

# THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF THE NEW CHRISTIANITY SEMINAR

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The Spring 2013 Westar Conference marks the start of the new Christianity Seminar. In terms of its basic assumptions and envisioned working model, this new five-year project is similar to both the Jesus Seminar and Acts Seminar. Just as the canonical gospels and the Book of Acts when viewed uncritically came to be regarded as unreliable for an historical understanding of Jesus and early Christianity, so also the Christianity Seminar assumes, at the start, that the single New Testament canon is likewise not history but instead a product of orthodoxy. Rather than being a reliable witness to the emergence of Christianity, the canon is instead an intentional reworking of history aimed at erasing the plurality of voices that were without a doubt present in the earliest stages of this religious movement. As Lane McGaughey writes, “The aim of the Christianity Seminar will be to move from an understanding of Christianity that has been predetermined by the canon to a reconstruction that starts prior to its formation and does not assume the canon as an inevitable outcome.”

The New Testament canon functions like a juggernaut to cement only certain understandings of Christianity. While diversity is evident among its various texts—there are four separate gospels assigned to different authors and letters attributed to different authors—issues, such as the particular selection of texts, the order of their presentation and the fact that these particular twenty-seven works are all bound together into one “book,” provide the impression of a single and largely uniform message and purpose. Compounding the problem, because they follow the canonical order in their analyses of the texts, many introductions to the New Testament perpetuate this highly controlled and constrained understanding of history. Brandon Scott assesses the problem as follows.

The Canon as a context for reconstructing early Christianity isolates the books and writings of the New Testament from their historical context and makes the ideology of canon the determining point of view. A better model for viewing the artifacts of emerging Christianity is reconstructing the conversation and debate during the formative moments when various individuals and groups were responding to the words and deeds of Jesus in different ways.

Thus, the seminar aims to reconstruct as far as is possible conversations and debates on topics that are determina-

tive for understanding Christian origins. The first meeting (Santa Rosa, March 2013) provides an example of the types of issues it plans to engage. The spring 2013 meeting opens conversations around the subjects of religious and gender diversity within the first century. Elaine Pagel’s presentation and panel discussion of her latest book *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation* provides a framework by which to engage topics such as the socio-historical context for the Book of Revelation, the meaning of apocalyptic, canonical disputes regarding this text, and the differences in the religious beliefs and practices between Paul of Tarsus and John of Patmos. A second session is devoted to the role women played in the emergence of Christianity. In contrast to the constructed minimization and explicit silencing of women found within the canon, the seminar resists that tendency and instead posits the historical likelihood of female participation at the earliest stages of the movement. The title, “Women as Catalysts for the Emergence of Christianity” enables a reimagining of a history very different from the one dictated and conditioned by the canon. This session will host various women scholars on Mary Magdalene, Paul, Paul and Thecla, and, more generally, on the roles women played in ancient religious practices. At the fall 2013 meeting, the Christianity Seminar plans to reopen the issue of Marcion and Luke/Acts, more recently addressed by the Acts Seminar, and thereby reconsider issues pertaining to the dating of the texts within the formative period of Christianity. In addition, it plans to take up the issue of the canonization process itself. The Christianity Seminar will be structured along the same lines as other seminars at Westar and plans to follow a collegial and participatory model that includes voting.

With the aim of extending its reach and influence, the new Christianity Seminar envisions producing various written products and plans to maintain a significant web presence. Two volumes along with subsidiary articles are already envisioned for this seminar. The volumes are *From Jesus to Irenaeus*, a retelling of the story of early Christianity with individual chapters dedicated to and organized by topics adopted for the various sessions, and a companion volume, *Early Christian Documents*, that provides a limited yet annotated supplement to the first volume. Taken together these volumes would serve as alternative New Testament introductory textbooks. **4R**