discussion of Christian intellectuals (172-186), such as Justin Martyr,²⁰ Origen and Julius Africanus. He shows how these men (hardly ever women) resembled pagan philosophers and acted as teachers by playing an important role in the development of the Christian doctrines,²¹ and whose literary productivity was stimulated by the adoption of the codex. It is only in later times that intellectuals such as Augustine and Ambrosius are incorporated into the clergy. The clerical hierarchy developed only slowly (186-204) and was influenced by the secular hierarchy of the Roman society with its many distinctions. The rise of the powerful bishop was probably due to both internal and external developments, as an influential bishop could protect his members against hostile outsiders.²² The expansion of the bishop's office went concomitant with an increasing distinction between clergy and laity, which had been absent from earlier Christianity. It was Constantine who confirmed their position by making them his conversation partners. The clergy needed to live (205-215), and we can note an increasing attention to their finances. Yet money corrupts and the clergy sometimes succumbed to its seductions.

After their deaths, important Christians seem to have received special attention, witness the graves of Peter and Paul in Rome (215-223). Even if these graves are 'inventions of tradition', they show that Christians were convinced that the apostles had been martyred in Rome and had been the founders of their congregation. Leppin dates the *Religuienkult* already to the time of Cyprian and the end of the third century, but that seems too early. A proper cult of relics is hardly attested before the later fourth century, even if there are occasional moments of special attention to bones of martyrs.²³ In general, this chapter seems out of place here and would have been better positioned after the one on the burials.

Naturally, we hear also about ascetics (223-235). It still remains a problem, why asceticism started and was more successful in the East than in the West. Undoubtedly, climate may have played a role, but this can hardly explain everything. In any case, as-

20. Cf. Leppin, 2018; van der Lans, 2019.

21. See also Kany, 2008.

22. For the bishop, see also Solin, 2006.

23. Bremmer, 2017b.

ceticism seems to have been an important aspect of early Christianity, be it in drinking water instead of wine during the Eucharist, or abstaining from sexuality. Ascetics challenged the normal life of most people and their prominence in early Christianity, even though not wholly absent from their pagan contemporaries, must have been a striking aspect of the new religion. Yet it is enigmatic when exactly the wave of hermits started to originate in Egypt and Syria. Saint Antony, to whom Leppin rightly dedicates several pages, may well have lived later than Athanasius wants us to believe; in any case, the latter's representation of the saint should have been considered in a more sceptical manner than happens here.²⁴

The speedy translation of Antony's biography into Latin is only one sign of the impressive Christian networking,²⁵ which distinguished them from their Jewish and pagan contemporaries and which must have started virtually right from the beginning of the Jesus movement (235-53). The famous letters of Smyrna to Philomelium and Lyons & Vienne to the churches in Asia Minor about their local martyrdoms are only one example of the empire wide correspondence between Christians. Personal travels also contributed to the intensive contacts, although the famous inscription of Abercius is perhaps less trustworthy than long has been accepted.²⁶ As the power of bishops grew, they sought contact with one another and this led to regional and, under Constantine, to the empire wide Council of Nicaea.

Becoming a Christian also meant joining a new community and often a new family (255-62). It is now hard to understand the consequences the joining must have had in individual cases, but the *Passio Perpetuae* is a good illustration of the disturbances in the family such a choice could effect.²⁷ The Christian community offered a new kind of family and security in an uncertain world, although some Christians rejected family life and sexuality altogether (262-85). Alternatively, some Christians were libertarian and clearly enjoyed sex parties. In general Christians favoured sex only within marriage and declined divorce. But relinquishing sex also gave authority. In this respect, the early Christians must have been very different from their contemporaries with new boundaries and prohibitions, which even today have their impacts. Yet, as Leppin stresses, one should not see the pagan world as an erotic paradise and the Christian one as a sexual hell. Ancient practices, such as the sexual exploitation of slaves, would be totally intolerable today and were rejected by

24. Cf. Bremmer, 2019a.

25. Gandt and Bertrand, 2019.

26. Cf. Vinzent, 2019, pp. 77-161.

27. See also Bremmer, 2017a, pp. 20-25.

the early Christians, but in many other respects these did not treat their enslaved servants in the manner we would have expected from them (293-303). With the families came children (285-93), and the early Christians soon developed ideas about them, also orphans, and debated the desirability of having children. One would perhaps have expected here also some words by Leppin on the religious education of the children. A letter of the Church of Rome to the one in Corinth, the so-called 1 Clement, urges the Corinthians to educate “the young men in the fear of God” (21.6), but also tells them to let their children, presumably boys and girls, “to partake in the education that is in Christ” (21.8). In the martyrdom of Justin Martyr, one of the Christians, Euelpistos (already a Christian name), tells the Roman judge that he was raised as a Christian by his parents, and the same is told by his fellow martyr Paeon (*Acta Justini* [A] 4.6-7). Surely, a Christian education must have been an important part of the expansion of the Christian faith in the first centuries.

Penance (303-11) was one of the ways in which the Christian congregation controlled its members, however unusual such a procedure was in the ancient world. Yet very strict Christians would oppose penance and would refuse forgiveness, certainly in the case of *lapsi*. Repentance required humility, a very Christian virtue with a long future (311-25), which was not recognised as such in pagan ethics. In the emerging world of Christianity, people had to find their own ways which sometimes led to individualising behaviour. In turn, this led to the demand for more precise rules to regulate Christian manners.

Humility may have fitted the early Christians amongst whom really wealthy people must have been the exception (325-35). One of these was Marcion, a billionaire according to modern standards, but it is significant that despite his wealth he could not push through his ideas in the Roman Christian congregations. In the end, often unlike today, money was not the last word in the Christian communities. Admittedly, wealth remained an ambivalent asset for many Christians, but all agreed that it obliged to charity without trying to acquire fame and honours, unlike contemporary euergetism (325-44).²⁸ This charity, which was one of the heritages of Judaism, must also have promoted the further organisation of the congregations and in this way the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The ideas about wealth and poverty always focused on the individual but they did not lead to a fundamental reconsideration of the structure of the power and economical structure of the ancient world.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on the relationship between the believers and the Roman Empire. Leppin well stresses the Christian ambivalence towards

28. Cf. van der Horst, 2016.

the Empire with some rejecting it and others being loyal and even promoting fiscal obedience (345-55). Despite their overall loyalty, a number of Christians were executed, to start with the famous Neronian persecution, which recently has been unpersuasively called into doubt.²⁹ Court cases as handed down in the *Acta martyrum*, however adapted and abbreviated,³⁰ give us some idea of the confrontation between the Roman authorities and the Christian martyrs, such as the Scillitan martyrs and Polycarp (355-80). Their persistence with their beliefs impressed even pagans, such as Galen.³¹ The martyr ideology, which seems to have originated in the middle of the second century,³² was not shared by every Christian, such as those from the Gnostic spectrum, and some recoiled at the last minute from martyrdom or found ways to dodge the Decian sacrifice test (380-92). A fair number of early Christians must have lapsed in times of persecution, but their behaviour needs further analysis.³³ In any case, the institute of penance enabled the *lapsi* to become reintegrated into the Church. In this respect, the 'Great Church' was more merciful than the rigorist Donatists and Novatians.

A special category among the Christians were the soldiers who were continuously confronted with cultic practices (392-402). That, rather than their killing of others, was the main problem with the army for the early Christians: military martyrs never died because of a refusal to execute or to slaughter enemies. In the end, pacifism was not unusual, but it was not the main conviction of early Christianity. However, as an undercurrent it has remained important in Christianity until the present day.

Like some soldiers, many early Christians must have declined to participate in the traditional sacrifices. Such an attitude did not fit the imperial and municipal elites whose presence at and participation in sacrifices was obligatory. This situation made that Christianity was slow to make advances into the highest ranks of the Roman Empire, although in the later third century it had reached the imperial court (402-14). Against, earlier opinions, though, this did not mean that Christianity was a typically lower-class religion. Especially, in the second half of the third century, many people of the higher classes must have converted.³⁴ The situation changed dramatically after

29. For the recent debate, see Shaw, 2015, refuted by Jones, 2017 and van der Lans and Bremmer, 2017, to be read with the, unpersuasive in my view, response by Shaw, 2018; see now also Cook, 2019.

30. Interesting but perhaps not convincing, Huebner, 2019.

31. Fleming, 2017.

32. Bremmer, 2019b.

33. See, most recently, Ameling, 2008; Crook, 2014; Hornung, 2016; Hurtado, 2016.

34. Cf. Weiss, 2015; note also Urciuoli, 2018, pp. 329-336, with a helpful chart of early Christians from the highest classes; add Alkan and Nollé, 2017.

Constantine, when joining the Church became advantageous and no longer carried any risks, even though Constantine himself was baptised only on his deathbed.

In a *Rückblick und Ausblick* (415-43), Leppin looks at the so-called “parting of the ways” between the Jesus followers and other Jews, which he discusses in a nuanced manner. As regards the reasons for the Christian success – a much explored subject since Harnack’s great work³⁵ – he suggests the charisma of Paul and other early leading Christians, but other reasons were the lack of a connection with a specific *polis*, the networking, the rejection of sacrifice which saved the Christians financial costs, the sexual morals, the social capital of moral and spiritual (especially in the Gnostic spectrum) superiority, and the possibilities for women.³⁶ At the same time, the Christians shared a process of religious individualisation with their contemporaries, even though they rejected all other divinities. Amongst them, it was those who could claim spiritual authority that would determine the course of early Christianity, be they apostles and teachers or, later, confessors and martyrs. Their spiritual authority was not based on secular social status and could even be claimed by slaves and women.

On the other hand, a powerful reaction to these authoritative individuals clearly gained the upper hand in the later second century when the majority began to opt for more stable structures. The institution of penance helped to ascertain the power of the bishops, just as to mark the increasing difference between those who were baptised and those who were not. Yet the occasional wealth and *Amtsautorität* (the shadow of Max Weber clearly falls over this last part as elsewhere) of the bishops could always be challenged by others with spiritual authority, such as intellectuals, monks and other ascetics. Instead of *Hellenisierung*, Leppin therefore prefers *Intellektualisierung* as the term to characterise the theological discussions of early Christian intellectuals, which brings him close to Jörg Rüpke’s recent views on the religious transformations in the Roman Empire.³⁷ This process went concomitant with the more general process of the textualisation of religion, which could be also used to draw sharper boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy. But it would last until Constantine before Christianity would become the favoured religion. Nevertheless, the emperor never became the head of the church. Unlike the world of the *polis*, the plurality of early Christian authorities prevented it from becoming fully controlled by the political powers that

35. Harnack, 1924, and see the informative review by Brendel, 2019.

36. For recent other discussions, see Bremmer, 2010; Schliesser, 2019.

37. Rüpke, 2018, pp. 48-49.

be. Then as now, those early Christian texts can still inspire counter-cultural and counter-political movements.

Leppin's very readable book presents a persuasive portrait of a movement that began with a small group but in a couple of centuries would dominate the Empire. Its main merit is its encompassing approach to early Christianity which gives full scope to its plurality. It also well shows that life for the early Christians was not an easy one, as they had to find new ways away from pagan and Jewish traditions. Leppin's kaleidoscopic picture, though, with its many lively quotations from contemporary literature, does not always situate the Christian movement in its pagan and Jewish context and sometimes makes one lose sight of the main developments; it does not help either that this big book lacks a subject index. Also the local differences or even the differences between East and West sometimes disappear behind a more generalising depiction. Moreover, it is a book by an ancient historian, as is illustrated by its continuous attention to power and structures, whereas theology but also the nature of the worship of Christ or the process of canonisation of the Christian texts comes somewhat short.³⁸ But who will claim to be able to survey this whole field in all its details? For those who want to have an up-to-date idea of early Christianity, which often connects the ancient world with modern ideas, Leppin's book is a reliable and attractive guide and a stimulus to further thoughts about a movement that has been neglected all too long by ancient historians and historians of religion.

38. For the latter, see the shorter but equally attractive study of Marksches, 2016.

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