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Innehåll

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Övriga artiklar/Other articles

Recensioner/Book Reviews

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The Protestant Historiographic Myth and the Discourse of Differentiation in Scholarly Studies of Colossians

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1. Introduction

In spite of a lively debate during the last century, there is still no scholarly consensus about the identity of the opponents in Colossians. The aim of this article is not to put forward yet another attempt to solve this complex historical problem, but rather to examine how boundaries are drawn between the author and the opponents in Colossians and how similar boundaries are maintained, developed or even created in scholarly historiography.

In what Jonathan Z. Smith refers to as the "Protestant Historiographic Myth," nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of biblical studies often understood early Christian developments in terms of an original purity that was lost at a later stage. According to this historiographic construction, the essence of Christianity was distorted through interaction with the cultural and religious environment of the Roman Empire and through the incorporation of pagan elements.

Throughout the article, I argue that this essentialist conception of early Christianity has shaped the construction of the opponents of Colossians in scholarly literature. In studies of Colossians, many modern scholars have, problematically, recreated the dichotomy between an original apostolic Christianity and later Hellenized deviations. This legacy of the "Protestant Historiographic myth" is mainly expressed in two ways, either as an opposition between the author's pure apostolic Christianity and the opponents, who are understood as a syncretistic group, composed of a mixture of various Hellenistic elements, or as a dichotomy between Christianity, as represented by the author, and "religion," as represented by the opponents.

2. A Theoretical Framework: The Protestant Historiographic Myth and the Discourse of Legitimate and Illegitimate Christianity

During the last three decades, critical studies of scholarly bias in the academic study of religion have become more common. A good example of this positive trend in some scholarship is Smith's *Drudgery Divine*, where he argues that the Protestant notion of an original purity of earliest Christianity, distorted by the intellectualism and Hellenism of the early church fathers, has had profoundly negative influences on much biblical scholarship.[1] Such a notion of an original purity, only accessible through reading of scripture (*sola scriptura*), implies that Christianity has been seen as something totally unique, a phenomenon sui generis, not comparable or reducible to anything else. Smith argues that on a historical level, this is "an assertion of the radical incomparability of the Christian 'proclamation' with respect to the 'environment.'"[2] In other words, "pure" Christianity is placed *outside* of history and it is through subsequent interactions with the cultural and historical environment that the decline starts. According to what Smith calls "the Protestant Historiographic myth," Christianity is perceived as unique in contrast to other religions, just as apostolic or Pauline Christianity is unique with respect to other (later) Christianities.[3]

Smith also recognizes that this "Protestant historiographic myth" is present in more recent scholarship, but disguised as if evaluating traditions in terms of authenticity was a question on chronology.[4] In other words, the earliest tradition wins the de facto prize for being the most authentic.

This hierarchy of chronology is not, however, the only way to separate authentic apostolic Christianity from heretical deviations. In this article, I identify two additional strategies to differentiate between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" Christianity: 1. The taxonomy of revealed and religious, and 2. The taxonomy of syncretic and pure.

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[1] See Smith 1990, 1–35.
[2] Smith 1990, 39.
[3] Smith 1990, 43.
[4] Smith 1990, 43.

2.1 The Revealed and the Religious

In *The Invention of the World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa demonstrates that the notion of world religions is relatively young and was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the designation began to occur commonly in historiographic works.[5] Moreover, Masuzawa demonstrates that many aspects of the academic study of religion in the eighteenth, nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century were theologically motivated. The religions of the world were defined over against Christianity, often understood as inferior, primitive and "older."[6] The divisions of diverse religious groups and practices were also motivated by theological interests, arranged in a hierarchical order and put into the simplistic categories of Christianity (that is, orthodoxy), Judaism and Mohammedanism (inferior, yet acceptable) or Paganism (furthest from the true faith and pretty much everything that does not fall into any of the former categories).[7]

One common denominator for the historiography of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century biblical studies and comparative religious studies is the tendency to use a discourse of religion to separate the orthodox from the heretical, the "revealed" from the historical. According to the Protestant historiography of early-twentieth-century biblical studies, Christianity is not originally a religion—it is something wholly different, a phenomenon sui generis. It was only in a later stage that Christianity started to resemble a religion, when, through contact with its cultural and religious environment, it adopted pagan rites and practices.[8] Similarly, the nineteenth-century theologians of comparative religious studies depicted Christianity as a "new" faith, in contrast to the non-Christian "older" religions, stressing either the notion of Hegelian progress from deficient to perfect, or depicted Christianity as something wholly unique that could be placed outside of historical events.[9]

In this article, I argue that a similar distinction between the Christianity of the author and the "religion" of the opponents occurs in the scholarly works on Colossians.

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[5] Masuzawa 2005, 37–53.
[6] Masuzawa 2005, 79–82.
[7] Masuzawa 2005, 50–51.
[8] Smith 1990, 43–45.
[9] Masuzawa 2005, 79–80.

2.2 The Pure and the Polluted

If one finds Smith's conceptualization persuasive, the dysphemistic implications of "syncretism" lose their meaning, since syncretism implies that certain phenomena are less authentic and consist of a mixture of influences—in contrast to other phenomena that are more pure. While this may be true when it comes to chemistry, it is much harder to apply the same principle to *social* phenomena, including religious groups. Yet the term syncretism occurs frequently in articles, monographs and biblical commentaries dealing with the opponents of Colossians.

If the term should be of any analytical value it is necessary that this designation can be contrasted to other phenomena that are not mixed. Mircea Eliade defines religion as "something wholly other" than the profane.[10] From this point of view, it is of course possible to argue that there is an "unmixed" element in religious thought. But as Ron Cameron and Merill P. Miller (and many other modern critical scholars) demonstrate, this one and similar essentialist conceptions of religion rest on a metaphysical ground and cannot be used as an argument in a academic context.[11] Rather, it is necessary to acknowledge the social dimension of religious groups. From this point of view, that it is primarily the social elements that constitute a religious group, it is difficult to argue that one particular group or strand of thought is "pure" while another is "syncretistic."

Another scholar who is particularly critical towards the designation "syncretistic" is Robert M. Royalty. Royalty argues against scholars like Clinton E. Arnold who use the term to identify the opponents, and raises the question whether the designation can add anything of analytical value to the discussion.

> Casting Jewish, Gnostic, or pagan groups as the enemy within a canonized text without first considering Christian groups reads the polemical interactions of the earliest Christian communities within the narrow ideological confines of the canon. This move presupposes that Colossians expresses a "pure" form of proto-ortodox Christianity and the opponents were heterodox, if not heretical. If not Jewish or Gnostic "heretics" or "errorists", the author's opponents could also be "syncretistic", again with the implication that the author, usually Paul himself, expresses a "pure" Christianity. For instance Clinton Arnold, a recent proponent of a fully developed theory of "syncretistic" origins for the opponents, notes that the designation (e.g.

[10] Eliade 1959, 10.
[11] Cameron and Miller 2004, 498–99.

> syncretistic) "is descriptive insofar as the competing teaching represents a blending of variety of religious traditions". But this is a description of all of the Christianities of the NT, including that of the author of Colossians.[12]

Royalty concludes:

> Since 'syncretistic' is equally descriptive for all the Christianities that developed in Asia Minor during the first two centuries of the Common Era, the term does not bring precision to delineating the opposing groups referred to by the apostle.[13]

I concur with Royalty that the category of syncretism is part of an ideologically tainted discourse that only serves to differentiate between orthodoxy and heresy. It cannot, however, contribute to a better understanding of actual religious groups and historical events.

2.3 Summary and Working Hypothesis

According to the "Protestant Historiographic Myth," Christianity emerged as a wholly unique phenomenon. This original purity was distorted at a later stage, when Christianity merged with the surrounding cultural and religious milieu and became "historicized." The legacy of the "Protestant Historiograhic Myth" is still present in some scholarship, albeit in a modern disguise. A working hypothesis throughout this article is that the differentiation between apostolic Christianity and later deviations primarily is expressed either in a taxonomy of "Religion" and "Christianity," or "Syncretic" and "Pure."

Before I proceed to discuss the use of these designations in scholarly portrayals of addressees and opponents in Colossians, I offer a brief overview of the historical context of Colossians and the boundary demarcations present in the text.

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[12] Royalty 2002, 333–34.
[13] Royalty 2002, 334.

3. The Epistle to the Colossians

3.1 Purpose and Historical Context

The dating and authorship for Colossians has been hotly contested. In this debate, I concur with scholars such as Angela Standhartinger, Robert Royalty and Robert Wilson, who argue that Colossians should be dated in the 70s or 80s of the first century and moreover should be viewed as a Pauline pseudepigraphon.[14] The eschatology of an already realized resurrection, the cosmic Christology and the total absence of any references to the imminent coming of Christ suggest a later date for Colossians, after Paul had died.

Equally contested is the occasion for the letter. A majority of scholars agree that the author composed the Epistle to the Colossians in order to refute a particular group of false teachers.[15] A working, and unexamined, hypothesis for this group of scholars is that Colossians addresses *just one set* of opponents—a point that the letter neither confirms nor denies. There is no consensus, however, regarding the identity of the opponents. A minority of scholars, such as Angela Standhartinger and Morna Hooker, argue that Colossians is not concerned with a specific group of opponents, but rather with the general threat of Hellenism[16] or internal differences.[17]

Finally, a third group of scholars, here represented by James D. G. Dunn and Walter Wilson, argue that the main focus and reason for writing is the author's own paraenetic teaching.[18] While the opponents do exist, Wilson stresses that the author only is interested in them insofar that they can be used as a negative type to strengthen the authority of the author's own school. Accordingly, the opponents were not considered as an immediate threat to the community, but rather perceived as a negative model.

My own position is closest to the third group. While I do believe that the author responded to external pressure from other Christian interpreters, I find plausible that the exhortations in 2:6–23 primarily serves the admonitory function of educating the addressees.

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[14] See Wilson 2005, 35; Standhartinger 2004, 581; Royalty 2002, 334–35. For scholars who advocate an earlier date and a Pauline authorship, see Lohse 1971, 4; MacDonald 1980, 11; Barth and Blanke 1994, 125; Murphy-O'Connor 2001, 1191.
[15] Talbert 2007, 14; Patzia 1984, 7; Martin 1972, 4. See also the discussion below.
[16] Hoooker 1990, 121–36.
[17] Standhartinger 2004, 588.
[18] Wilson 1997, 152, 172; Dunn 1996, 25–26.

3.2 Interpreting Boundary Demarcations in Colossians

So what can we with confidence know about the opponents from the polemical passages in Colossians? Interestingly, there are no references to any named competitors in Colossians, as in for example 1 Corinthians or Galatians. In contrast to the genuine Pauline letters, the author consistently makes use of indefinite pronouns in the hortative passages in Colossians. In 2:4 the negative indefinite pronoun μηδείς is used for the anonymous opponents: "I am saying this so that no one may deceive you through plausible arguments."[19] In 2:8, the prohibitive imperative, βλέπετε μή, is paired with the indefinite pronoun, τις, to warn the addressees: "See that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit." A similar pairing of a prohibitive imperative and τις occurs again in 2:16 when the author goes back to criticize the opponents: "Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or baths." In 2:18 an imperative is paired with the negative indefinite pronoun μηδείς: "Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worshipping of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking."

Standhartinger suggests that the description of the opponents does not reflect the practices of a particular group because the letter was intended to circulate throughout the Graeco-Roman world.[20] Walter Wilson, on the other hand, argues that the reason why the author provides so scarce information about the opponents could be that he does not want to betray the post-Pauline origin of the letter.[21] Here I find Wilson's argumentation persuasive, although I concur with Standhartinger that the opponents might just as well be several groups rather than one specific school of interpretation.

To sum it up, the author rejects:

- Philosophy according to human traditions and the elements of the world (Col 2:8, 2:20).
- Observance of food regulations and holy days. Or more precisely: the tendency of the practitioners to judge those who fail to observe these practices (Col 2:16; 2:21).

[19] NRSV is used for the quotations.
[20] Standhartinger 2004, 592.
[21] Wilson 1997, 171.

- Worship of angels and visionary-oriented mysticism (Col 2:18).
- "Worldly" regulations; self-imposed piety (Col 2:18, 21–23).

Particularly striking is that all of these practices that the author rejects also can be found in the early Christian movement. As Karen King points out, it was other Christian schools of interpretation that posed the greatest threat in the making of early Christian identity, since they challenged the self-definition and orthodoxy of the own group.[22] "Real differences," King writes, "had to be fully exploited and even exaggerated, while similarities were best overlooked altogether or portrayed as malicious and superficial imitation."[23]

The boundary demarcations in the Pauline letters also seem to work according to the same logic. While Paul certainly did not approve of polytheism and pagan practices, the fiercest polemics in the Pauline corpus is targeting other Christians, rather than pagans.[24] Similarly, the "Antichrists" in 1 John are fellow Christians and former members of the community (1 John 2:18).

Col 2:16 seems to refer to food laws. Throughout the New Testament, and particularly in the opponents of Paul, we have several examples of Christians who followed the Mosaic Law.[25] Examples of visionary-oriented and apocalyptic Christianity can be also be found in the New Testament, most notably in the Revelation of John. In "Dwelling on Visions: On the Nature of the So-Called 'Colossians Heresy,'" Robert Royalty suggest that it may be the community behind the Revelation of John that the author of Colossians polemizes against.[26] While I would not go as far, I find no support in this passage for the notion of a non-Christian identity of the opponents.

Col 2:21–23 depicts the opponents' rules and regulations as "worldly," naturally, in contrast to the author's teaching. That particular practices are described as "worldly" or hypocritical in contrast to the own school, which's founding figure is understood as divinely inspired, is in no sense unique for rhetoric of Colossians. A similar rhetoric occurs in philosophical literature,[27] as well as in the canonical texts of the NT.[28]

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[22] King 2003, 22–23.
[23] King 2003, 23.
[24] See for example Gal 1:6–9; 5:12; 2 Cor 11:12–15; Phil 3:2.
[25] Phil 3; Gal 2; Acts 10:9–16 are only a few of numerous examples in the NT.
[26] See Royalty 2002.
[27] For a discussion on the conventions of ancient polemic, see Johnson 1989.

Col 2:8 has traditionally been and is still by many modern scholars understood as displaying a polemic stance towards philosophy as a whole.[29] Other scholars such as Walter Wilson reject this rigid division between philosophy and Christianity,[30] and argue that an ancient letter containing a moral exhortation, where the addressees are urged to adopt a certain way of life, would immediately be recognized as a conventional form of philosophical discourse.[31]

In Col 2:8, when the author exhorts the addressees to be careful, so that they are not "taken captives through philosophy," he is contrasting the philosophy κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, according to human tradition, and κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, according to the elements of the world, against the philosophy that is κατὰ χριστόν, according to Christ. This differentiation between a "worldly" philosophy and the teachings of the author, which is divinely inspired, is, as discussed above, part of a conventional rhetoric of exclusion.

4. Apostolic Christianity and "Religion"

In a monograph from 1973, John J. Gunther accounts for at least 44 different scholarly opinions on the identity of the opponents in Colossians.[32] Particularly interesting is that almost all of these designations depict the opponents as "religion," as something other than Christianity. The ones who do acknowledge the Christian identity of the opponents seem to have felt the need to differentiate between a "legitimate" and "illegitimate" Christianity. While the author of the epistle (and, presumably, also the followers) is characterized as simply Christian, the opponents were, for

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[28] See for example Matt 6:1–8 and 6:16–21, where a "worldly," self-imposed piety is contrasted to the "true" piety of the believers. See also the contrast between the divinely ordained order of Paul's theology and the worldly practices of the opponents in Gal 1:6–2:10 and 1 Cor 2:6–16.

[29] Lohse 1971, 94–96; Martin 1972, 74; Bruce 1984, 98; Hartman 1985, 93–94; Talbot 2007, 211.

[30] Wilson 1997, 8. See also Hübner 1997, 75–76, who puts emphasis on the term "empty deceit," that immediately follows "philosophy" in Col 2:8 and argues that it is used by the author to clarify that it is a particular, errant form of philosophy he rejects rather than philosophy as a whole. A similar position can also be found in McDonald 1980, 76.

[31] See Wilson 1997, 47–50.

[32] Gunther 1973, 3–4.

example, "Jewish Christians appealing to Moses and natural philosophy."[33]

There are two common denominators for this large group of scholars: first, a tendency to interpret the opponents as one particular group, in contrast to several different groups of opponents; and, second, a tendency to understand the opponents' group as something wholly other than the Christianity of the author. This second point requires some clarification. Clearly, there are differences between the author of Colossians and the group (or groups) that advocated the practices which the author rejects—otherwise there would not have been any need to reject them. Therefore, it is necessary to ask how these differences should be understood and how wide the theological and cosmological gulf between the author's school and the opponents' actually was.

Whether the opponents are interpreted as Proto-Gnostics,[34] Essenes,[35] Middle Platonists,[36] or Neo-Pythagoreans,[37] they are understood and defined against the Christianity of the author and as something wholly different. While many scholars of this group tend to emphasize the dichotomy between Christianity and for example Proto-Gnostics (or whatever group the opponents are identified as), these proponents rarely problematize the issue of diverse and competing groups of Christianity. The scholarly boundaries are drawn between an apostolic Christianity and "religion" (as the "Other"), represented by the reconstructed identity of the opponents.[38]

This claim also requires some clarification. I do not argue that all scholars who interpret the identity of the opponents as non-Christian are victims of a simplistic and essentialist view of history. James Dunn, who understands the opponents as a Jewish group in Colossae whose practices stand in oppositions to the group of the author, is a great scholar whose works are anything but simplistic.[39] In his commentary on Colossians, he depicts the cultural and religious environment as diverse and complex.

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[33] See the examples in Gunther 1973, 3–4.
[34] MacDonald 1980, 12–14.
[35] Gunther 1973, 314–17.
[36] DeMaris 1994, 98–133.
[37] Schweizer 1988, 464–66.
[38] For examples of this boundary demarcation, see Lohse 1971, 2–3; Martin 1972, 6–12; MacDonald 1980, 12–14; Bruce 1984, 26–28; Barth and Blanke 1994, 23–39; Murphy-O'Connor 2001, 1192.
[39] Dunn 1996, 29–33.

Similarly, DeMaris, who advocates that the opponents should be understood as Middle Platonists, shows that he is well aware of early Christian diversity and does not present a dichotomy between Christ believers (as if it was a homogenous concept) and Pagan religion.[40]

DeMaris, however, creates another dichotomy, namely a dichotomy between the original, apostolic Christianity and later deviations and misinterpretations (in this case, the author of Colossians). With a rhetoric resembling Smith's "Protestant Historiographic Myth" but with an added new liberal touch to it, DeMaris argues that the author of Colossians has distorted the original message of Christianity and needs correction [*sic!*]:

> Anyone who claims to speak for Paul, as the author of Colossians did, bears a heavy responsibility, especially if the pursuit of victory in a dispute, or perhaps control of a community, results in a distortion of Paul's thought, which seems to the case in Colossians. In opposing Christ to the elements of the world (2:8) and devaluating the latter entirely (2:20), the letter writer did not do full justice to Paul's theology. Paul was well aware of worldly powers inimical to God's rule, but he expected reconciliation to entail more than conquest; he awaited the ultimate transformation and redemption of all creation (Rom. 8:18-25). The letter writer's caricature of Paul has not always served later generation of Christians well; it deserves correction.[41]

According to the Protestant Historiographic Myth, Christian purity and unity preceded diversity. There were no rivaling Christian schools of interpretation—there was Christianity, and there was "heresy" and "religion." Although some of the heresies resembled Christianity, they were not Christian. These underlying assumptions still seem to guide the interpretive work of many modern scholars. Barth and Blanke's commentary from 1994 provides perhaps one of the best examples of this scholarly tendency.

Although Barth and Blanke do acknowledge that "the opponents whom Paul is approaching regard themselves as Christians,"[42] they find the term "Colossian Religion" to be the most appropriate designation for the group, since its components seem to overlap with many traditions common for

[40] DeMaris 1994 *passim*.
[41] DeMaris 1994, 147–48.
[42] Barth and Blanke 1994, 385.

ancient Mediterranean religions.[43] Despite the self-understanding of the group, Barth and Blanke choose to neglect early Christian diversity and portray the opponents, not as a rivaling Christian school, but as "religion."

A troublesome question that puzzled some of the early "Protestant Historiographers" was how pagan religion, even after the advent of Christianity (which was a vastly superior teaching), could attract followers. A common solution to this problem was to depict first- to fourth-century antiquity as an age of anxiety, where pagan charlatan priests profited on the irrationality and fear of common folks.[44] According to these scholars, Christianity was the true answer, but insecurity made people choose "religion." Ralph P. Martin writes: "Hence the central place of the heavenly bodies in popular Hellenistic religion was established once the astrologers had capitalized on this yearning for a 'religion' to fill the void."[45]

Francis W. Beare's commentary on Colossians provides a similar contextualization:

> It was a product of the mental and spiritual instability of the times, and it was bound to perish with the contemporaneous state of mind that begot it. We may be thankful that a great Christian thinker was moved to deal with it in the moment of its first attempt to capture the Christian imagination and to provide the church with the weapons to defeat it in the greater struggles of the second century.[46]

This dated and dubious view of antiquity as an "age of anxiety" has been challenged in a recent study by Nicola Denzey Lewis. In her book, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Denzey Lewis argues that there is no compelling evidence that supports the view of the first century as a more "irrational" and anxious age than any other particular time.[47] One of the sources that Denzey Lewis discusses is Colossians, whose elements, powers and principalities, when interpreted in light of much later texts and the presupposition that humanity felt particularly alienated during late antiquity, have been understood as personifica-

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[43] Barth and Blanke 1994, 39, write, "As a consequence, the Colossian Religion remains an unsolved puzzle."

[44] In modern scholarly literature, these religious movements are often pejoratively and anachronistically likened to the New Age movements of the twentieth century. See Barth and Blanke 1994, 39–41, for a discussion of "modern analogies."

[45] Martin 1972, 14.

[46] Beare 1955, 140.

[47] Denzey Lewis 2013, 26–28.

tions of oppressing and enslaving astrological entities.[48] Denzey Lewis shows, on the contrary, that the notion of an irrational humanity, helplessly caught in the clutches of fate until they are saved through the faith in Christ, was a part of an early Christian ideological discourse with the purpose to contrast the irrationality of the non-Christian life to the perfected life of the believer.[49]

Unfortunately, similar depictions of "spiritual instability" and Christian victory over pagan irrationalism can still be found in modern publications. One of the more extreme examples can be found in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's article on Colossians in *Oxford Bible Commentary*. Murphy-O'Connor creates the following picture of the opponents in Colossians:

> Here [the author] has to deal with a fashionable religious fad without intellectual depth, whose proponents floated in a fantasy world. His concern is to restore a sense of reality, to set the feet of the misguided on solid ground. They grasped at shadows. He had to show them that Christ was substance (2:17).[50]

One may think that Murphy-O'Connor's comments on the opponents in Colossians reflect a bygone era, when scholars employing an essentialist historiography did not even bother to conceal their contempt for Paul's opponents or even of (possibly fictitious) opponents, as presented by the pseudo-Pauline authors. This is however not the case. Murphy-O'Connor's article is a part of a Bible commentary from the beginning of the twenty-first century, published by Oxford University Press, one of the most prestigious university presses of the world. Since Murphy-O'Connor's approach is emblematic of a problematic trend among exegetes, this article's critical study of the making of boundaries between authenticity and heresy in Colossians and of essentialist construals of boundary demarcations in scholarly literature is needed.

5. The Opponents as "Syncretists"

Since the features that the author rejects were commonly occurring among all sorts of religious groups contemporary to Colossians, it is understandable that some scholars have described the opponents as "syncretistic."

[48] Denzey Lewis 2013, 66–67.
[49] Denzey Lewis 2013, 23.
[50] Murhpy-O'Connor 2001, 1192.

The common denominator for scholars who belong to the syncretistic school of interpretation, like Hartman, Patzia and Martin, is that they all acknowledge the limitations of the religious categories of late antiquity and argue that none of them are sufficient to describe the identity of the opponents.[51] I share this position. It could, however, be questioned whether the term syncretism is much more appropriate. As has been discussed in the theoretical and methodological considerations, the term syncretism implies that some phenomena are mixed and that others are pure.

Problematically, the taxonomy of a pure apostolic Christianity and its mixed, Hellenistic counterpart is often combined with the notion that the syncretistic movement is confusing and irrational. A main component of the "Protestant Historiographic Myth" is the notion that Christianity originally was simple and rational. After being hijacked by Hellenism, the simple teachings of Jesus were distorted, confused and intellectualized.[52]

Lars Hartman depicts the "syncretism" of the opponents as follows:

> The syncretism which was a typical feature of the age meant a confusing ethnic and cultural pluralism in which many religions, philosophies and cults offered their solutions, also such as involved magic, mantics and astrology. Many individuals seem to have felt insecure and sought for meaning, structure, stability, perhaps for atonement with Tyche, or for support by powers stronger than destiny.[53]

Not all proponents of the syncretistic school of interpretation oppose Christianity and Pagan syncretistic identity, however. Hartman acknowledges that the opponents had a Christian self-understanding and were members of the church in Colossae.[54] The difference between the opponents and the author's group was then, according to Hartman, that the opponents were syncretistic (in contrast to the group of the author, which he implicitly states as non-syncretistic).[55] The syncretism of opponents was characterized by, among other things, astrology and veneration of intermediary beings, elements that all contained influences from other traditions. This depiction of the historical events surrounding Colossians resembles to a high degree Smith's "Protestant Historiographic Myth,"

[51] Martin 1972, 12–20; Patzia 1984, 4–7; Hartman 1985, 117–25.
[52] Smith 1990, 7–8.
[53] Hartman 1995, 36.
[54] Hartman 1985, 94.
[55] Hartman 1985, 117–25.

where the apostolic Christianity of the author is contrasted to the non-apostolic Christianity, corrupted through the incorporation of Pagan traditions.

In the scholarly accounts of the opponents, the proponents of the syncretistic school of interpretation often dissect the elements that constitute the "heresy" of the opponents, for example the cosmological details, and trace them back to other religious traditions.[56] The constituents of the author's pure Christianity are rarely (if ever) analyzed in terms of their genealogy. Rather they are considered as elemental components of Christianity. This is particularly interesting, since several modern critical scholars, including Nicola Denzey, stress that the author of Colossians and the opponents shared a common cosmology.[57]

It is clear from these cases that syncretism only serves to separate the orthodox from the heretical, the pure from the contaminated, and can therefore not contribute to a better understanding of actual religious groups and historical events.

6. Conclusion

Summarily, it is beyond dispute that boundary demarcations are present in Colossians, but it is unclear how they should be understood and towards whom they are directed. Modern scholars have interpreted the identity of the opponents as one particular group, either composed of a mixture of syncretistic elements (as contrasted to the "purity" of the author's school) or as a specific religious group, often presented as an opposition of Christianity, as represented by the author, and "religion," as represented by the opponents. The dichotomizing and simplistic taxonomy of *one* apostolic Christianity and several other Hellenized deviations (often referred to simply as "religion") is a modern scholarly construction, a "Protestant Historiographic Myth" as Smith phrases it,[58] and it needs to be challenged.

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[56] See for example Hartman 1985, 117–25; Patzia 1984, 4–7.

[57] Denzey Lewis 2013, 66–67.

[58] There could be additional explanations for the boundary demarcations in current scholarship. After all, Smith's Protestant historiography alone cannot account for everything. A relevant future project would therefore be to compare boundary demarcations in Protestant and Roman Catholic scholarship and see if they employ similar strategies in creating orthodoxy and separating the legitimate from the illegitimate. Due to the proportions of such a task—and the space constraints of the article—this undertaking will have to wait to another project.

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