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The first Christians must have seemed rather peculiar to the Roman world: they professed to have their own messiah, and yet some of them continued to frequent the temple in Jerusalem and the synagogues. They claimed to have been given a very special message, and yet they lived right among everyone else. Many avoided civic celebrations, failed to obey public officials, renounced their families, and yet claimed to be good citizens. Some proved themselves to be utterly fearless, incorruptible and immune to any temptation, yet others appeared to operate only covertly and quickly gave in to pressure. The history of the first Christians is riven both with internal divisions and external tensions.

Christians frequently met with antipathy; persecutions by the state claimed many victims. And yet, the Christian faith was successful. Not even three-hundred years after the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate had let Jesus die a shameful death, Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306–37 CE) professed himself a Christian – although Christians had insisted that no emperor could ever be one. Early Christians had liked to emphasise that they lived their time as foreigners in the world. Now they found themselves shoulder to shoulder with its masters, or rather, some Christians now took up that position. And immediately they started to persecute other Christians, in fact anyone holding different beliefs. But this book concerns itself with those Christians who lived in the first three centuries after Christ and were taken by surprise by Constantine’s decision.

These early Christians by no means formed a homogenous group, let alone a church. This book gives an account of how they lived in the world, including the ways in which this grated with their contemporaries – an account that in turn is intended to grate with its modern readers: our world remains closely connected to those ancient Christians through a living tradition and a shared textual inheritance, the Bible, even for those distant from the Christian faith itself. Churches are ubiquitous, Christian festivals punctuate our calendar, much of our art is marked by Christian
motifs, even when they are being lampooned. Yet this seeming proximity can be illusory. Much about the first Christians is alien to us and far removed from what is considered Christian today – be it acceptance of slavery or that women must cover their heads.

What I hope to achieve is to elucidate the twofold way in which the first Christians grate, both with ancient contemporaries and us today, and to show how peculiar this seemingly familiar Christianity really was. My approach is that of a historian, asking at the same time what enabled a small, socially weak group from the margins to grow as it did and what challenges its members faced. While theological debates are not at the heart of my argument, a historian must take these seriously too because it was through them that Christians of the time could make sense of their world. Theological lines of reasoning could trigger actions, or at least justify them, and therefore are indisputably of historical significance.

Both theologians and historians have demonstrated how varied Christian responses to the challenges of their time could be: while some thought it imperative to keep to the Jewish dietary laws, others were in fact set against it. While some saw marriage as a legitimate form of Christian life, others considered it objectionable. While some admired martyrdom as a sign of the greatest faith, others dismissed it as too facile a path to sanctity. Christian women felt entitled to spread the faith, and yet often were told to remain silent. And ever new quandaries arose: was it permitted to eat meat from pagan sacrificial feasts? Should one drink water or wine at the Eucharist? Might a Christian join the military or even hold a local civic office?

Christians were poorly prepared for many aspects of daily life: the guidance Jesus had given, according to tradition, was rather general, focused mainly on one-to-one situations and touched on only a few aspects of wider society. His words were spoken in anticipation of an imminent end of the world that would, however, not arrive. Christians had no choice but to engage with the world. Epistles, many of which became part of the New Testament, bear witness to the lively discussions that ensued. Anyone seeking to live as a Christian was compelled time and again to reflect about what appeared self-evident to other contemporaries. It stands to reason that as a result different solutions emerged, and this lack of homogeneity has no small part in making this period so fascinating. It is simply astounding how keen the first Christians were to engage in debate.

Accordingly, I cannot write a linear history from the very first Christians up to the universal church. Neither will I lament the decline of an originally pure Christianity or praise the creation of a well-organised...
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church furnishing sage precepts for life. The history of the Christians as I present it neither follows any internal logic of its own nor is it determined by higher forces. Rather, I observe them in their attempts, with varying success, to find their place in the world, even if that meant choosing to be hostile to it. My account is concerned with specific recurring situations, with the solutions to issues that Christians sought, debated and arrived at, some of which came to be settled on while others did not prevail. What we see is not a linear evolution but a process of trial and experimentation.

The beginning of the history of Christians is relatively easy to determine: inherently Jesus himself could not already have been a Christian; therefore, I will not discuss his life and works. If Jesus’s words or deeds are mentioned, it will be because of their attribution to him and resulting significance for later Christians. The gospels that tell of his life were, after all, created later than the authentic Epistles of Paul; this means Jesus appears not as a historical figure but as the subject of stories. My prologue is concerned with the experience of Jesus’s resurrection, which I treat as an historical event in so far as it preoccupied the first Christians.

The remainder of the book is divided into four main sections whose subsections are organised more or less chronologically though necessarily overlapping to a certain extent. The structuring of the four overarching sections appears always to be leading back to Constantine the Great, which may seem to contradict the non-linear approach I have just set out. It should become clear to the reader that much of what I describe did in fact not lead to Constantine. On the contrary, it was an entirely unexpected turning point in the history of Christendom that after him virtually all Roman emperors embraced Christianity. From then on, one had to reckon with the influence of this now Christian political as well as economic power: certain factions of Christians received official state support, meaning they stood a better chance of prevailing. This new – and surprising – state of play fundamentally changed the significance Christian attitudes had for the world, and also in turn changed those attitudes themselves. I can only hint at this abrupt shift in the passages that relate to the time of Constantine: for one, I set out his – not always successful – attempts at resolving issues old and new. Those sections also already illustrate what difficulties such a close relationship between Roman monarchy and Christians would entail at this early stage.

My first section throws a spotlight on how followers of Jesus defined themselves vis-à-vis Jews and pagans. The first followers of Christ came from the Jesus movement and considered themselves Jewish; they all worshipped the one God who would not countenance other gods. It was
only gradually that the idea that Christians and Jews differed in their beliefs and practices gained traction. Both groups consistently set themselves apart from the pagans, in their eyes all those who worshipped other gods than theirs. That meant a great variety of people of widely differing religious convictions were billed as pagans who themselves would never have thought they might all fall under one umbrella term such as ‘pagan’. But not every follower of the Christian God took their beliefs to imply that they had to miss out on taking part in the celebrations for the pagan gods. These joyous occasions probably appeared both too enticing and quite harmless. Christians and pagans also were similar in other respects where today we would expect differences. For example, both groups shared a belief in miracles and demons. No clearly defined Christian identity emerged in these first centuries, but certain boundaries came to be drawn, both vis-à-vis the Jews and pagans, that would prove to be of great consequence.  

The second main section sets out how Christians organised themselves and what kind of authorities competed for influence among them. ‘Authority’ is to be understood as a position that made it very likely that its holder would be listened to, or even followed, when commenting on doctrine or behaviour. I tread carefully when it comes to the often-used terms ‘power’ and ‘rule’, since they emphasise the aspect of domination by the more powerful which represents only one aspect of authority among Christians. Christian ‘authorities’ might also be considered more generally as exemplary individuals, causing others to follow them without this being their primary aim; for example, martyrs and ascetics were concerned foremost with their own relationship with their God.

The received view, going back to the work of Max Weber (1864–1920), describes the story of authority among Christians as one of an evolution of ‘ charisma’ from that of an individual to that of an office, with the office of bishop considered its epitome. The emergence and development of the episcopate were indeed of paramount importance yet manifestations of personal charisma such as prophecy continued to be significant. In fact they experienced a revival particularly at the time when the episcopate came to consolidate, in its turn strengthened considerably by Constantine. I will provide further evidence for the diversity among Christians by differentiating between various types of personal authority – such as intellectual or ascetic authority. What is crucial is to investigate by what means and in what ways authority managed to find acceptance, and how the desire for authority emerged out of that striving for acceptance.  

The third main section is dedicated to investigating everyday concerns, from sexuality and marriage to attending games to earning a living.
Christians were compelled to reflect time and again about what their faith required of them. The questions that arose often were fundamental ones: how important were, in the end, institutions such as the family when one’s entire life was meant to revolve around serving God? Some of what Jesus reputedly had said sounded inimical to families but not everything. Moreover, if one was a teacher was it appropriate to be dealing with mythological texts or ought one to give up that profession? Many everyday situations proved to be tricky: for example, dinners that were accompanied by sacrifices, whether small or large. Was it all right for a Christian to let those happen? Would they become polluted if they participated in cultic celebrations without engaging emotionally? And was a Christian permitted to own much? Some Christians knowingly risked overstepping the limits; many felt compelled to point out that they were living in a way that pagans considered correct yet to an even higher degree. Christians had to think through and ponder time and again what for most people was simply everyday life – a heavy burden but also prompting much intelligent and complex thought.

The fourth main section considers Christian attitudes to political power. It is only at a first, superficial glance that the synthesis of Christianity and empire appears to be the natural outcome of the popularisation of Christian notions. In fact, it was the unlikely resolution of a relationship marked by tensions. Most Christians of whom we know did proclaim their loyalty towards the emperor, paid their taxes and prayed for him. Yet they refused to take part in his cult, and many also objected to serving in his army. Others might interpret this as these Christians absenting themselves when it counted, since the emperor’s cult did not have a solely ritual function but served to keep those gods propitious who might otherwise punish the city and wider state. And if there was no army, how would enemies be kept at bay? These issues made it all the harder for Constantine to develop his dual role as emperor and supporter of the Christians.

The act of an emperor professing to be a Christian had a political impact that the first followers of Jesus would have neither suspected nor desired. All they wished for was to serve a Lord whose imminent second coming they awaited.1 But now the political order had to be reimagined completely. What expectations should one have of a Christian emperor? Might he command a bishop or was he in fact obliged to obey this minister of souls? What position should a Christian take when it came to the death penalty, and to wars? Christians had for so long considered themselves to be entirely separate from the sphere of political power and developed their own independent hierarchy. Consequently, they proved to be awkward
allies, in particular since a critical view of political power loomed large in their traditions. However, much of this is not within the scope of this book.

However many aspects I aim to explore, I do not attempt to present a systematic, complete history of the first Christians. Rather, my subsections function more like vignettes dedicated to matters that Christians did not agree on. In these shorter sections I look at both what Christians expected and said of themselves, and what they actually did, insofar as that is possible to ascertain. Following an almost phenomenological approach I attempt to use numerous individual case studies to show how Christians came to find their place in the Roman Empire, what account they gave of themselves, how they talked about and to each other. In this way I hope to demonstrate the diverse range of responses that Christians found were open to them and which they tried in the various situations they faced. But I also believe it is crucial to always convey a sense of the contemporary horizon of understanding by shining a light on what Jews or pagans at the time expected Christian attitudes to be. Selected passages from such sources serve as key examples that I interpret in more detail, leading to some unevenness in my account.

This approach aims to render audible the voices of the protagonists at the time, both those who came to prevail and those who did not. The latter bear witness to lost ways of Christian living, which nonetheless represented alternative possibilities. Now apocryphal Christian writings are not intrinsically more important or better than those that became canonical. However, they do offer an especially rich insight into the plurality at the time and therefore also have their place in this account.

Ultimately my aim is not to paint one big picture; rather I wish to create a kaleidoscopic image offering constantly changing viewpoints. Some sections form clusters, others follow each other more loosely. The sequence of my sections is to a large extent arbitrary given that I do not claim to describe a single continuous development, and actually pay particular attention to side paths. In fact, the resulting book is in essence like a primer: readers are invited to chart their own course, so to speak encouraged to shake the kaleidoscope as they read.

This way of proceeding has one disadvantage: some of what belongs together ends up being separated, meaning it is possible to lose sight of the chronology, the simple sequence of events. Some individuals appear in different sections, showing how varied their activities were even if not how particular actions fit into a full picture of their life and works. Local idiosyncrasies are discussed in various passages, yet I do not offer regional
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histories. It falls to the final section to highlight such historical trajectories and interconnections, albeit in brief.

What is hardest to work out is the key issue at the heart of any such endeavour: who is to be considered a Christian? This kind of question at first appears easily answerable in today’s society, checking statistics on church membership – yet would every single church member call themselves a Christian? And would not others call themselves Christian precisely because they do not belong any official church? We encounter even greater difficulties investigating antiquity when religious affiliations were not recorded by the state. The term Christianós only gradually gained currency. And at times groups who considered themselves Christian denied that others who would in turn have described themselves as such were in fact Christians.

Any attempt to unequivocally distinguish between Christians and non-Christians would have to employ a normative understanding of the Christian faith, such as theologians are entitled – and indeed perhaps ought – to employ in certain contexts. Historians have long abandoned the notion of being able to survey history free from bias or, so to speak, from an Archimedean point. Yet it remains one of their tasks to define categories that help structure historical conditions, though the categories must be appropriate for the given historical context and allow for multiple perspectives. Accordingly, I do not privilege what later became canonical, nor do I let myself be swayed by the tendency to postulate a true Christianity suppressed by a powerful church, which has been furthered by the media and popular fiction.

My definition of a ‘Christian’ has to be a broad one, given that I reject basing my argument on a normative concept of ‘Christianness’: I take anyone who considers themselves to be one, or is termed so by others, to be a Christian. This approach runs the risk of arbitrariness. The concept of ‘family resemblance’ that goes back to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is particularly helpful, I believe, for allowing this kind of broad definition to be used, nonetheless: although one may make out many resemblances between the different members of a family, it is impossible to identify a single characteristic that is common to them all. Games offer another example: football and card games are worlds apart and yet both fall under that same heading. What we are dealing with, then, is a spectrum whose furthest edges become blurred and may lie far apart. In the case of Christianity, the extent of that spectrum is so great that, from a particular contemporary or later perspective, certain beliefs may be seen as belonging to a Jewish or pagan ‘family’, yet if looked at from a different viewpoint to a Christian one.
Still, in my view it is entirely possible to highlight certain notions and practices which connected Christians. Some things were probably common to all Christians: they all drew upon Jesus Christ who had come into the world, was put to death at least in the flesh and then been resurrected or at any rate attained a new life. This Jesus was, in their eyes, not any random higher being but a crucial figure who was singularly close to God, whatever words they chose to express this. This meant his death too was a unique type of event. The vast majority of his followers expected that Jesus Christ would return, and God would then hold judgement. They all rejected animal sacrifices, whether Jewish or pagan, as a matter of principle. Two rituals which they ordinarily celebrated were crucial to both their internal and external identity, both of which they traced back to Jesus himself: baptism and Eucharist, even if once again innumerable variants developed for both. It is true that those who practised these rituals might still describe themselves as Jews, but they were considered Christians by others and therefore come into my purview. Consequently, the notion of a Christian is at the same time dynamic and relational, meaning it depends on who it is set in relation to. This has implications for my terminology: I call those who move within a Jewish context ‘followers of Christ’ to make it clear that they counted on a certain Jewish messiah, that is Jesus Christ. Others also employ the term ‘believers in Christ’; yet this has the disadvantage of further foregrounding a mental attitude which is so difficult to grasp for later generations.

As a result, I accord equal weight to followers of Christ who continued to observe Jewish dietary laws, to groups such as the Montanists who discovered prophetism anew in the second century, to texts that have become apocryphal and to authors sometimes called early Catholic because they helped develop those doctrines that prevailed within the Catholic and Orthodox churches and were accepted as true by them. Contributions to the debates which I aim to trace here were made by the most diverse groups, all under a Christian banner. However far they often lay – and however much they set themselves – apart: despite their divisions they were exercised by the same questions.

Yet one should not see these developments as the outcome solely of internal conflicts. Christians faced immense challenges: not only did they have to reach an understanding with each other, but also make themselves understood by non-Christians. They shared a special story in the reports of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But initially they evidently saw themselves as part of the Jewish spectrum, rather than as ambassadors of a
special religion. Over time most of them moved away from this view, in particular those who engaged more closely with pagans.

Christians acted with remarkable independence from each and any tradition, declaring their allegiance to a saviour who had only just walked the earth and now testing what might be appropriate for this faith and what not, making their own personal decisions. Christians are often said to have differed from pagans in privileging the right doctrine over the right action, orthodoxy over orthopraxy. While there is truth to this argument, for Christians too acting in the right way was very important. A key thread running through this book is in fact ‘correct behaviour’, given the topic holds particular interest for historians.

A new notion of religion emerged with this emphasis on orthodoxy. It was now viewed as an arena where one wrestled to attain religious truths that were to be defined and clarified – in fact some scholars advocate no longer using the word ‘religion’ to denote pagan practices.9 Tellingly, ancient observers occasionally termed the Christian faith a philosophy because it differed so greatly from traditional cults in that it offered precepts not just for its cult but for living the right life – precepts whose reference point was death. Among pagans this role indeed usually fell to philosophers rather than their priests.

All Christians were in agreement that all things pagan were to be rejected yet, as I have suggested, no consensus existed as to what this meant in each particular case. One Christian might enjoy circus games with a pure conscience as a fun, social event. But others could object that the person in question was therefore clearly a heathen because games were inevitably accompanied by ritual sacrifices. Thus our terminology must always take into account the question of perspective: if one employs the taxonomy Christians – pagans – Jews, equally popular in ancient and modern times, the same phenomenon may well be assigned to different religions, depending on one’s point of view. However, this taxonomy reaches its limits in that the way in which these three groups defined themselves, and were defined by others, was constantly shifting and changing.

The many ways in which Christians found their place in the world are connected by a thread across time and space, to employ another notion of Wittgenstein’s (2001), a thread that is continuous but whose composition changes: ‘And the strength of a thread does not depend on any one fibre running through its entire length but on many fibres interconnecting’ (§ 67). Therefore I also count as Christian groups who rejected, or thought
little of, those very things that I claim to have been significant for the identity of the great majority of Christians: for example, some considered baptism to be of little importance. Yet by inserting themselves into this Christian context they proved themselves to be Christian, taking up the thread and continuing to spin or, indeed, to unravel it. This debate was made possible only by the fact that baptism was central to Christians.

Our sources likewise are written from certain points of view and, at least from the second half of the second century, saw their world more overtly in terms not only of Christians, Jews or pagans, but also of the orthodox or heretics, apostolic tradition or new insight. These terms are important in that they convey the writers’ perspectives and thus clarify how they understood their world. But the modern scholar cannot simply adopt the same terminology as that would mean also adopting a certain individual’s perspective even though contemporaries held a range of widely differing views. It is telling that around 200 CE Celsus, an early critic of the Christians, considered some as belonging to the faith whom Origen, responding as a Christian, saw as sectarian.

Throughout I attempt not to lose sight of this plurality of the early days. Of course, in all historical eras the Christian faith is expressed variously. But since late antiquity it has been a small number of well-organised superregional churches, all connected, albeit in different ways, to the political order and distinguishing comparatively clearly between what was within and what outside.

In the early days, however, most followers of Christ lived in small, localised groups that were only loosely connected. Part of the scholarly community has come think that, particularly at this time, communities may be seen as forming around certain texts, thus the textual community of the readers of Matthew’s gospel, the writings of John or the Gospel of Thomas. But right from the start epistles and intermediaries facilitated lively exchanges, from the second century if not earlier even across the empire. Increasingly stable hierarchical structures developed in many places. Despite this, at the time of Constantine no overarching structure existed, and among those communities led by bishops no one see was accepted as preeminent.

These reflections have consequences for my terminology: the term ‘Christianities’ is gaining currency at the moment. It captures the plurality of the time but suggests the existence of relatively stable, denomination-like formations. However, as we will see, in the early days such plurality did not necessarily go hand in hand with institutional demarcation. In fact, local diversity in particular was considered unproblematic, for the most