The Concept of Religion and the Study of the Apostle Paul

Brent Nongbri

Macquarie University │ brent.nongbri@mq.edu.au

Introduction

In the early 2000s, when I first started looking into questions of how the concept of religion may have shaped the study of the apostle Paul and his letters, the bibliography on the topic was not especially large.[1] Burton Mack's statement, published in 1996, still seemed to ring true: "New Testament studies are generally pursued without feeling the need for discussing theories of religion, much less articulating the assumptions about religion that are taken for granted by New Testament scholars."[2] This is not to say that no one was interested in the question of Paul and religion (as I will outline in a moment), but it is to emphasize that now, twenty years after Mack's statement, there is a much more visible concern for thinking critically about the concept of religion among at least some scholars of the Pauline corpus. Part of the reason for this situation has to do with trends in the field of religious studies more generally.[3] But even in the narrower area of Pauline scholarship, a desire to avoid "distortion" and to achieve greater descriptive precision has brought religion and several associated concepts under the microscope.[4]

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[1] The results of that investigation can be found in Brent Nongbri, *Paul Without Religion: The Creation of a Category and the Search for an Apostle Beyond the New Perspective* (PhD diss., Yale University, 2008).

[2] Burton L. Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," *MTSR* 8 (1996): 247–69, at 251–52. See, however, the response by John S. Kloppenborg, "Critical Histories and Theories of Religion: A Response to Burton Mack and Ron Cameron," *MTSR* 8 (1996): 279–89.

[3] For a sense of the changes in the last twenty years, see the two *status quaestionis* essays by Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Category 'Religion' in Recent Publications: A Critical Survey," *Numen* 42 (1995): 284–309; and "The Category 'Religion' in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later," *Numen* 62 (2015): 119–41.

[4] On the concepts of "conversion," "nationalism," and "monotheism," see Paula Fredriksen, "Mandatory retirement: Ideas in the study of Christian origins whose time has come to go," *SR* 35 (2006): 231–46. On "Christianity" and "church," see Anders Runesson, "The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary

In what follows, I will trace out a brief history of the question of the concept of religion in the study of Paul's letters, focusing primarily on two exchanges, one involving the work of Edwin Judge and Wayne Meeks, the other involving the work of E. P. Sanders and Jonathan Z. Smith. Framing the history of scholarship in this way will serve as a springboard for reflecting on the current state of the question among Pauline interpreters. While the arguments of E. P. Sanders have had tremendous influence on North American and British Pauline scholarship, I find that scholars working in Sanders's wake, including many so-called "radical" interpreters of Paul, have not sufficiently accounted for J. Z. Smith's critique and remain locked into reading Paul's letters in ways that have been decisively shaped by Sanders's notion of religion as soteriology. Even Pauline scholars who have explicitly criticized Sanders's use of religion tend to replicate the structure of Sanders's argumentation, continuing to compare Paul on the one hand and "Judaism" on the other, with a focus on questions of belief. To illustrate this phenomenon in contemporary Pauline scholarship, I place N. T. Wright's recent criticism of Sanders in conversation with the work of Russell McCutcheon and William Arnal, who have especially highlighted the problematic status of religion and belief in New Testament studies. My conclusion from surveying all these debates is that, despite the wide influence of Sanders, the exchange between Judge and Meeks offers approaches to the concept of religion that provide more fruitful paths for the study of Paul's letters. I therefore close with a look at how either setting aside the concept of religion in Pauline studies (as Judge suggested) or using the concept in a more self-conscious and sophisticated way (as Meeks modeled) might open new avenues of exploration. Throughout, I try to demonstrate the contact points of the study of Paul's letters and the wider field of the academic study of religion.[5]

Discussions on Paul," in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 53–77. On "missionary journeys," see John Townsend, "Missionary Journeys in Acts and European Missionary Societies," in *SBL 1985 Seminar Papers*, SBLSPS 24 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 433–37.

[5] I share the concerns of a number of scholars who have voiced the opinion that biblical studies often operates in isolation from religious studies and the humanities. I am largely (though not wholly) in agreement with the diagnosis and proposals of William Arnal, "What branches grow out of this stony rubbish? Christian Origins and the Study of Religion," *SR* 39 (2010): 549–72. My own interest in the present essay centers on contact points in the histories of scholarship of Pauline studies and religious studies in the twentieth century.

Paul and Religion: A Brief History of the Question

There are numerous studies of Paul and his letters that seek to situate Paul among "ancient religions." For the project at hand, these studies are of less interest because they generally presume the universality of religion and attempt to show how Paul's letters manifest a particular instance of this supposedly universal phenomenon.[6] Yet, among the effects of the broader questioning of the concept of religion is the recognition that the idea of "ancient religion" is, somewhat paradoxically, a modern invention.[7] To compress and simplify the conclusions of a large and unwieldy body of scholarship, we might say that one of the features (along with the invention and spread of the printing press and Europe's colonial exploits) that marks off what we typically call "modernity" from what came before is the notion that religion is an identifiable and basically autonomous part of the social world, ideally distinct from politics, science, law, and other spheres of life. This relatively recent development in Western thought has been projected outward in space and backward in time to yield the impression that religion is a natural and necessary part of the way humans understand the world, and always has been.[8] But it is only in the last three hundred years that religion has come to be seen as a universal genus of which the "World Religions" are species.[9] Thus, studies of Paul that seek to locate "his religion" among other discrete "ancient religions," while numerous, are not the topic at hand. I am interested in more self-conscious assessments of the

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[6] For exercises of this sort, see, for example, Hans Dieter Betz, "Christianity as Religion: Paul's Attempt at Definition in Romans," *JR* 71 (1991): 315–44; and idem, "The Birth of Christianity as a Hellenistic Religion: Three Theories of Origin," *JR* 74 (1994), 1–25. I would also place under this rubric studies that focus on Paul as an exemplar of a universal "religious experience," such as John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[7] There is a growing bibliography on this point. See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), especially chapter 7, "The Modern Origins of Ancient Religions."

[8] See the literature reviewed in McCutcheon, "The Category 'Religion' in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later."

[9] On the development of the "World Religions" paradigm in the nineteenth century, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). For further developments in the twentieth century, see Katherine K. Young, "World Religions: A Category in the Making?" in *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality*, ed. Michel Despland and Girard Vallée (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1992), 111–30.

usefulness of religion to talk about various historical phenomena. It is these approaches to Paul's letters that I mean to discuss.

A second conversation relating to "Paul and religion" that I will not explore in depth but should mention here is the critique of religion associated with the work of Karl Barth.[10] For Barth, all religion was human striving, which stood in direct opposition to what Paul allegedly advocated, a point captured nicely in a subheading in the *Church Dogmatics*, "Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion" ("God's Revelation as the Abolition of Religion").[11] Barth's outlook finds expression in contemporary Pauline scholarship in the works of J. Louis Martyn. The theme of Paul's supposed critique of religion is recurrent throughout Martyn's works. To take but one clear example: "Religion . . . is the various communal, cultic means—always involving the distinction of sacred from profane—by which human beings seek to know and to be happily related to the gods. . . . Religion is a human enterprise. Thus in Paul's view, religion is the polar opposite of God's act in Christ."[12] Paul's extant writings, however, do not contain Greek words generally rendered as "religion" (hardly a surprising observation, given the history of the concept). What Paul does frequently mention is the concept of *nomos*, and his addressees' inability to adhere to the particular *nomos* of the Judaean god. Thus, "religion" for Martyn operates as a cipher for "Judaism," and is the very opposite of what Paul advocates in his letters.[13] Martyn's work proceeds without reference to the wider field of religious studies or the historicization of the concept of religion, so it also lies outside the area of my present investigation.

Barth's specifically Protestant theological critique of religion did, however, play an important role in the landmark study that in some ways marks the beginning of the historicization of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The*

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[10] The standard point of reference for Barth's take on Paul is his commentary on Romans, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), a translation of the sixth German edition.

[11] See section III.17 of *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zollikon: Verlag der evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1938), vol. 1, part 2, p. 304; *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, trans. G. T. Thomson et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 280.

[12] J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 79.

[13] For a related critical take on "religion" and "Judaism" in Martyn's work, see Mark Nanos, "How Inter-Christian Approaches to Paul's Rhetoric Can Perpetuate Negative Valuations of Jewishness—Although Proposing to Avoid that Outcome," www.marknanos.com/SBL-03-Inter-Christian-Prob.pdf.

Meaning and End of Religion.[14] Smith claimed that, just as Barth protested that religion was inimical to being a true Christian, "representatives of other traditions" similarly rejected the concept of religion.[15] For Smith, religion was essentially an "outsider's" (inadequate) way of depicting inner faith. The first portion of his book thus traced the development of the Latin term *religio* and the concept of "religion" in the history of the West. He concluded that the notion of "religion" as a system of belief that can be compared to other "religions" or systems of belief is a relatively recent invention particular to the Christian tradition and thus not useful for thinking about other cultures, such as those of India or China (or ancient cultures). Smith then proposed that scholars dispense with the category "religion" and instead open two separate lines of inquiry, one that would examine the historical, contingent "cumulative tradition" of religious groups and one that would examine the ahistorical, unchanging "faith" of the groups that have come to be designated "religions."[16] The immediately obvious drawback of such a proposal is that Smith essentializes the noun "faith" and the adjective "religious" to such a degree that these terms becomes plagued with all of the same problems as the traditional notion of "religion" that he seeks to replace.[17] Smith's work has nevertheless proven highly influential in the

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[14] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). For the book's impact, see Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *HR* 40 (2001): 205–22.

[15] Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 114–18. Elsewhere Smith asserts, "Throughout human history no man has been religiously great who was not dissatisfied with those aspects of his age that the modern observer would call its religion" (117).

[16] Smith was not alone in advocating this kind of method. His formulation resembles the division of labor in Mircea Eliade's summary statement in the final paragraph of *The Sacred and the Profane*. After a rather triumphalist description of the "history of religions" field, Eliade concluded, "At present, historians of religions are divided between two divergent but complementary methodological orientations. One group concentrate[s] primarily on the characteristic *structures* of religious phenomena, the other choose[s] to investigate their *historical context*. The former seek to understand the *essence* of religion, the latter to discover and communicate its *history*" (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask [San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959], 232).

[17] In the formulation of Tomoko Masuzawa, "Smith was proposing to abandon the use of the *term* 'religion' in order to forefront what it *really* is, which is by nature, as he would have it, off limits to naturalistic analysis or explanation" ("The Production of Religion and the Task of the Scholar," *Culture and Religion* 1 [2000]: 123–30, quotation at 125).

academic field of religious studies, even if more critical voices have emerged in recent years.[18]

At roughly the same time as the publication of Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Edwin A. Judge published an essay arguing, among other things, that Pauline groups more closely resembled ancient "scholastic communities" than they did so-called ancient religious groups.[19] In a retrospective essay published twenty years later, Judge sharpened that point, posing the question, "In what terms is the social identity of early Christianity to be defined?" and answering, "The first model to be discarded is that of 'religion' itself."[20] Judge went on to cite the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith as demonstrating the "crippling ambiguities" of the term "religion," but the emphasis of Judge's study is the search for understanding how people of the first century might have interpreted groups of the followers of Jesus. By "testing models" that can be discerned in the historical record of the first century (*polis*, household, school, etc.), we might gain greater clarity on how early followers of

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[18] See, for instance, Russell T. McCutcheon, "Religion Before 'Religion'?" in *Chasing Down Religion: In the Sights of History and the Cognitive Sciences. Essays in Honor of Luther H. Martin*, ed. Panayotis Pachis and Donald Wiebe (Thessaloniki: Barbounakis, 2010), 285–301.

[19] By "scholastic communities," Judge meant sophists as well as a range of philosophers. See Edwin A. Judge, "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community," *JRH* 1 (1960): 5–15; (1961): 125–37, now reprinted in *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays*, ed. James R. Harrison (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 526–52, esp. 539–40. For reservations about Judge's partial erasure of the distinction between sophists and philosophers, see Stanley K. Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *NovT* 26 (1984): 59–82.

[20] Edwin A. Judge, "The Social Identity of the First Christians: A Question of Method in Religious History," *JRH* 11 (1980): 201–17, reprinted in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E. A. Judge*, ed. David M. Scholer (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 117–35, quotations drawn from the latter at 130. Judge has returned to these questions in greater detail repeatedly over the years in a series of essays: "The Beginning of Religious History," *JRH* 15 (1989): 394–412, now reprinted in *Jerusalem and Athens: Cultural Transformation in Late Antiquity*, ed. Alanna Nobbs (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 11–31; "Did the Churches Compete with Cult Groups?" in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 501–24, now reprinted in Harrison, *The First Christians in the Roman World*, 597–618; and "Was Christianity a Religion?" *Society for the Study of Early Christianity Newsletter* 56 (2006): 4–7, now reprinted in Harrison, *The First Christians in the Roman World*, 404–409.

Jesus may have been perceived. Judge was emphatic that "religion" was not a helpful concept in this exercise.

In 1983, Wayne Meeks offered two responses to Judge's thesis. First, he countered that the earliest Latin writers to take notice of the followers of Jesus identified them as taking part in *superstitio*, which, according to a number of ancient authors stood on a continuum with *religio*.[21] Meeks thus implied that a study of the followers of Jesus as a Roman *religio* might be fruitful, but his chief interest was somewhat different. While Judge sought to identify the social formations into which contemporary Romans might have placed groups of Jesus' followers, Meeks set his own discussion in a different register by invoking "the rubric of religion as described by some modern social scientists," in particular the anthropologist, Melford E. Spiro, who defined religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[22] Beginning from Spiro's definition and invoking Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Mary Douglas among others, Meeks offered an analysis of "rituals" alluded to in the Pauline letters (such as meetings, baptism, and communal eating). Thus, to use terms derived from anthropological discussions, whereas Judge was engaging in an emic, or descriptive, exercise, Meeks was carrying out an etic, or redescriptive, analysis.[23] While Judge found "religion" unhelpful as an emic concept, Meeks found it useful as an etic concept.

A second exchange about Paul and religion took place simultaneously in the late 1970s and the early 1980s in the writings of E. P. Sanders and Jonathan Z. Smith.[24] This dialogue was prompted by the landmark study of E. P.

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[21] Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.8; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.3; and Suetonius, *Nero* 16.3. On these passages, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–67; and Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1–20.

[22] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 140–42, quotation at 140–41. Further reflections from Meeks on the place of "religion" in the study of Paul can be found in Wayne A. Meeks, "Taking Stock and Moving On," in *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later*, ed. Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 134–46, esp. 145.

[23] On the history of these terms, their usefulness, and their drawbacks, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 1999), 15–17.

[24] Their discussion was largely independent of the work of Judge and Meeks. I say "largely" because Meeks, Judge, and Smith all seem to have been well aware of each

Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which carried the subtitle, *A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. It was a work in which Sanders was determined to pay attention to religion instead of theology and to carry out a truly comparative study. Although Sanders's interaction in this book with the broader academic field of religious studies is minimal, much of his work seems to have been shaped by what I would call the ethos of that developing field. In a retrospective essay surveying his career, Sanders has characterized his early impulses in the study of religion as follows:

> In September 1963, when I started graduate school at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where the New Testament faculty members were John Knox, W. D. Davies, and Louis Martyn, I had three views about the field that I was entering and what I would like to do: (1) Religion is not just theology, and in fact is often not very theological at all. New Testament scholarship then (as now) paid too much attention to theology and not enough attention to religion. . . . (2) To know one religion is to know none. The human brain comprehends by comparing and contrasting, and consequently comparison in the study of religion is essential, not optional. (3) New Testament scholars ought to study Judaism. I now cannot say what had convinced me of numbers 1 and 2 (too much theology, comparison necessary). Bill Farmer had told me item number 3 (study Judaism), and I simply believed him.[25]

Sanders's statement seems to fit comfortably in the context of the academic study of religion in the United States in the 1960s. He identifies two key boundary lines of the developing academic field of religious studies. Tomoko Masuzawa's account of the modern discourse of "World Religions" is in fact bracketed by these concerns:

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other's ideas, even if these two discussions do not cross-reference one another. See Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Social Description of Early Christianity," *RelSRev* 1 (1975): 19–25.

[25] E. P. Sanders, "Comparing Judaism and Christianity: An Academic Autobiography," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 11–41, quotation at 14–15. In the same piece, Sanders refers to the impulse toward comparison in reference to the genesis of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*: He writes of his "main conviction: *I had to compare*, just as Gene Kelly had to dance" (21, emphasis in original).

> To this day, the disciplinary history of the science of religion has been intent on distinguishing comparative religion from comparative theology. . . . On the whole, the disciplinary establishment of so-called religious studies, for whatever reason and with whatever justification, seems to hold fast to this bottom line: Religion is found everywhere; it is an essential and irreducible aspect of human life; it should be studied. And if we take into consideration the constitution, for instance, of the American Academy of Religion as a whole, it also seems to imply something else in addition: Religions should be studied concertedly, comparatively.[26]

Thus, Sanders's view number 1 (religion, not theology) is a chief identity marker of the field of religious studies; comparative religion was supposed to be a separate enterprise from comparative theology.[27] Sanders's view number 2 (comparison necessary) follows logically from number 1 within the framework of the "World Religions" paradigm. Because there exist multiple different religions, they must be studied comparatively. Sanders seems to confirm his affinity to this model with his unattributed reference to the famous quotation of the putative *pater* of the field of comparative religion, Friedrich Max Müller ("To know one is to know none").[28]

Sanders's argument in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* is well known, but I will very briefly summarize it here. The starting point for Sanders's project was

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[26] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 22 and 317.

[27] Yet, as the work of Masuzawa and others has shown, that separation is porous at best. Nevertheless, the desire for a pristine, theology-free study of religion seems to be a compelling one for many scholars. This argument is ongoing. The most vocal advocate for a science of religion that is entirely distinct from theological interests is Donald Wiebe. See his essays collected in *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); and, more recently, "An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures," *JAAR* 74 (2006): 674–96. Overtones of this desire are discernable in some strands of Pauline scholarship. See, for example, Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 225–40.

[28] See Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution with Two Essays on False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology* (London: Longmans and Green, 1873), 16: "He who knows one, knows none." Müller was building upon Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's contribution to linguistics, paraphrased apophthegmatically as: "He who knows one language, knows none."

a deep dissatisfaction with an influential strand of German Pauline scholarship that stressed Paul's uniqueness by denigrating the Jews and Judaism of Paul's day: Paul's religion was about grace while the Jewish religion was occupied with legalism and fulfilling commandments. Sanders offered a stinging rebuke of this scholarship.[29] He showed that such an understanding of Jewish literature relied largely on inadequate handbooks and insufficient attention to actual ancient Jewish sources.[30] The picture of a legalistic and dead religion was simply incorrect. Sanders claimed instead that Palestinian Jewish literature showed that Jews thought of themselves as having been elected as a chosen people by divine grace, and the performance of good deeds was what *kept them in* this covenantal relationship. Sanders called this religious system "covenantal nomism" and summarized it as "the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to the commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression."[31] In Sanders's view, Judaism was thus not fundamentally about earning salvation through works; instead, Judaism (like Paul himself) emphasized grace.[32]

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[29] Sanders acknowledged that he had important predecessors in this effort to produce a more sympathetic account of ancient Judaism, namely two scholars of the early twentieth century, George Foot Moore and Claude G. Montefiore.

[30] The main target of Sanders's ire is reliance upon Strack-Billerbeck, a collection of talmudic and midrashic texts arranged as commentary to the New Testament books (Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* [4 vols.; Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922–1928]).

[31] *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75.

[32] It is this charitable understanding of ancient Judaism that has made Sanders's reading so appealing to many scholars of early Christianity, but as Philip S. Alexander has noted, this presentation of Judaism is not as innocent as it might appear: Sanders's "answer to the charge of 'legalism' seems, in effect, to be that Rabbinic Judaism, despite appearances, is really a religion of 'grace'. But does this not involve a tacit acceptance of a major element in his opponents' position—the assumption that 'grace' is superior to 'law'? The correct response to the charge must surely be: And what is wrong with 'legalism'? . . . It is neither religiously nor philosophically self-evident that a 'legalistic' view of the world is inferior to one based on 'grace.' If we fail to take a firm stand on this point, we run the risk of seriously misdescribing Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism, and of trying to make it over into a pale reflection of Protestant Christianity"; see Alexander's review of Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, in *JJS* 37 (1986): 103–106; quotation from 105. See also the review of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by Nils Dahl, who, in an assessment roughly equal parts praise and critique, summarized: "At the end, my objections boil down to a question about the appropriateness of Sanders's methodological approach. . . . Paul obviously did

Paul, then, did not find fault with Judaism because of its inherent deficiencies as a religion. In Sanders's reading, what Paul found "wrong with Judaism" was simply that it was not Christianity. As he put it, Paul did not think "from plight to solution" but rather "from solution to plight"; if Christ is the only means to salvation for all people, then the Jewish law must be somehow deficient when it comes to producing salvation.[33] Thus, while Sanders portrayed Judaism in a way more palatable to Christian scholars by maintaining that it was focused on grace, he still claimed that the religion Paul advocates is very different from Judaism. In Sanders's model, the "religion of Judaism" presented a valid means of salvation, but it was a means of salvation of that Paul rejected in favor of Christ.

I wish to focus now on Sanders's methodology, as this is the target of Jonathan Z. Smith's critique. Sanders's project proposed to carry out a "holistic" comparison of the religion of Paul and Judaism. He sought "to compare an entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion, parts and all"; he wanted "to discover two wholes, both of which are considered and defined on their own merits and in their own terms, to be compared with one another."[34] Sanders's solution for comparing "Judaism" with "Paulinism" was to study their respective "patterns of religion," by which he meant the "function" of the "religions"—how one gets from "the logical starting point" to the "logical conclusion" of a religion. Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out a number of difficulties in this formulation:[35]

> Allowing, for the moment, the language of "entire" and "wholes" to stand unquestioned, and setting aside the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of comparing two different

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not think of himself as having converted to another religion than Judaism. . . . That might indicate that the category 'religion' is not quite appropriate for understanding either Paul or Judaism. . . . [Sanders's] definition of a 'pattern of religion' is drawn from Western, especially Protestant, theology, much more than from Judaism understood on its own terms. As it turns out, the definition is even too narrow to give the full picture of Paul, the Jew who became the apostle to the Gentiles" (*RelSRev* 4 [1978]: 153–57, quotations drawn from 157).

[33] *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 443.

[34] Ibid., 16. See also Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983).

[35] *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 33–35. See also Anthony Saldarini's review of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in *JBL* 98 (1979): 299–303; and Jacob Neusner, "Mr. Sanders' Pharisees and Mine: A Response to E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*," *SJT* 44 (1991): 73–95.

objects, each "considered" and "defined in their own terms"—
a statement which he cannot mean literally, but which he gives
no indication as to how he would modify—Sanders
compounds the confusion by further defining the notion of a
pattern. It is not a total historical entity (e.g. Judaism,
Christianity, Islam), but "only a given more or less
homogeneous entity." How much "more," how much "less" is
needed to posit homogeneity and, hence, a pattern is left
unclear. It is a matter of seeing "how one moves from the
logical starting point to the logical conclusion of the religion."
But the notion of "logic" is nowhere clarified. Indeed, it seems
thrown aside by Sanders's exclusion of what he terms
"speculative matters" of methodology and by his strange
insistence that the logic is one of "function." Given these
restrictions, I am baffled by what "entire religion, parts and
all" could possibly mean for Sanders. I find no methodological
hints on how such entities are to be discovered, let alone
compared. His results give me no ground for confidence.[36]

Smith's critique is on target, but I cannot help but wonder if he was being coy in mentioning the lack of "methodological hints" in Sanders's account. For Sanders is quite clear that his "pattern of religion" is closely related to what theologians have traditionally called "soteriology."[37] One can thus isolate a "pattern of religion" by arranging one's data to mirror the very traditional Christian notion of a system of beliefs (and, to a lesser degree, practices) leading individuals to salvation.[38] This type of comparison of differing "ways to salvation" was timely and fully comprehensible in the pluralistic atmosphere of the study of religion in the late twentieth century.[39] Sanders's conclusion, however, that Paul

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[36] *Imagining Religion*, 33–34.

[37] Sanders wrote, "A pattern of religion thus has largely to do with the items which a systematic theology classifies under 'soteriology' [but] . . . '[p]attern of religion' is a more satisfactory term for what we are going to describe" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 17).

[38] Other early reviewers did note this point. Saldarini writes, "Though he does not call it soteriology, to avoid the many connotations of that word, Sanders's concern is nevertheless soteriology" (review of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 300). Sanders was also criticized on this point by Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*, 27.

[39] John M. G. Barclay has written concerning scholarship following in Sanders's path that "this interpretation, like all its predecessors, is influenced by current social and ideological currents, although such influences have rarely been noted and few of its

disapproved of the law as a valid means of salvation leaves the apostle falling short of being an ideal religious pluralist, a point to which I shall return.

Paul and Religion in Contemporary Scholarship

Looking broadly at Pauline scholarship since the early 1980s, I think it fair to say that Sanders's work has been considerably more influential, although this situation has changed somewhat in the last decade, with the approaches closer to those of Judge and Meeks becoming more and more prominent.[40] Jonathan Z. Smith's remarkable dissection of Sanders's key theses seems to have left almost no trace in the landscape of Pauline scholarship (especially among writers in the so-called New Perspective). As a result, a number of works that have built upon Sanders's conclusions are liable to similar criticisms.

For example, while I have learned an immense amount from the writers whose approaches have come to be called collectively the "radical New Perspective," I find that a number of authors working in this paradigm implicitly employ a concept of religion much like that of Sanders, which is highly concerned with soteriology.[41] As I read them, the authors collected under this heading take issue especially with Sanders's assertion that for Paul, the Jewish law is not a valid means of salvation for Jews. According to at least some of the radicals, Paul instead suggests two different "paths to salvation," *nomos*, or *Torah*, for Jews and Christ for non-Jews.[42] In a synthetic work summarizing arguments from a variety of authors who could be classed in this "radical" group, John Gager is openly critical of the idea that "Paul underwent a typical conversion from one religion to another, in this case from Judaism to

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practitioners seem conscious of the fact" ("'Neither Jew nor Greek': Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 197–214, quotation from 198–99).

[40] In particular, Sanders's work has inspired the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which itself has spawned a variety of reactions (and reactionaries). The bibliography is immense. For an overview, see Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 95–193.

[41] For this description, see for example, Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 161: "the radical new perspective"; Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 216: "radical New Perspective scholars" or "the radicals"; and Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 153: "the radical wing of the new perspective."

[42] Eisenbaum suggests that "two ways salvation" is a criticism leveled against "the radical New Perspective" (*Paul Was Not a Christian*, 251), but it seems to me to be a legitimate reading of at least some of these authors.

Christianity."[43] He nevertheless seems comfortable with the idea of distinct religions in the ancient world, noting that "the unexpected success of [the post-Pauline] movement among Gentiles rapidly pushed it toward becoming a new, separate religion."[44] And when Gager discusses "Paul's gospel," he (like Sanders) does so in terms of "salvation": "If Paul's gospel is about the acceptance of the Gentiles and if he does not repudiate the law for Israel, does it follow that Gentiles and Jews take different paths to salvation? Put differently, does Paul foresee the redemption of Israel through conversion to Christ?"[45] The ideas of salvation and conversion come together again for Gager in a summary of "revisionist" scholarship on Paul. Gager writes that there is agreement on a number of issues, but "on the question of whether Israel's salvation lies in Christ, whether Paul regarded Jesus Christ as the Messiah for Israel, there is no such agreement." Gager's own view is that Paul "does not envisage an End-time conversion of Israel to Christ." In Gager's model, then, Jesus being "the Messiah of Israel" appears to necessitate that Israel would have to "convert to Christ."[46] Yet, such an inference is only necessary if we insist on working within a framework of religions as multiple paths to salvation. If we set aside that framework, the whole notion of two "paths to salvation" becomes nonsensical.[47]

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[43] John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

[44] Ibid., 39.

[45] Ibid., 59. Gager is careful to point out that these different "paths to salvation" are not unrelated: "One final observation on the 'two ways.' It would be a serious misrepresentation of Paul's [view] to say that he conceived of separate or divided paths as the final word . . . it is clear that Paul thinks of the two ways as a temporary, provisional stage in the story of salvation" (60).

[46] Ibid., 146.

[47] Consider the following scenario as a possibility: Paul claims that Jesus is the Messiah. He further claims that other *ioudaioi* should acknowledge that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and thus acknowledge that these are the last days, and that non-*ioudaioi*, having been made pure by the newly available *pneuma* of the Messiah, are now to join together with *ioudaioi* in worshipping their ancestral god, who expressed this desire for joint worship in the book of Isaiah. *Ioudaioi* would still carry out their ancestral traditions; they would have to change their behavior only in regard to interacting with these newly purified non-*ioudaioi*. To characterize those kinds of behavioral changes as *ioudaioi* "converting to Christ" would be baffling. This scenario is condensed and adapted primarily from the work of Paula Fredriksen and Stanley Stowers. See Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *JTS* 42 (1991): 532–64; and Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

But there is an undeniable appeal to the framework that Gager provides, in that it presents us with a Paul who is a more ideal religious pluralist. What we find in Gager (and some, though not all, of the "radicals") is thus a view that is indeed radical relative to the staid world of Pauline studies but hardly radical all in the context of the North American academic study of religion, in which pluralism reigns as the dominant ethos.[48] And this is perhaps one of the reasons that the "radical" approach to Paul has gained adherents in recent years. I wish to be clear that it is not really a criticism to point out that an interpretation of a text shares the values of the cultural environment in which it was produced. In the present case, however, I think it is a necessary and salutary reminder, because authors of the radical New Perspective sometimes display a tendency to present themselves as describing a value-free or "real" Paul.[49] Yet, the modern idea of religions as providing multiple different equally valid "paths to salvation" is, of course, very much a value-laden ideology.

I am not alone in identifying this phenomenon, although others do seem to think it worthy of rather sharp censure. In fact, N. T. Wright, a more traditional interpreter of Paul, has roundly criticized scholarship emerging from "American 'departments of religion,'" especially the work of "those who hope to find Paul an ally in the project of postmodern pluralism." These quotations are derived from Wright's recent large work, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, in which the concept of religion features prominently.[50] The first volume contains an extended discussion on "'Religion' and 'Culture' in Paul's World."[51] The

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[48] See Russell T. McCutcheon, "Our 'Special Promise' as Teachers: Scholars of Religion and the Politics of Tolerance," in *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 155–77.

[49] Gager presents his portrait as the "real" Paul and implies a positive answer to his opening question: "Is it possible to break free . . . from the powerful tendency to read our views into Paul rather than working our way from them?" (*Reinventing Paul*, vii). Zetterholm speaks of "the truth about Paul" (*Approaches to Paul*, 235 and 239). I agree that we can adjudicate better and worse historical readings of ancient evidence, but the criteria for making such judgments are the socially constructed "rules" of historiography, which do not produce a singular "truth about Paul."

[50] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). For general statements of suspicion of "locating the study of early Christianity within university and college 'Departments of Religion,'" see 1.72 and 2.1321. For the remark on pluralism, see 2.1309, note 108. For what Wright characterizes as the "half-truths" and "untruths" of North American scholars such as Gager, see 2.1129. Full disclosure: While I am presently employed in an Australian department of ancient history, I was trained in an American department of religious studies.

[51] Ibid., 1.246–1.278.

second volume dedicates a chapter to the topic "Paul and Religion," and contains a critical assessment of E. P. Sanders's use of the concept of religion in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[52]

In the first volume, Wright cites with approval the more recent work of Edwin Judge but decides, against Judge's advice, to carry on with using the concept of religion.[53] Wright proceeds to give an overview of "The Religious World of Ancient Greece," "Mysteries from the East," and "Religion and Culture in the First-Century Roman World." He finds that Roman *religio* encompasses a variety of things: temples, priesthoods, myths, festival calendars, civic magistrates, sacrifice, oracular interpretation, and more—"we are dealing with what today we might call 'the fabric of society,' the things which held people together and gave shape and meaning to their personal and corporate life."[54] This is to be contrasted with the "eighteenth century" or "Enlightenment" notion of religion that Wright characterizes "in most of today's western world at least, as implying 'not-ordinary-life,' 'not-culture,' and particularly '*not*-politics.'"[55] Ultimately, Wright concludes, with much support from recent scholarship in classical studies, that in Paul's world, "*religio* penetrated more or less every area of life."[56]

In his second volume, Wright turns to the question of "Paul and Religion," clarified as "the relationship of Paul to *first-century* religion, as discussed in that earlier chapter, rather than to 'religion' as that term has been understood since at least the eighteenth century."[57] This relationship is, for Wright, largely negative:

> Paul has rejected pagan religion in all its works and ways. But "religion" itself—centered upon the celebratory offering of sacrifice, through which humans and the divine presence are bound together in the solidarity of one community and its

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[52] Interestingly, this critique is made without reference to that of Jonathan Z. Smith, mentioned above.

[53] In this context, Wright mentions Judge, "Was Christianity a Religion?" (Wright elsewhere cites some of Judge's other essays).

[54] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1.274. Oddly, Wright seems not to include the Jews under this heading (1.276).

[55] Ibid., 1.35.

[56] Ibid., 1.274. For a critical view of the treatment of "religion" in much of the classical scholarship on which Wright relies, see Brent Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope," *Numen* 55 (2008): 440–60.

[57] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2.1321.

consequent fruitfulness—is something Paul sees as fulfilled and transformed in and through Jesus. Jewish "religion" was, for him, a signpost pointing forwards to this new reality. Pagan "religion" was a parody of it, distorting it in line with the distorted and dehumanizing pseudo-divinities of the pagan pantheon.[58]

Wright's more explicit thoughts on methodology appear most clearly in critiques of other scholars, especially Sanders. After an extended discussion of the problems of Sanders's use "without any discussion, [of] an implicit definition of 'religion' which belongs in the eighteenth rather than in the first century," Wright cuts to the heart of the matter:

By *comparing* Paul and Judaism in terms of "patterns of religion," [Sanders] makes it impossible to see that the early Christians, like at least the Qumran sect in one way and the followers of bar-Kochba in another, were claiming that Israel's God had inaugurated or was inaugurating his long-promised purposes and that they themselves were in the vanguard of this new movement.[59]

Apart from the easy gloss from "Paul" to "early Christians," Wright makes a generally valid point here. The very structure of Sanders's project determined its results. If we go looking for differences between the writings of Paul on the one hand and all other Jewish writings on the other, we shall surely find them.[60] Yet, despite this recognition, Wright's own treatment of "Paul and religion" functions in a similarly divisive manner. And despite Wright's assertion that his own approach to Paul "retains, and indeed emphasizes, Paul's location within

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[58] Ibid., 2.1343.

[59] Ibid., 2.1324.

[60] If one were to carry out a similar exercise by isolating another Jewish document and comparing it with all other Jewish literature from the Second Temple period, it would not be surprising to find that the isolated Jewish document had "unique" elements. Would we then conclude on this basis that the document was not Jewish? Unlikely. Yet, such a conclusion is exactly what one finds when Paul is compared with "Judaism" in this way. To his credit, Sanders was at least somewhat consistent in this regard. Sanders noted the ways in which 4 Ezra differs from other contemporary Jewish literature, and in a fascinating formulation, he concluded that "IV Ezra is not a particularly good representative of Judaism" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 409–28, quotation from 427).

second-temple Judaism," Wright, like Sanders, constantly sets "Paul" over against "Judaism."[61] Judaism is treated (if not described) throughout as a stable, well-defined entity against which Paul can be compared, but mostly contrasted.[62] Wright's consistent stress upon Paul's "reinterpretation" or "reworking" or "revising" or "reappropriation" or "renewing" or "radicalization" or "reorientation" or "transformation" or "mutation" or "radical variation" of Jewish traditions implies that these traditions existed in some sort of utterly stable no-man's-land prior to Paul's encounter with them.[63] Rather than considering Paul's voice as one among a cacophony of competing claims about how the Judaean god should properly be worshipped, Wright regularly carries out much the same comparative project as Sanders did, with "Judaism" on one

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[61] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2.612. Indeed, Wright ends up even further down this path than Sanders himself would venture. On different occasions, Sanders concludes that Paul "unconsciously" created something different from "Judaism," a third race (not Gentiles, not Jews). Wright goes further. Note the way that Sanders criticizes this statement: "Paul considered Christianity to be a rival religion to Judaism"—"I cannot agree, *if* the subject is Paul's conscious intent" (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 201, note 22; his emphasis). Elsewhere in that work, Sanders asserts that "Paul's view of the church, supported by his practice, against his own conscious intention, was substantially that it was a third entity, not just because it was composed of both Jew and Greek, but also because it was in important ways neither Jewish nor Greek" (178–79). Throughout this section of Sanders's work, there is a noteworthy dissonance between Paul's own terminology ("his own conscious intention") and the "situation" Sanders describes. He writes, "The situation is quite clear, even if the terminology is confusing" (175); Paul thinks of the church as the "true Israel," "but the terminology is not carried through" (174) and "that term is not used by Paul" (175). Where Sanders is ambivalent, Wright is utterly convinced: "I find Sanders's argument here so strong that it is not clear to me why he then doubts that Paul would have thought of a 'third race'" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2.1444).

[62] The grammar of Wright's assertions in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* makes the point again and again: "For Paul, as for Judaism . . ." (1.229); "The unity on which Paul insists went explicitly beyond that envisaged within Judaism" (1.387); "ancient Israel and second-temple Judaism" on one hand and "Paul" on the other (2.933); "Love, then, is obviously and uncontroversially central to Paul's vision of the Christian moral life, in a way which was not true in either Judaism or the greco-roman world" (2.1119).

[63] These terms are used throughout *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Wright's use of the word "radicalization" (1.563) especially invites comparison with contemporary use of that word in academia and the media, most often in association with "radicalized forms of Islam" or the like. Such formulations often serve to segregate so-called "terrorists" from "normal Islam" or "real Islam." So also, Wright's use of this term (and all the others) sets up Paul as something other than "real Judaism."

side of the equation and Paul (along with "Christianity") on the other. It does Wright little good to state that he appreciates "the rich, dense, and sometimes mutually contradictory variations within" Second Temple Judaism if, by the structure of Wright's own argument, Paul is preemptively excluded from those "variations within."[64]

Although Wright repeatedly insists on the "Jewish" grounding of Paul's "worldview," he regularly portrays Paul and his "worldview" as something essentially (I use the word advisedly) different. This practice results in claims that are sometimes in high tension with one another. Thus, Wright states at one point that "Paul did not have to stop being a Jew" while elsewhere emphasizing that "*Being a Jew was no longer Paul's basic identity*," which seems to mean that Paul was a Jew, but he was not Jewish (or perhaps Paul was only somewhat "Jewish").[65] Structurally, this argument is indistinguishable from those that assert that Paul was a Jew, but his "religion" was something other than "Judaism."[66]

What allows Wright to be explicitly critical of Sanders's use of religion while at the same time by and large reproducing his comparative project is Wright's heavy (and un-theorized) use of the notion of belief: "It is important to stress . . . that whereas indeed for Christians, starting with Paul, 'belief,' and in particular belief about who 'God' really was, took centre stage, this had never been the case for the Greeks and the Romans."[67] Belief is omnipresent in

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[64] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1.563. Where is the evidence that Paul was being any more or less inventive with ancestral traditions than other contemporary worshippers of the Judaean god? Every text that Wright uses to craft his picture of the "Jewish world" represents a reinterpretation or revision or transformation of an ever-growing and ever-changing "Jewish tradition." Even claims to "defend the traditions of the ancestors" mask continuous innovation; see Brent Nongbri, "The Motivations of the Maccabees and Judean Rhetoric of Ancestral Traditions," in *Ancient Judaism in its Hellenistic Context*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 85–111.

[65] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1.47 and 2.1436, Wright's italics.

[66] Indeed, for all Wright's repeated stress that Paul's worldview was "Jewish," Wright's uses of "Jewishness" and "Judaism" seem to function chiefly as a means mediating (or of insulating Paul from) the "greco-roman" world or "pagan" thought. Paul "derives" things from "the world of Israel's scriptures and Jewish traditions," but he "adapts" things from the non-Jewish world (see, for example, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1.200–201). For reflections on how this kind of work crafts a very particular, normative type of "Judaism," see William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Identity* (London: Equinox, 2005).

[67] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1.276. At the outset of his project, Wright speaks of "the heart of Paul's beliefs and aims, which are the central focus of this book"

Wright's work, with major sections of the book dedicated to Paul's "mindset," to which Wright seemingly has privileged access.[68] And it is exactly here, in the realm of Paul's "beliefs," his "reworking," "transforming," etc., that Wright can establish his comparisons with Paul on one side and Judaism on the other.

This brings me to a final study on the concept of religion and the study of Paul (or rather, the early followers of Jesus more generally). It is a chapter by William Arnal and Russell McCutcheon entitled "The Origins of Christianity Within, and Without, 'Religion': A Case Study."[69] In the course of examining the role of the concept of religion in the work of New Testament scholars, they observe that one of the central problems with applying the concept of religion to ancient evidence is that it tends to focus attention on belief as a mental state that precedes actions.[70] The problematic status of "belief" in historical studies has been well established, both in the fields of philosophy and anthropology and of religious studies.[71] Arnal and McCutcheon note that, among other specific problems it causes in the study of early Christianity,

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(1.7). He claims to "discern beliefs and motivations . . . underneath the deeds and words which come into the public domain" (1.29).

[68] I stopped counting after reaching 50 instances of the phrase "Paul believed." And these are not all simply quotations from Paul's letters. In many cases, despite what Paul says (or does not say), Wright is able to identify what Paul *actually believed*. For example, although Rom 2:26 mentions uncircumcised people who "keep the ordinances of the law" and "fulfill the law," which appears to mean "uncircumcised people keeping the commandments," Wright is able to divine that Paul "clearly has in mind a different sort of law-fulfilment" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2.922). And even though Paul never uses the phrase "true Israel," or "true Jew," or "true circumcision" with reference to his addressees, Wright can confidently declare that these phrases "express what [Paul] has in mind" (2.1187, note 536).

[69] The chapter is part of a collection of essays by Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134–214.

[70] Ibid., 142–49. The authors do note that there are a variety of other problems introduced by the use of the concept of religion: "The issue of belief will have to stand as a synecdoche for the problems involved in treating the New Testament materials as data for 'religion.' Space does not permit a thorough recitation of the many other ways in which the notion of 'religion' interferes with or inhibits our understanding of Christian origins as explicable, mundane, and the product of behaviors and characteristics common to the human race" (149).

[71] See, for example, Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972); and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Belief," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21–35.

> the centrality of belief . . . has served to reify the [Christian] tradition, leading us to think in terms of the identity, consistency, and continuity of Christianity over time and in different circumstances. As a result, we often neglect the ways in which the tradition is divided and conflicted . . . we also make the mistake of assuming that the same texts or creeds function in the same ways in different historical periods or social contexts and begin to posit fanciful lines of continuous "tradition" that serve as communicative vectors for these allegedly persistent ideas.[72]

For these and other reasons, Arnal and McCutcheon conclude that "the most productive directions in recent New Testament scholarship have been precisely those that wrest the ancient Christian materials *away* from religious categories."[73] I cannot pretend to have myself solved all the difficult philosophical and historiographical problems presented by the concept of belief.[74] Nevertheless, the relentless focus on "Paul's beliefs" that we see in Wright's work surely obscures other potential loci for generating meaning using Paul's letters, as I hope to demonstrate in the final section of this article.

Possible Directions for Paul and Religion

What, then, are the possible ways ahead for the concept of religion in the study of Paul's letters? Although Sanders's work (and his implicit concept of religion) has been highly influential in Pauline studies, I do not think it is an especially promising avenue for further research. Rather, the approaches represented in the exchange between Judge and Meeks seem more potentially fruitful to me. If, following Judge, we momentarily set aside religion when approaching the data of Paul's letters, we can devote more attention to finding and describing other possible analogues for groups of Jesus' followers in the ancient textual and material remains. Refining Judge's observation that some meetings of Jesus' followers would have appeared to be meetings of "scholastic communities,"

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[72] Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane*, 143.

[73] Ibid., 149. Or as they phrase it elsewhere, "our comprehension of the origins of Christianity [is] fostered by moving *away* from the idea of religion, rather than *toward* it" (ibid., 151).

[74] I do think that understanding belief as part of a field of practices (and not exclusively prior to "practice") seems to be the only workable way forward. See the discussion of Stowers's recent work below.

much illuminating work has been carried out specifically on Paul's letters and the literature of the various philosophical schools.[75] Considerable efforts have also been made in gathering evidence for ancient *collegia* and guild groups with an eye toward comparison with the group structures and activities outlined in Paul's letters.[76] It seems to me that various Greek and Roman civic and administrative social formations might also yield interesting models for thinking about Pauline groups. Paul did, after all, address his letters to *ekklēsiai*, which he characterized as being part of a *politeuma*. In addition to such vocabulary, one can also consider practices, such as letter writing and the sending of emissaries, which were ubiquitous in the running of Roman civil administration.[77] These sorts of approaches allow us to see that Paul's groups may well have not been very uniform at all. To put it another way, some of his addressees will have

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[75] The foremost examples come from the work of Troels Engberg-Pedersen. See his *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) and *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For the Epicureans, see Clarence E. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). For Platonists, see Emma Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). While some of this work is liable to the charge of being overly focused on the beliefs of Paul and the philosophers in isolation from practices, Engberg-Pedersen and Glad do have a good deal to say about community formation. Still more could be said about how groups of philosophers were described by their contemporaries. On this point, see Loveday Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 60–83; and Stanley K. Stowers, "Does Pauline Christianity Resemble a Hellenistic Philosophy?" in *Paul Beyond the Judaism / Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 81–102.

[76] For the gathering of primary sources, see John S. Kloppenborg and Richard S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011). The first volume covered Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, and Thrace. Additional volumes are forthcoming. For select sources in translation, see Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012). For an application to the Pauline letters, see Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

[77] Such practices have appeared as anomalous or even "unique" to those who understand the followers of Jesus as a self-evidently religious phenomenon. Jan Bremmer has written that the trans-local connections among early followers of Jesus and their letter writing habits "were totally unique in antiquity, as there was nothing comparable in Greco-Roman religion" (Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity in the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack, and Stark* [2nd ed.; Groningen: Barkhuis, 2010], 69).

appeared to outsiders to be acting like philosophical schools, other groups will have more frequently been classed as taking part in rank *superstitio*; some will have looked like a typical burial society. Such identifications would also depend on what activities of the group were being observed and who was doing the observing.

Another potential benefit of simply bracketing "religion" when analyzing Paul's letters is that it can make what appear to be "perennial problems" in the study of Paul's letters seem curious or even unnecessary. Consider the issue of "Paul and Judaism." I would hope that, by this point in my discussion, this formulation would seem bizarre. Mark Nanos and others have suggested that we should be talking instead about "Paul's Judaism" or "Paul within Judaism."[78] In general terms, I would agree with this suggestion, although my preferred understanding of *ioudaismos* when discussing Paul follows Steve Mason's compelling argument that, like other Greek verbal nouns formed from *izein* verbs, *ioudaismos* refers primarily to activity ("Judaizing," to use Mason's translation).[79] This way of thinking shifts our attention to Paul's activities, his practices, and his occupation as "apostle to the Gentiles." Such an orientation is, in different ways and with different emphases, making inroads in some circles of Pauline scholarship.[80] This kind of work allows us to pose a new series of questions to Paul's letters and think rather differently about the early followers

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[78] Mark Nanos, "Paul and Judaism: Why Not Paul's Judaism?" in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 117–60; and the essays collected in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*.

[79] Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512. Subsequent scholarship has called for greater nuance regarding Mason's arguments concerning the translation of *ioudaios*; see, for example, Michael L. Satlow, "Jew or Judaean?" in *"The One Who Sows Bountifully": Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, ed. Caroline Johnson Hodge et al. (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), 165–75. I would also distance myself from Mason's overall reading of Paul's letters, but Mason's basic argument about the verbal aspect of *ioudaismos* seems to me to be sound. Seth Schwartz's reply to Mason concerns post-Pauline usage of the term; see Schwartz, "How Many Judaisms Were There? A Critique of Neusner and Smith on Definition and Mason and Boyarin on Categorization," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2 (2011), 208–38.

[80] See, for example, Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–52; Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*; Joshua D. Garroway, *Paul's Gentile Jews: Neither Jew nor Gentile, But Both* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Mark Nanos, "Paul's Non-Jews Do Not Become 'Jews,' But Do They Become 'Jewish'?: Reading Romans 2:25–29 Within Judaism, Alongside Josephus," *JJMJS* 1 (2014): 26–53.

of Jesus (apart from their later, retrospective incorporation as "founders" of Christianity).

A second trajectory is represented by Meeks's use of a self-consciously modern anthropological model of religion, an etic approach. This method has been most fruitfully explored in recent years by Stanley Stowers.[81] Based on a robust theory of practice, Stowers's model of religion is explicitly a second-order formulation.[82] Establishing his interest in religion as taking account of "all activities connected with beliefs about gods, ancestors, and so on—not just those that can be thought of as sanctioned by the kinds of complex social formations that we call religions," Stowers allows for different modes of religion, such as "the religion of everyday exchange" in which gods and other non-obvious beings are "conceived as interested parties with whom people carry on mundane social exchange."[83] In contrast to this mode of religion is the "religion of the literate cultural producer," who deals in the production and interpretation of texts.[84]

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[81] Stowers's position on social theory, is, however, quite distinct from that which Meeks advocated in 1983. See Stowers's critical review of *The First Urban Christians* in "The Social Sciences and the Study of Early Christianity," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism Volume V: Studies in Judaism and its Greco-Roman Context*, ed. William Scott Green (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 149–81. The positions of both scholars have evolved since that time. Although Stowers's more recent essays draw on a host of theorists, they are based primarily in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, such as *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and the works of Theodore R. Schatzki, especially his book, *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). Stowers has developed these ideas in a number of discrete studies. For his theoretical grounding, see "The Ontology of Religion," in *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Equinox, 2008), 434–49. For examples of this theory in action, see Stowers, "Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Households and Families," in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 5–19; and idem, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings Versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences, and Textual Mysteries," in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, ed. Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (New York: Oxford, 2011), 35–56.

[82] Stowers, "The Ontology of Religion," 443.

[83] Stowers, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings," 36. The distinction between "religion" and "a religion" is crucial for Stowers. I see a potential for confusion here; see the cautionary comments in Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion," 449–50 and note 28.

[84] Stowers, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings," 36–42. Stowers adds two caveats: "Two things must be kept in mind in order to understand the effects of literate

Because of its basis in practice theory, Stowers's notion of religion does have a place for belief, but it is less central and autonomous than in the more typical theories of religion criticized by Arnal and McCutcheon:

> Because mind is bodily activity, and human activity mostly takes the form of socially organized activities, mind is instituted in practices. . . . It is a constant mistake of various forms of individualism to assume that individuals can perform intelligible actions in virtue of beliefs and desires alone.[85]

Approaching the Pauline materials with this type of framework allows Stowers to read the letters in an illuminating manner. The content of Paul's letters places him in the role of the literate specialist, but many of the addressees of Paul's letters were likely more involved in the religion of household and everyday exchange. Thus, a given event (say, baptism for the dead or the Lord's Supper) elicited from Paul and his addressees quite different sets of expectations and different ways of making meaning.[86] This observation highlights the multiple possibilities of what it might have meant to participate in these groups: What if a given Corinthian's sole connection to the Jesus group was a once-a-week meal? Pauline scholars tend to imagine commitment to Paul's instructions and beliefs as a twenty-four hour a day, everyday affair, but this seems unlikely for the majority of his addressees. Commitment levels probably varied and led to the kinds of disagreements that Paul's letters mention.[87] Stowers's use of the concept of religion directs our attention to such potential fissures and the instability of the groups that the rhetoric of Paul's letters is attempting to shape into

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specialists on religion. First, any literate textual practice, including writing, reading, and interpretive practices, introduces modifications into, or overlaid against, the religion of everyday social exchange and civic religion. Second, the degrees of novelty and difference that separated the religion of the literate specialist from the religion of everyday social exchange and civic religion varied greatly among different kinds of specialists in the field. This field of literate exchange had many subfields, organized by ethnicity, social rank, educational opportunity, etc." (41–42).

[85] Stowers, "The Ontology of Religion," 440.

[86] Stowers, "Kinds of Myth, Meals, and Power: Paul and the Corinthians," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 105–49.

[87] See, for instance, 1 Cor 8:1–13.

communities.[88] This kind of analysis is difficult, if not impossible, when focusing strictly on "Paul's beliefs." Thus, the potential of this sort of redescriptive exploration using religion is considerable, but as Arnal and McCutcheon warn, deploying religion in this way requires an "extreme degree of self-consciousness."[89]

Conclusions

Both implicitly and explicitly the concept of religion has played, and continues to play, a large role in the study of Paul's letters. My main argument is that Pauline scholars should always be conscious of their use of the concept and the ways it might be shaping their projects.[90] I hesitate to join the chorus of voices that call for a complete disavowal of the concept.[91] The two approaches I have just outlined above are not at all incompatible. They can, in fact, be seen as complementary. Once we have moved on from searching for any kind of supposedly universal "religion" in Paul's letters, we may, with greater clarity, use self-consciously analytic definitions of religion to open up interpretive options that have been obscured by assuming that "religion" naturally inheres in the Pauline texts. Such a move can create space for reading Paul differently.[92]

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[88] Stowers has elsewhere undermined this notion of stable "Pauline communities" with shared beliefs (Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *MTSR* 23 [2011]: 238–56).

[89] Arnal and McCutcheon, "The Origins of Christianity," 208, note 38.

[90] Such caution is, of course, not to be limited to the concept of religion, even if this particular concept can be exceptionally mischievous in the field of biblical studies.

[91] I noted my differences with Wilfred Cantwell Smith above. More recently, there have been calls for abandoning the concept of religion and attempting to make a useful cross-cultural analytic concept out of soteriology in its place (Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* [New York: Oxford, 2000]). Yet, as we have seen, soteriology is itself quite dependent upon traditional Christian notions of religion.

[92] I am grateful to Mary Jane Cuyler, Dale Martin, Stanley Stowers, and an anonymous reviewer at *JJMJS* for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.