CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Context of the Johannine Enigma

1. THE STUDY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

To understand the full dimensions of the Johannine enigma we must set our inquiry within the larger context of the study of early Christianity. By doing so we will see that the questions raised by the study of early Christianity are intricately related to the questions raised by the study of the Johannine enigma. We therefore begin with an examination of the nature of early Christianity. What was early Christianity like? What did the early Christians believe? How do we know what they believed? What particular difficulties does the inquirer encounter when asking questions about early Christianity?

A close examination reveals that there is considerable disagreement relating to these questions, many of which are grounded in different suppositions about the method and scope of historical inquiry. Such disagreements—and their significance—are well illustrated in the debate over orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity. In this discussion the Fourth Gospel has come to occupy a central place.

In the history of Christian thought, "orthodoxy" is conceived of as right belief, belief that corresponds to and is grounded in Divine Revelation. It thus is seen in contrast to "heresy," i.e., false or defective belief. In this conception orthodoxy and heresy constitute a binomial; moreover, each is used to define the other. Nevertheless, orthodoxy logically precedes heresy, for one cannot have heretical belief without a norm against which to judge it defective or false. As such, orthodoxy usually reaches formal definition with the appearance of heresy.

This point has relevance to the premises of what is called the Eusebian view of history, for, according to this position, ortho-

doxy historically predates heresy. This Eusebian or "classical" view saw the pattern of early Christian development as unbelief, right belief, and deviations into wrong belief. That is to say, unbelievers are first converted into orthodox Christian believers, and only later are there deviations from the norm with the rise of heresies. The pure Christian doctrine was revealed by Christ to his apostles, who were commissioned to take this unadulterated gospel to the portions of the world allotted to them. It was not until the apostles had died that the Church experienced its first heresy.

The Thesis of Walter Bauer

It is this interpretation of early Christianity's growth that Walter Bauer challenged in his book *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, translated into English as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.[1] After being neglected for many years, this book became the focal point of an important debate. The discussion which so belatedly ensued in the wake of Bauer's work focused attention on the problem of orthodoxy and heresy not only in early Christianity, but by implication in modern theology.

Bauer's view was sponsored by Bultmann and accepted by many Bultmannians, including Bultmann's most famous student, Ernst Käsemann. Käsemann wrote an article in which he asked: "Does the New Testament canon establish the unity of the Church?" His answer showed Bauer's influence—the New Testament canon rather established the "plurality of confessions."[2]

Bauer's pioneering study is important because of the crucial issues it raises. He has given renewed impetus to viewing Christian origins from the standpoint of diversity. Specifically, Bauer's work raises the following problems: Can the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" be applied correctly to earliest Christianity? Is "orthodoxy" to be seen as no more than that which gained acceptance by the church at large? Does Bauer's work contradict the claim of the Church to be in direct historical continuity with the apostles? Again, Bauer uses the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" without reference to the claims of the "orthodox" and "heretical" parties themselves; that is, he does not judge the claims or condemnations of either party. Eusebius used the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" with the claim that the assertions of the "orthodox" are true and

those of the "heretics" false. Is there an alternative way of using these terms?

Such churchmen as Eusebius viewed history providentially. They believed that the view that won out is true because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Bauer insisted on a "scientific" approach to history. Are these two views mutually exclusive? Has the orthodoxy/heresy debate reached an impasse at this point?

Now that we have discussed some of the questions raised by Bauer's work, we can examine in some detail his thesis.

In the introduction to the book, Bauer gives a programmatic sketch of intention, where he outlines his approach, in the spirit of the dictum *audiatur et altera pars* (Let the other side be heard). Hence, in his discussion of orthodoxy and heresy, he consciously avoids allowing his judgement to be swayed by one party:

> That party which perhaps as much through favourable circumstances as by its own merit eventually was thrust into the foreground, and which possibly has at its disposal today the more powerful, and thus the more prevalent voice, only because the chorus of the others has been muted.[3]

Bauer asserts that orthodoxy and heresy will be decided not by the church, but, ultimately, by history.[4]

The ecclesiastical position has four main suppositions: First, Jesus "revealed the pure doctrine to his apostles, partly before his death, and partly in the forty days before his ascension."[5] Second, after Jesus' death the apostles took the unadulterated gospel to the portions of the world allotted to them. Third, after the death of the apostles false doctrine crept in at the instigation of Satan. The pattern of development in earliest Christianity is thus envisaged as running unbelief, right belief, deviations into wrong belief. Bauer is disconcerted by the fact that there is scarcely "the faintest notion anywhere that unbelief might be changed directly into what the church calls false belief."[6] Fourth, there is the supposition that right belief is invincible.

It is these suppositions that Bauer intends to examine. As a historian he refuses to employ the correlatives "true" and "untrue," "good" and "bad." He is not easily convinced of the moral inferiority usually attributed to the heretics, nor does he believe it to be self-evident that heresies are a deviation from the genuine.

Having thus announced his intention, Bauer applies himself to his task. He begins with an examination of the region of Edessa in the post-apostolic age. Was there in the second century in Mesopotamia a large body of ecclesiastically organized Christians? After a lengthy and somewhat intricate discussion of the evidence, Bauer concludes that this is not the case. The orthodox arrive so late on the scene that they cannot even claim for themselves the title of Christians, for such a designation does not distinguish them from the Marcionites.

Next Bauer turns his attention to Egypt. He notes the almost total silence with regard to Christianity in Egypt and Alexandria in the first two centuries. This makes him very suspicious, for Christianity obviously came to Egypt very early. Why do we know so little of Christian origins in that country? Because the situation there was somewhat of an embarrassment for later orthodoxy—"even into the third century, no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished in Egypt and the two types of Christianity were not yet clearly differentiated from each other."[7]

As for Ignatius of Antioch, he is less concerned with depicting the actual situation than with portraying an ideal. Although it is true that the majority of Christians in the churches of Asia Minor at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, and Philadelphia held to a form of Christianity that Ignatius could condone, we must beware of extending this judgment to cover the whole of Asia Minor, or merely only its western part. For "the surviving clues concerning Antioch, Philippi, and Polycarp's Smyrna should at least urge us to be cautious, if not frighten us away from such a generalization."[8]

Ignatius knows of "difficulties" in Ephesus. Moreover, we can infer from I Timothy—with its opposition to a Jewish type of gnosticism—that there existed

> a gnostic Jewish Christianity large and powerful enough to evoke opposition, so that one could not simply classify the Jewish Christianity of this region as being on the side of ecclesiastical orthodoxy without further examination. Thus Jewish Christianity would be divided, just as gentile Christianity was divided, into orthodox and heretical types.[9]

For Bauer, that which triumphs as "orthodox" is the Christianity of Rome. Why did Roman Christianity come to dominate

the whole of Christendom? Bauer finds a number of reasons, not the least of which is the affluence of the Roman church:

> If we ask to what degree donations of money should be of importance in the warfare of the spirits, our imagination would have no difficulty in suggesting all kinds of ways. . . . The encomium of Eusebius teaches us that Rome viewed it as an altogether legitimate practice in religious controversies to tip the scales with golden weights.[10]

Apart from material advantage, the Roman church was endowed with "a shrewdness, energy and communal unity" engendered by the experiences of persecution. The Roman church was essentially unanimous in the faith and in the standards of Christian living; after it had rid itself of the Marcionites it was never endangered by serious heresy. By the end of the second century, being meticulously organized and methodically governed by the monarchical bishop, the Roman church was ready to flex its muscles and extend its power.

Not unexpectedly, Bauer is somewhat cynical about the Roman church's claim of direct continuity to Peter. He finds specific ecclesiastical requirement more operative here than historical memory. Bauer notes that although Peter was linked originally with Paul at Rome, he is later singled out and elevated above the apostle to the gentiles because he alone provides the close tie to Jesus which guarantees the purity of church teaching.[11]

In his treatment of the use of literature in the conflict Bauer focuses on the work of Eusebius. (After all, it is Eusebius who wished to show that the general rejection of false belief could be found in the very earliest Christian literature.) Eusebius does not fare well under Bauer's scrutiny. He is simply inaccurate in depicting an abundance of orthodox literature extant in the first centuries.

Bauer adduces evidence of much chicanery in the use of literature. Opponents' views were distorted, their characters maligned, and their documents tampered with and falsified. Once the orthodox party gained the upper hand, they suppressed (where possible) all heretical literature. Hence we cannot hope to gain a true picture of the circumstances prevalent in the first few centuries by considering its literature at face value.

Bauer sums up his position thus:

> The form of Christian belief and life which was successful was
> that supported by the strongest organization—that form which
> was the most uniform and best suited for mass consumption—in
> spite of the fact that, in my judgement, for a long time after the
> close of the post-apostolic age the sum total of consciously ortho-
> dox and anti-heretical Christians was numerically inferior to
> that of the "heretics."[12]

Furthermore:

> It appears no less self-evident that the Roman government finally
> came to recognize that the Christianity ecclesiastically organized
> from Rome was flesh of its flesh, came to unite with it, and
> thereby actually enabled it to achieve ultimate victory over unbe-
> lievers and heretics.[13]

With respect to the New Testament itself, the conclusions of
Bauer are no less far-reaching. The Gospel of John began its
course as a heretical Gospel.[14] As for Paul, he scarcely knew a
heretic, and he had "calm confidence" that the Christian religion
would eliminate from itself what was alien to it. At this juncture,
Bauer deftly inverts the argument and roundly declares that Paul
is the only heresiarch known in apostolic times. The Judaizers,
who were the main critics of Paul, were to be judged more harshly
by history:

> The arrow quickly flew back at the archer. Because of their
> inability to relate to a development that took place on hellenized
> gentile soil, the Judaists soon became a heresy, rejected with con-
> viction by the gentile Christians. . . . Thus the Judaists became an
> instructive example of how even one who preserves the old posi-
> tion can become a "heretic" if the development moves suffi-
> ciently far beyond him.[15]

Bauer concludes his book thus:

> It is indeed a curious quirk of history that western Rome was des-
> tined to begin to exert the determined influence upon a religion
> which had its cradle in the Orient, so as to give it that form in
> which it was to achieve world-wide recognition. But as an other-
> worldly religion that despises and inflexibly orders life in accord
> with a superhuman standard that has descended from heaven, or
> as a complicated mystery cult or religious and intellectual con-

noisseurs, or as a tide of fanatical enthusiasm that swells today and ebbs tomorrow, Christianity never could have achieved such a recognition.[16]

To summarize. First, Bauer maintained that one should not retroject the categories of orthodoxy and heresy into a description of earliest Christianity. Second, those later called heretics were the first Christians in many areas. Third, what we now term orthodox was in fact imposed by the Roman Church.

The Reply of H. E. W. Turner

It was the Anglican scholar H. E. W. Turner who made the first detailed response to Bauer in his book, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church*.[17] Turner first describes the classical theory of orthodoxy and heresy. Before true doctrine there is no heresy. Such a rigid view, however, is criticized by the heretics themselves. Marcion, far from looking on himself as an innovator, called himself a conservative. The Gnostic tradition, though secret, was every bit as genuine to its participants as the official orthodoxy. Meanwhile, both parties, heretic and orthodox, defended their respective positions and their "Christian" lineage with relevant scriptural references.[18]

All things considered, says Turner, the classical view of orthodoxy is too static to fit the realities and is therefore deservedly challenged. To describe heresy as a deviation from a fixed norm is simply inadequate. Similarly, it is wrong to reduce the Apostolic Fathers to a doctrinal common denominator or to use a single theological rubric to interpret the New Testament.

Having questioned the classical view of orthodoxy, Turner looks briefly at three modern views, those of R. Bultmann, A. Harnack, and M. Werner. These, too, question the notion of a fixed norm, and point out the diversity and fluidity of early Christian thought. Furthermore, they suggest that the "orthodoxy" that did win out was simply not at one with earliest Christianity.

Neither of the extreme positions on the orthodoxy/heresy question is to Turner's liking. He finds the classical view of a fixed and static norm too simple a reading of a rather more complex theological development. But at the same time he considers the mod-

erns' argument, which stresses diversity, to be too open-ended and believes that it implies too high a degree of flexibility. Thus, he proposes to mediate between these extremes:

> The development of Christian theology as a whole (and not merely in the Patristic period) may be perhaps better interpreted as the interaction of fixed and flexible elements, both of which are equally necessary for the determination of Christian truth in the setting of a particular age.[19]

The key here is to discern what those fixed elements are. To begin, argues Turner, there are the tradition's "religious facts themselves, without which there would be no grounds for its existence."[20] Here we quote Turner at length, as this point seems to have been misunderstood by some later writers:

> Belief in God as a Sovereign Father of a creation which is his handiwork forms an essential part of the basic realities of the Christian Church. His being may at times be described in terms more appropriate to the static and transcendent Absolute of Greek metaphysics, His Fatherhood too closely approximated to mere causation, His Providence defined in terms drawn from the Hellenic concept of Pronoia. The religious fact still underlies the changing categories under which it is expressed. The fact of Christ as the Historical Redeemer serves to differentiate even the most metaphysical of Christian thinkers from the Greek "flight from history." The Christian estimate of history was already a stone of stumbling to Celsus, and here Origen, despite his fundamental sympathy with much of the Greek spirit and the priority which his theory of exegesis was to assign to the mystical over the historical, remains inflexible. If there was a tradition in Christology which saw the Divine Logos in the Incarnate Lord and scarcely had eyes for anything else, the Church as a whole never lost her grip upon the concept of the incarnation as an act of Divine Irruption into human history.[21]

This is crucial: "The Church's grasp on the religious facts was prior to any attempt to work them into a coherent whole."[22] *Lex orandi* is what Turner calls the idea of "the relatively full and fixed experimental grasp of what was involved in being a Christian."[23] For example, centuries before the fixing of the Nicene orthodoxy, Christians lived a faith strongly influenced by the concept of the Trinity.

Other fixed elements in the Christian tradition involved the Creed, Biblical Revelation, and the Rule of Faith. For example, from the New Testament *kerygma* through the *credenda* summaries to the early creeds proper there is a clear line of development. Although the creeds are the start of a new phase, this phase, too, is the extension "of a process which takes its origins from the formalized oral tradition of the Apostolic Church itself."[24]

One of the key "differences in Christian idiom," in Turner's view, is contained in the tradition's flexible elements. While many analysts distinguish sharply between the metaphysical and eschatological interpretations of Christianity, he argues that the "Christian deposit of faith is not wedded irrevocably to either idiom":

> The selection of a distinctive theological idiom, whether it be eschatology, ontology, or even in more recent times existentialism, illustrates one possible element of flexibility in Christian thinking.[25]

Turner also sees the individual styles and personalities of the various theologians as a source of Christian doctrinal flexibility.

The essence of Turner's argument is that Bauer draws too sharp a line between orthodoxy and heresy. The developments he describes are better accounted for in terms of a "penumbra" or merging area between these two. Furthermore, his concept of orthodoxy is too narrow, ignoring much of its variety and depth. Orthodoxy, says Turner, "resembles not so much a stream as a sea, not a single melodic theme but a rich and varied harmony, not a single closed system but a rich manifold of thought and life."[26]

The following passage sums up Turner's dissatisfaction with Bauer's position:

> His fatal weakness appears to be a persistent tendency to oversimplify problems, combined with the ruthless treatment of such evidence as fails to support his case. It is very doubtful whether all sources of trouble in the early Church can be reduced to a set of variations on a single theme. Nor is it likely that orthodoxy itself evolved in a uniform pattern, though at different speeds in the main centres of the universal Church. The formula "splinter movement, external inspiration or assistance, domination of the whole Church by its orthodox elements, tributes of gratitude to

those who assisted in its development" represents too neat a generalization to fit the facts. History seldom unfolds itself in so orderly a fashion.[27]

In his wider discussion of the topic, Turner discusses how the major heresies depart from or challenge the Christian norm. In Turner's view, gnosticism, a product of outside (non-Christian) elements, dilutes it;[28] Marcionism cuts several important elements off the core tradition;[29] Montanism distorts it;[30] and Arianism is an empty version of Christian theology.[31] Turner dismisses as mere "archaisms" those heresies that cling only to the past with no regard for meaningful dialogue with the present.

On the positive side, Turner's aim is to have us see that heresy is less a questioning of the total tradition than it is a concern that major elements within the tradition be properly interrelated. Christian common sense intuitively rejects heresy.[32] But the outcome of this kind of development should be measured not only by the coherence principle, "the logical articulation of the Christian faith into a systematic whole," but also "by the further principle of correspondence with the Biblical facts themselves."[33]

Although debate over the issue of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity continues, Bauer and Turner remain central to the discussion. The trend of the subsequent debate has been to retroject the orthodoxy/heresy question into the New Testament. The participants in this venture have tended to take their point of departure from Bauer rather than from Turner. We will now turn to a discussion of why the differences in approach between Bauer and Turner are so significant for the study of early Christianity and the New Testament.

Understanding Early Christianity

Bauer's approach to the study of early Christianity is illustrative of the old adage, "The question determines the answer." Bauer's questions—being reductionist and limited—do not enable him to come up with an understanding of early Christianity which does justice to its complexity and mystery. H. E. W. Turner, on the other hand, asks questions that are more insightful and fruitful. We will briefly examine some of the major issues at stake in the discussion about orthodoxy and heresy and we will determine the fruitfulness of Turner's insights.

The Semantic Problem   It is tempting, when one reads Bauer, to think of the whole problem of orthodoxy and heresy as merely semantic. But is it really a question of semantics? Is it simply a question of how one defines orthodoxy and heresy?

Certainly this is one of the confusing issues underlying the discussion: How should orthodoxy and heresy be defined? Bauer said that in using these terms he was referring to what one "customarily and usually understands them to mean." But in fact, as the ensuing debate showed quite clearly, there is no "customary and usual understanding" of the terms. Moreover, Bauer himself averred that he would not use "dogmatically conditioned" definitions of orthodoxy (derived from church councils) because they enshrine value judgements, and he believed value judgements were not the business of the historian. Most historians, however, would disagree with Bauer here. History is not "value free," if what we mean by that phrase is that the historian refrains from making value judgements. Historical inquiry aims at settling matters of fact, but this cannot possibly exclude value judgements from the matters of fact to be settled. History does not say who was orthodox and who was heretical. It does, however, have something to say about who *claimed* to be orthodox and who charged whom with heresy. Such claims are part and parcel of the historian's data. Value judgements do have a role in the work of the historian. They should not, of course, substitute for evidence. They guide the choice of historical questions without presuming to answer them. As Bernard Lonergan puts it:

> History is not value-free in the sense that the historian refrains from value-judgements. . . . The historian ascertains matters of fact, not by ignoring data, by failing to understand, by omitting judgements of value, but by doing all of these for the purpose of settling matters of fact.[34]

Any definition of orthodoxy and heresy must therefore take account of the thinking of the early Christians themselves, for the early Christian's world of meaning belongs indispensably to the data of which the historian must take account. Definitions of orthodoxy and heresy should, moreover, be both specific enough to meet real issues and flexible enough to apply to different times and places.

This is where Bauer fails as a historian. He does not take development into account. He fails to see that Christianity is an ongoing process. By later standards some of the beliefs of early Christianity were "heretical" but they were not seen to be so at the time. What was believed matters as much as *when* it was believed.

H. E. W. Turner's "Fixed" and "Flexible" Elements   Turner approaches the study of early Christianity in a different way. He sees that the self-understanding of early Christianity reveals an interaction between what he calls "fixed" and "flexible" elements. Only by grasping this point does the unity *and* diversity of early Christianity become intelligible. Both Eusebius and Bauer are mistaken in their view of early Christianity. Christianity was not uniform and monolithic at the beginning, as Eusebius claimed; but neither was it completely variegated and diverse, as Bauer claimed.

This debate about Christian origins is not merely some abstruse and solely academic argument—it has theological implications. Many see Christianity as a syncretistic phenomenon. But Turner argues that there is a unity to Christianity. A first-century Christian in Alexandria may not have had the same beliefs as a fifth-century Christian in Rome. They lived in different eras, spoke different languages, and thought differently. But despite differences in style, idiom, and historical context, Turner would argue that their Christian faith has a basic structural similarity in subject matter and content. Turner, in other words, argues for a dynamic unity to Christianity.

The *Lex Orandi* and Development   Turner, it will be recalled, gave the name *lex orandi* to the "relatively full and fixed experimental grasp of what was involved in being a Christian."[35] What is meant by this requires more elucidation, for it is quite central to the idea of development in early Christianity.

Religion precedes theology, explains Ninian Smart in *Philosophers and Religious Truth*: "The apprehension in experience of the Holy is the primary datum in religion, and theological ideas are secondary to it."[36] That is to say, people live a faith before they try to conceptualize it; for example, trinitarian religion preceded trinitarian theology. The triune baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 is universally cited in the practice of the early Church. Even the Arians accepted the text. The doctrine of the trinity was primarily an

extension and exploration into the baptismal formula. That is to say, the early Christians began with the practice of baptism, during which they uttered the phrase "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and only later did they begin to think through the full implications of what they were saying. It was in pondering these implications that the early Christians came up with the doctrine of the trinity. They did not begin with the doctrine; they began with the practice (the *lex orandi*).

Lex orandi, then, covers the instinctively adopted devotional and liturgical attitude within the early Church. It indicates that there is a close connection between spirituality and theology. The Russian Orthodox Church uses the term *sobornost* ("together-ness") to describe this reality—the idea that devotion and worship form the bedrock on which theological speculation is built.

For missionary and apologetic reasons the early Church found it necessary to articulate the faith in a reasoned and structured way. The degree and precision of such articulation was dictated by historical circumstances. The Church was subject not only to attack from without, but also to disruption and differences within. Celsus treats Gnostics as Christians, and sixty years later we find Origen vigorously refuting this. Orthodoxy had evidently become much more selective in that sixty-year span. There is nothing odd about this; it merely indicates that certain tendencies within Christianity were seen as gradually leading to positions that were irreconcilable with the basis of the faith. Historically it is difficult to see how it could happen otherwise. It is wrong to think that the Church had a blueprint from the beginning which was the touchstone of correct Christian belief. Heresy was not a known in the sense of trans-gressing a fixed theological law.

In the beginning the Church was a collection of people bound together by the common belief that Jesus was the Christ, the bringer of salvation. The exact implications of such belief had to be worked out in the course of time as the need arose. The history of the early Church is thus a history of doctrinal explorations; it was not immediately obvious that certain avenues were culs-de-sac. Yet although the journey down a certain avenue may have begun, once the life and reflection of the Church revealed that route to be a dead end, it was abandoned and others were explored. Those who continued along that road eventually reached the point of no

return, and the Church had to disown them as it carried its search for truth down other avenues.

The first major problem that the Church faced in erecting its "intellectual scaffolding" around the faith was the reconciliation of its trinitarian religion (given in the *lex orandi*) with the monotheism of the faith from which it had sprung (Judaism). This occupied the mind of the Church until the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325). The relation of the Father to the Son was the first item of reflection, as this was so central in preaching and teaching. Once this was settled the precise nature and position of the Holy Spirit within the Godhead was formulated—as is evidenced by the quite rapid development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the period A.D. 327–381.

The formulation of Christian doctrine was the result of the interplay of various ways of thinking within the Church. The characteristics of the Church militated against extremism. The various great traditions of the Church tended mutually to correct each other. The Western tradition, with its love of the concrete and the balanced, was a good foil for the Eastern tradition, with its love of the mystical and speculative. Turner's notion that the development of early Christianity is best seen as an interaction between fixed and flexible elements accords with this picture. It is of course wrong to envisage this development as having fixed and narrow limits. As Turner puts it:

> The customary limitations imposed by human sin, human error, and human blindness can be observed even here. Christian theology is not exempt from the law of oscillation which applies to all branches of human thought. Premature syntheses required subsequent modification and the dangers of distortion and accretion were not slow in making their presence felt.[37]

Diverse usages reflect diverse realities. There really are evolutions and devolutions, and not every sequence is a development. If the progression of orthodoxy did not proceed along the "straight and narrow" in quite the way envisaged by the classical approach, neither is it true to say that it often wandered off the road completely. To be sure, the development of early Christian doctrine is characterized by oscillations, but the quest for balance was always there, with the givenness of the New Testament data as the fulcrum. The development of Christian thought begins with the faith data; from

this givenness certain inferences are drawn as historical circumstances dictate. These inferences at a later stage, after they have been explored and tested, become the postulates for theologizing.

We thus see how development helps us to understand better the ongoing process of Christian history. We also see how the notion of *lex orandi* helps us to understand more clearly the direction of this development. *Lex orandi* illustrates how early Christian development was governed by experience, the experience of the early Christians themselves. Moreover, the development is dynamic—it is, in Turner's words, the interaction between fixed and flexible elements. It is not confined within fixed and narrow limits, but neither is it so open-ended as to be capricious. Christianity is not a syncretism, it has a dynamic unity. In this sense Christian development can be said to be mysterious, as Ben Meyer observes:

> Development, unlike organic growth, unlike logical deduction, takes place in the sphere of spirit, subjectivity, freedom, meaning and history. It is unpredictable. Its authenticity is not discerned equally by all, nor all at once. It is taken in piecemeal, by a learning process, and is satisfactorily grasped after the fact.[38]

Bauer and Turner, then, represent quite different perspectives on early Christianity. At the deepest level they take different approaches not just to the historical task, but in perceiving Christianity itself. Is it meaningful to speak of *Das Wesen des Christentums*? Does Christianity have an "essence" or a unique identity? Or is it a syncretism, an ongoing multiplicity of interpretations with family resemblances? This is a central issue. Before considering this further, however, we must focus more clearly on the questions that arise from such a discussion within the context of politics, community, and faith.

2. POLITICS, COMMUNITY, AND FAITH

Edward Norman and the Politicization of Christianity

It is now several years since Edward Norman gave his Reith Lectures, *Christianity and the World Order*. In these lectures, Norman attacked liberation theology and indeed, all forms of "political Christianity." Christianity, he said, was concerned with "the