

On the History of Early Christianity

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I

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order. And in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead. Three hundred years after its appearance Christianity was the recognized state religion in the Roman World Empire, and in barely sixty years socialism has won itself a position which makes its victory absolutely certain.

If, therefore, Prof. Anton Menger wonders in his *Right to the Full Product of Labour* why, with the enormous concentration of landownership under the Roman emperors and the boundless sufferings of the working class of the time, which was composed almost exclusively of slaves, "socialism did not follow the overthrow of the Roman Empire in the West," it is because he cannot see that this "socialism" did in fact, as far as it was possible at the time, exist and even become dominant – in Christianity.

Only this Christianity, as was bound to be the case in the historic conditions, did not want to accomplish the social transformation in this world, but beyond it, in heaven, in eternal life after death, in the impending "millennium."

The parallel between the two historic phenomena forces itself upon our attention as early as the Middle Ages in the first risings of the oppressed peasants and particularly of the town plebeians. These risings, like all mass movements of the Middle Ages, were bound to wear the mask of religion

and appeared as the restoration of early Christianity from spreading degeneration.[1]

But behind the religious exaltation there was every time a very tangible worldly interest. This appeared most splendidly in the organization of the Bohemian Taborites under Jan Žižka, of glorious memory; but this trait pervades the whole of the Middle Ages until it gradually fades away after the German Peasant War to revive again with the workingmen Communists after 1830. The French revolutionary Communists, as also in particular Weitling and his supporters, referred to early Christianity long before Renan's words:

“If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men's Association.”

This French man of letters, who by mutilating German criticism of the Bible in a manner unprecedented even in modern journalism composed the novel on church history *Origines du Christianisme*, did not know himself how much truth there was in the words just quoted. I should like to see the old “International” who can read, for example, the so-called Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians without old-wounds re-opening, at least in one respect. The whole epistle, from chapter eight onwards, echoes the eternal, and oh! so well-known complaint: *les cotisations ne rentrent pas* – contributions are not coming in! How many of the most zealous propagandists of the sixties would sympathizingly squeeze the hand of the author of that epistle, whoever he may be, and whisper: “So it was like that with you too!” We too – Corinthians were legion in our Association – can sing a song about contributions not coming in but tantalizing us as they floated elusively before our eyes. They were the famous “millions of the International”!

One of our best sources on the first Christians is Lucian of Samosata, the Voltaire of classic antiquity, who was equally sceptic towards every kind of religious superstition and therefore had neither pagan-religious nor political grounds to treat the Christians otherwise than as some other kind of religious community. On the contrary, he mocked them all for their superstition, those who prayed to Jupiter no less than those who prayed to

Christ; from his shallow rationalistic point of view one sort of superstition was as stupid as the other. This in any case impartial witness relates among other things the life-story of a certain adventurous Peregrinus, Proteus by name, from Parium in Hellespontus. When a youth, this Peregrinus made his *début* in Armenia by committing fornication. He was caught in the act and lynched according to the custom of the country. He was fortunate enough to escape and after strangling his father in Parium he had to flee.

“And so it happened” – I quote from Schott’s translation – “that he also came to hear of the astonishing learning of the Christians, with whose priests and scribes he had cultivated intercourse in Palestine. He made such progress in a short time that his teachers were like children compared with him. He became a prophet, an elder, a master of the synagogue, in a word, all in everything. He interpreted their writings and himself wrote a great number of works, so that finally people saw in him a superior being, let him lay down laws for them and made him their overseer (bishop) On that ground (*i.e.*, because he was a Christian) Proteus was at length arrested by the authorities and thrown into prison ... As he thus lay in chains, the Christians, who saw in his capture a great misfortune, made all possible attempts to free him. But they did not succeed. Then they administered to him in all possible ways with the greatest solicitude. As early as daybreak one could see aged mothers, widows and young orphans crowding at the door of his prison; the most prominent among the Christians even bribed the warders and spent whole nights with him; they took their meals with them and read their holy books in his presence; briefly, the beloved Peregrinus” (he still went by that name) “was no less to them than a new Socrates. Envoys of Christian communities came to him even from towns in Asia Minor to lend him a helping hand, to console him and to testify in his favour in court. It is unbelievable how quick these people are to act whenever it is a question of their community; they immediately spare neither exertion nor expense. And thus from all sides money then poured in to Peregrinus so that his imprisonment became for him a source of great income. For the poor people persuaded themselves that they were immortal in body and in soul and that they would live

for all eternity; that was why they scorned death and many of them even voluntarily written by his sacrificed their lives. Then their most prominent lawgiver convinced them that they would all be brothers one to another once they were converted, *i.e.*, renounced the Greek gods, professed faith in the crucified sophist and lived according to his prescriptions. That is why they despise all material goods without distinction and own them in common – doctrines which they have accepted in good faith, without demonstration or proof. And when a skilful imposter who knows how to make clever use of circumstances comes to them he can manage to get rich in a short time and laugh up his sleeve over these simpletons. For the rest, Peregrinus was set free by him who was then prefect of Syria.”

Then, after a few more adventures,

“Our worthy set forth a second time” (from Parium) “on his peregrinations, the Christians’ good disposition standing him in lieu of money for his journey: they administered to his needs everywhere and never let him suffer want. He was fed for a time in this way. But then, when he violated the laws of the Christians too – I think he was caught eating of some forbidden food – they excommunicated him from their community.”

What memories of youth come to my mind as I read this passage from Lucian! First of all the “prophet Albrecht” who from about 1840 literally plundered the Weitling communist communities in Switzerland for several years – a tall powerful man with a long beard who wandered on foot through Switzerland and gathered audiences for his mysterious new Gospel of world emancipation, but who, after all, seems to have been a tolerably harmless hoaxer and soon died. Then his not so harmless successor, “Doctor” Georg Kuhlmann from Holstein, who put to profit the time when Weitling was in prison to convert the communities of French Switzerland to *his own* Gospel, and for a time with such success that he even caught August Becker, by far the cleverest but also the biggest ne’er-do-well among them. This Kuhlmann used to deliver lectures to them which were published in Geneva in 1845 under the title *The New World, or the Kingdom*

of the Spirit on Earth. Proclamation. In the introduction, supporters (probably August Becker) we read:

“What was needed was a man on whose lips all our sufferings and all our longings and hopes, in a word, all that affects our time most profoundly should find expression ... This man, whom our time was waiting for, has come. He is the doctor Georg Kuhlmann from Holstein He has come forward with the doctrine of the new world or the kingdom of the spirit in reality.”

I hardly need to add that this doctrine of the new world is nothing more than the most vulgar sentimental nonsense rendered in half-biblical expressions *à la* Lamennais and declaimed with prophet-like arrogance. But this did not prevent the good Weitlingers from carrying the swindler shoulder-high as the Asian Christians once did Peregrinus. They who were otherwise arch-democrats and extreme equalitarians to the extent of fostering ineradicable suspicion against any schoolmaster, journalist, and any man generally who was not a manual worker as being an “erudite” who was out to exploit them, let themselves be persuaded by the melodramatically arrayed Kuhlman that in the “New World” it would be the wisest of all, *id est*, Kuhlmann, who would regulate the distribution of pleasures and that therefore, even then, in the Old World, the disciples ought to bring pleasures by the bushel to that same wisest of all while they themselves should be content with crumbs. So Peregrinus Kuhlmann lived a splendid life of pleasure at the expense of the community – as long as it lasted. It did not last very long, of course; the growing murmurs of doubters and unbelievers and the menace of persecution by the Vaudois Government put an end to the “Kingdom of the Spirit” in Lausanne – Kuhlmann disappeared.

Everybody who has known by experience the European working-class movement in its beginnings will remember dozens of similar examples. Today such extreme cases, at least in the large centres, have become impossible; but in remote districts where the movement has won new ground a small Peregrinus of this kind can still count on a temporary limited success. And just as all those who have nothing to look forward to from the official world or have come to the end of their tether with it – opponents of

inoculation, supporters of abstemiousness, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, nature-healers, free-community preachers whose communities have fallen to pieces, authors of new theories on the origin of the universe, unsuccessful or unfortunate inventors, victims of real or imaginary injustice who are termed “good-for-nothing pettifoggers” by all bureaucracy, honest fools and dishonest swindlers – all throng to the working-class parties in all countries – so it was with the first Christians. All the elements which had been set free, *i.e.*, at a loose end, by the dissolution of the old world came one after the other into the orbit Christianity as the only element that resisted that process of dissolution – for the very reason that it was the necessary product of that process – and that therefore persisted and grew while the other elements were but ephemeral flies. There was no fanaticism, no foolishness, no scheming that did not flock to the young Christian communities and did not at least for a time and in isolated places find attentive ears and willing believers. And like our first communist workers’ associations the early Christians too took with such unprecedented gullibility to anything which suited their purpose that we are not even sure that some fragment or other of the “great number of works” that Peregrinus wrote for Christianity did not find its way into our New Testament.

II

German criticism of the Bible, so far the only scientific basis of our knowledge of the history of early Christianity, followed a double tendency.

The first tendency was that of the *Tübingen school*, in which, in the broad sense, D.F. Strauss must also be included. In critical inquiry it goes as far as a *theological* school can go. It admits that the four Gospels are not eyewitness accounts but only later adaptations of writings that have been lost; that no more than four of the Epistles attributed to the apostle Paul are authentic, etc. It strikes out of the historical narrations all miracles and contradictions, considering them as unacceptable; but from the rest it tries “to save what can be saved” and then its nature, that of a theological school, is very evident. Thus it enabled Renan, who bases himself mostly on it, to “save” still more by applying the same method and, moreover, to try to impose upon us as historically authenticated many New Testament accounts that are more than doubtful and, besides, a multitude of other legends about martyrs. In any case, all that the Tübingen school rejects as unhistorical or apocryphal can be considered as finally eliminated for science.

The other tendency has but one representative – *Bruno Bauer*. His greatest service consists not merely in having given a pitiless criticism of the Gospels and the Epistles of the apostles, but in having for the first time seriously undertaken an inquiry into not only the Jewish and Greco-Alexandrian elements but the purely Greek and Greco-Roman elements that first opened for Christianity the career of a universal religion. The legend that Christianity arose ready and complete out of Judaism and, starting from Palestine, conquered the world with its dogma already defined in the main and its morals, has been untenable since Bruno Bauer; it can continue to vegetate only in the theological faculties and with people who wish “to keep religion alive for the people” even at the expense of science. The enormous influence which the Philonic school of Alexandria and Greco-Roman vulgar philosophy – Platonic and mainly Stoic – had on Christianity, which became the state religion under Constantine, is far from having been defined in detail, but its existence has been proved and that is primarily the achievement of Bruno Bauer: he laid the foundation of the

proof that Christianity was not imported from outside – from Judea – into the Romano-Greek world and imposed on it, but that, at least in its world-religion form, it is that world's own product. Bauer, of course, like all those who are fighting against deep-rooted prejudices, overreached his aim in this work. In order to define through literary sources, too, Philo's and particularly Seneca's influence on emerging Christianity and to show up the authors of the New Testament formally as downright plagiarists of those philosophers he had to place the appearance of the new religion about half a century later, to reject the opposing accounts of Roman historians and take extensive liberties with historiography in general. According to him Christianity as such appears only under the Flavians, the literature of the New Testament only under Hadrian, Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius. As a result the New Testament accounts of Jesus and his disciples are deprived for Bauer of any historical background: they are diluted in legends in which the phases of interior development and the moral struggles of the first communities are transferred to more or less fictitious persons. Not Galilee and Jerusalem, but Alexandria and Rome, according to Bauer, are the birthplaces of the new religion.

If, therefore, the Tübingen school presents to us in the remains of the New Testament stories and literature that it left untouched the extreme maximum of what science today can still accept as disputable, Bruno Bauer presents to us maximum of what can be contested. The factual truth lies between these two limits. Whether that truth can be defined with the means at our disposal today is very doubtful. New discoveries, particularly in Rome, in the Orient, and above all in Egypt, will contribute more to this than any criticism.

But we have in the New Testament a single book the time of the writing of which can be defined within a few months, which must have been written between June 67 and January or April 68; a book, consequently, which belongs to the very beginning of the Christian era and reflects with the most naive fidelity and in the corresponding idiomatic language the ideas of the beginning of that era. This book, therefore, in my opinion, is a far more important source from which to define what early Christianity really was than all the rest of the New Testament, which, in its present form, is of a far later date. This book is the so-called Revelation of John. And as this, apparently the most obscure book in the whole Bible, is moreover today,

thanks to German criticism, the most comprehensible and the clearest, I shall give my readers an account of it.

One needs but to look into this book in order to be convinced of the state of great exaltation not only of the author, but also of the “surrounding medium” in which he moved. Our “Revelation” is not the only one of its kind and time. From the year 164 before our era, when the first which has reached us, the so-called Book of Daniel, was written, up to about 250 of our era, the approximate date of Commodian’s Carmen, Renan counted no fewer than fifteen extant classical “Apocalypses,” not counting subsequent imitations. (I quote Renan because his book is also the best known by non-specialists and the most accessible.) That was a time when even in Rome and Greece and still more in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt an absolutely uncritical mixture of the crassest superstitions of the most varying peoples was indiscriminately accepted and complemented by pious deception and downright charlatanism; a time in which miracles, ecstasies, visions, apparitions, divining, gold-making, cabbala and other secret magic played a primary role. It was in that atmosphere, and, moreover, among a class of people who were more inclined than any other to listen to these supernatural fantasies, that Christianity arose. For did not the Christian gnostics in Egypt during the second century of our era engage extensively in alchemy and introduce alchemistic notions into their teachings, as the Leyden papyrus documents, among others, prove. And the Chaldean and Judean *mathematici*, who, according to Tacitus, were twice expelled from Rome for magic, once under Claudius and again under Vitellius, practised no other kind of geometry than the kind we shall find at the basis of John’s Revelation.

To this we must add another thing. All the apocalypses attribute to themselves the right to deceive their readers. Not only were they written as a rule by quite different people than their alleged authors, and mostly by people who lived much later, for example the Book of Daniel, the Book of Henoah, the Apocalypses of Ezra, Baruch, Juda, etc., and the Sibylline books, but, as far as their main content is concerned, they prophesy only things that had already happened long before and were quite well known to the real author. Thus in the year 164, shortly before the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, the author of the Book of Daniel makes Daniel, who is supposed

to have lived in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, prophesy the rise and fall of the Persian and Macedonian empires and the beginning of the Roman Empire, in order by this proof of his gift of prophecy to prepare the reader to accept the final prophecy that the people of Israel will overcome all hardships and finally be victorious. If therefore John's Revelation were really the work of its alleged author it would be the only exception among all apocalyptic literature.

The John who claims to be the author was, in any case, a man of great distinction among the Christians of Asia Minor. This is borne out by the tone of the message to the seven churches. Possibly he was the apostle John, whose historical existence, however, is not completely authenticated but is very probable. If this apostle was really the author, so much the better for our point of view. That would be the best confirmation that the Christianity of this book is real genuine early Christianity. Let it be noted in passing that, apparently, the Revelation was not written by the same author as the Gospel or the three Epistles which are also attributed to John.

The Revelation consists of a series of visions. In the first Christ appears in the garb of a high priest, goes in the midst of seven candlesticks representing the seven churches of Asia and dictates to "John" messages to the seven "angels" of those churches. Here at the very beginning we see plainly the difference between *this* Christianity and Constantine's universal religion formulated by the Council of Nicaea. The Trinity is not only unknown, it is even impossible. Instead of the one Holy Ghost of later we here have the "seven spirits of God" construed by the Rabbis from Isaiah XI, 2. Christ is the son of God, the first and the last, the *alpha* and the *omega*, by no means God himself or equal to God, but on the contrary, "the beginning of the *creation* of God," hence an emanation of God, existing from all eternity but subordinate to God, like the above-mentioned seven spirits. In Chapter XV, 3 the martyrs in heaven sing "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" glorifying God. Hence Christ here appears not only as subordinate to God but even, in a certain respect, on an equal footing with Moses. Christ is crucified in Jerusalem (XI, 8) but rises again (I, 5, 18); he is "the Lamb" that has been sacrificed for the sins of the world and with whose blood the faithful of all tongues and nations have been redeemed to God. Here we find the basic idea which enabled

early Christianity to develop into a universal religion. All Semitic and European religions of that time shared the view that the gods offended by the actions of man could be propitiated by sacrifice; the first revolutionary basic idea (borrowed from the Philonic school) in Christianity was that by the one great voluntary sacrifice of a mediator the sins of all times and all men were atoned for once for all – in respect of the faithful. Thus the necessity of any further sacrifices was removed and with it the basis for a multitude of religious rites: but freedom from rites that made difficult or forbade intercourse with people of other confessions was the first condition of a universal religion. In spite of this the habit of sacrifice was so deeply rooted in the customs of peoples that Catholicism – which borrowed so much from paganism – found it appropriate to accommodate itself to this fact by the introduction of at least the symbolical sacrifice of the mass. On the other hand there is no trace whatever of the dogma of original sin in our book.

But the most characteristic in these messages, as in the whole book, is that it never and nowhere occurs to the author to refer to himself and his co-believers by any other name than that of *Jews*. He reproaches the members of the sects in Smyrna and Philadelphia against whom he fulminates with the fact that they

“say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan”;

of those in Pergamos he says: they hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling-block *before the children of Israel*, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. Here it is therefore not a case of conscious Christians but of people who say they are Jews. Granted, their Judaism is a new stage of development of the earlier but for that very reason it is the only true one. Hence, when the saints appeared before the throne of God there came first 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each tribe, and only after them the countless masses of heathens converted to this renovated Judaism. That was how little our author was aware in the year 69 of the Christian era that he represented quite a new phase in the development of a religion which was to become one of the most revolutionary elements in the history of the human mind.

We therefore see that the Christianity of that time, which was still unaware of itself, was as different as heaven from earth from the later dogmatically fixed universal religion of the Nicene Council; one cannot be recognized in the other. Here we have neither the dogma nor the morals of later Christianity but instead a feeling that one is struggling against the whole world and that the struggle will be a victorious one; an eagerness for the struggle and a certainty of victory which are totally lacking in Christians of today and which are to be found in our time only at the other pole of society, among the Socialists.

In fact, the struggle against a world that at the beginning was superior in force, and at the same time against the novators themselves, is common to the early Christians and the Socialists. Neither of these two great movements were made by leaders or prophets – although there are prophets enough among both of them – they are mass movements. And mass movements are bound to be confused at the beginning; confused because the thinking of the masses at first moves among contradictions, lack of clarity and lack of cohesion, and also because of the role that prophets still play in them at the beginning. This confusion is to be seen in the formation of numerous sects which fight against one another with at least the same zeal as against the common external enemy. So it was with early Christianity, so it was in the beginning of the socialist movement, no matter how much that worried the well-meaning worthies who preached unity where no unity was possible.

Was the International held together by a uniform dogma? On the contrary. There were Communists of the French pre-1848 tradition, among whom again were various shades: Communists of Weitling's school and others of the regenerated Communist League, Proudhonists dominating in France and Belgium, Blanquists, the German Workers' Party, and finally the Bakuninist anarchists, who for a while had the upper hand in Spain and Italy, to mention only the principal groups. It took a whole quarter of a century from the foundation of the International before the separation from the anarchists was final and complete everywhere and unity could be established at least in respect of most general economic viewpoints. And that with our means of communication – railways, telegraph, giant industrial cities, the press, organized people's assemblies.

There was among the early Christians the same division into countless sects, which was the very means by which discussion and thereby later unity was achieved. We already find it in this book, which is beyond doubt the oldest Christian document, and our author fights it with the same irreconcilable ardour as the great sinful world outside. There were first of all the Nicolaitans, in Ephesus and Pergamos; those that said they were Jews but were the synagogue of Satan, in Smyrna and Philadelphia; the supporters of Balaam, who is called a false prophet, in Pergamos; those who said they were apostles and were not, in Ephesus; and finally, in Thyatira, the supporters of the false prophetess who is described as a Jezebel. We are given no more details about these sects, it being only said about the followers of Balaam and Jezebel that they ate things sacrificed to idols and committed fornication. Attempts have been made to conceive these five sects as Pauline Christians and all the messages as directed against Paul, the false apostle, the alleged Balaam and “Nicolaos.— Arguments to this effect, hardly tenable, are to be found collected in Renan’s *Saint Paul* (Paris 1869, pp. 303–05 and 367–70). They all tend to explain the messages by the Acts of the Apostles and the so-called Epistles of Paul, writings which, at least in their present form, are no less than 60 years younger than the Revelation and the relevant factual data of which, therefore, are not only extremely doubtful but also totally contradictory. But the decisive thing is that it could not occur to the author to give five different names to one and the same sect and even two for Ephesus alone (false apostles and Nicolaitans) and two also for Pergamos (Balaamites and Nicolaitans), and to refer to them every time expressly as two different sects. At the same time one cannot deny the probability that there were also elements among these sects that would be termed Pauline today.

In both cases in which more details are given the accusation bears on eating meats offered to idols and on fornication, two points on which the Jews – the old ones as well as the Christian ones – were in continual dispute with converted heathens. The meat from heathen sacrifices was not only served at festal meals where refusal of the food offered would have seemed improper and could even have been dangerous; it was also sold on the public markets, where it was not always possible to ascertain whether it was pure in the eyes of the law. By fornication the Jews understood not only

extra-nuptial sexual relations but also marriage within the degrees of relationship prohibited by the Jewish law or between a Jew and a gentile, and it is in this sense that the word is generally understood in the Acts of the Apostles XV, 20 and 29. But our John has his own views on the sexual relations allowed to orthodox Jews. He says, XIV, 4, of the 144,000 heavenly Jews:

“These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins.”

And in fact, in our John's heaven there is not a single woman. He therefore belongs to the trend, which also often appears in other early Christian writings, that considers sexual relations generally as sinful. And when we moreover take into consideration the fact that he calls Rome the Great Whore with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication and have become drunk with the wine of fornication and the merchants of the earth have waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies, it becomes impossible for us to take the word in the messages in the narrow sense that theological apologists would like to attribute to it in order thus to catch at some confirmation of other passages in the New Testament. On the contrary. These passages in the messages are an obvious indication of a phenomenon common to all times of great agitation, that the traditional bonds of sexual relations, like all other fetters, are shaken off. In the first centuries of Christianity, too, there appeared often enough, side by side with ascetics which mortified the, flesh, the tendency to extend Christian freedom to a more or less unrestrained intercourse between man and woman. The same thing was observed in the modern socialist movement. What unspeakable horror was felt in the then “pious nursery” of Germany at Saint-Simon's *réhabilitation de la chair* in the thirties, which was rendered in German as “*Wiedereinsetzung des Fleische*”!^[2] And the most horrified of all were the then ruling distinguished estates (there were as yet no classes in our country) who could not live in Berlin any more than on their country estates without repeated reinstatement of their flesh! If only those good people had been able to know Fourier, who contemplated quite different pranks for the flesh! With the overcoming of utopianism these extravagances yielded to a more rational and in reality far more radical

conception, and since Germany has grown out of Heine's pious nursery and developed into the centre of the Socialist movement the hypocritical indignation of the distinguished pious world is laughed at.

That is all the dogmatic content of the messages. The rest consists in exhorting the faithful to be zealous in propaganda, to courageous and proud confession of their faith in face of the foe, to unrelenting struggle against the enemy both within and without – and as far as this goes they could just as well have been written by one of the prophetically minded enthusiasts of the International.

III

The messages are but the introduction to the theme properly so-called of John's communication to the seven churches of Asia Minor and through them to the remaining reformed Judaism of the year 69, out of which Christianity later developed. And herewith we enter the innermost holy of holies of early Christianity.

What kind of people were the first Christians recruited from? Mainly from the "labouring and burdened," the members of the lowest strata of the people, as becomes a revolutionary element. And what did they consist of? In the towns of impoverished free men, all sorts of people, like the "mean whites" of the southern slave states and the European beachcombers and adventurers in colonial and Chinese seaports, then of emancipated slaves and, above all, actual slaves; on the large estates in Italy, Sicily, and Africa of slaves, and in the rural districts of the provinces of small peasants who had fallen more and more into bondage through debt. There was absolutely no common road to emancipation for all these elements. For all of them paradise lay lost behind them; for the ruined free men it was the former polis, the town and the state at the same time, of which their forefathers had been free citizens; for the war-captive slaves the time of freedom before their subjugation and captivity; for the small peasants the abolished gentile social system and communal landownership. All that had been smitten down by the levelling iron fist of conquering Rome. The largest social group that antiquity had attained was the tribe and the union of kindred tribes; among the barbarians grouping was based on alliances of families and among the townfounding Greeks and Italians of the *polis*, which consisted of one or more kindred tribes. Philip and Alexander gave the Hellenic peninsula political unity but that did not lead to the formation of a Greek nation. Nations became possible only through the downfall of Roman world domination. This domination had put an end once for all to the smaller unions; military might, Roman jurisdiction and the tax-collecting machinery completely dissolved the traditional inner organization. To the loss of independence and distinctive organization was added the forcible plunder by military and civil authorities who took the treasures of the

subjugated away from them and then lent them back at usurious rates in order to extort still more out of them. The pressure of taxation and the need for money which it caused in regions dominated only or mainly by natural economy plunged the peasants into ever deeper bondage to the usurers, gave rise to great differences in fortune, making the rich richer and the poor completely destitute. Any resistance of isolated small tribes or towns to the gigantic Roman world power was hopeless. Where was the way out, salvation, for the enslaved, oppressed and impoverished, a way out common to all these groups of people whose interests were mutually alien or even opposed? And yet it had to be found if a great revolutionary movement was to embrace them all.

This way out was found. But not in this world. In the state in which things were it could only be a religious way out. Then a new world was disclosed. The continued life of the soul after the death of the body had gradually become a recognized article of faith throughout the Roman world. A kind of recompense or punishment of the deceased souls for their actions while on earth also received more and more general recognition. As far as recompense was concerned, admittedly, the prospects were not so good: antiquity was too spontaneously materialistic not to attribute infinitely greater value to life on earth than to life in the kingdom of shadows; to live on after death was considered by the Greeks rather as a misfortune. Then came Christianity, which took recompense and punishment in the world beyond seriously and created heaven and hell, and a way out was found which would lead the labouring and burdened from this vale of woe to eternal paradise. And in fact only with the prospect of a reward in the world beyond could the stoico-philonic renunciation of the world and ascetics be exalted to the basic moral principle of a new universal religion which would inspire the oppressed masses with enthusiasm.

But this heavenly paradise does not open to the faithful by the mere fact of their death. We shall see that the kingdom of God, the capital of which is the New Jerusalem, can only be conquered and opened after arduous struggles with the powers of hell. But in the imagination of the early Christians these struggles were immediately ahead. John describes his book at the very beginning as the revelation of “things which must *shortly* come to pass”; and immediately afterwards, I, 3, he declares:

“Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy ... for *the time is at hand.*”

To the church in Philadelphia Christ sends the message: “Behold, I come *quickly.*” And in the last chapter the angel says he has shown John “things which must *shortly* be done” and gives him the order: “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is *at hand.*” And Christ himself says twice (XXII, 12, 20) “I come *quickly.*” The sequel will show us how soon this coming was expected.

The visions of the Apocalypse, which the author now shows us, are copied throughout, and mostly literally, from earlier models, partly from the classical prophets of the Old Testament, particularly Ezekiel, partly from later Jewish apocalypses written after the fashion of the Book of Daniel and in particular from the Book of Henoch which had already been written at least in part. Criticism has shown to the smallest details where our John got every picture, every menacing sign, every plague sent to unbelieving humanity, in a word, the whole of the material for his book; so that he not only shows great poverty of mind but even himself proves that he never experienced, even in imagination the alleged ecstasies and visions which he describes.

The order of these visions is briefly as follows: First John sees God sitting on his throne holding in his hand a book with seven seals and before him the Lamb that has been slain and has risen from the dead (Christ) and is found worthy to open the seals of the book. The opening of the seals is followed by all sorts of miraculous menacing signs. When the fifth seal is opened John sees under the altar of God the souls of the martyrs of Christ that were slain for the word of God and who cry with a loud voice saying:

“How long, O Lord, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

And then white robes are given to them and they are told that they must rest for a little while yet, for more martyrs must be slain.

So here it is not yet a question of a “religion of love,” of “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you,” etc. Here undiluted revenge is preached, sound, honest revenge on the persecutors of the Christians. So it

is in the whole of the book. The nearer the crisis comes, the heavier the plagues and punishments rain from the heavens and with all the more satisfaction John announces that the mass of humanity will not atone for their sins, that new scourges of God must lash them, that Christ must rule them with a rod of iron and tread the wine-press of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God, but that the impious still remain obdurate in their hearts. It is the natural feeling, free of all hypocrisy, that a fight is going on and that – *à la guerre comme à la guerre*.^[3]

When the seventh seal is opened there come seven angels with seven trumpets and each time one of them sounds his trumpet new horrors occur. After the seventh blast seven more angels come on to the scene with the seven vials of the wrath of God which they pour out upon the earth; still more plagues and punishments, mainly boring repetitions of what has already happened several times. Then comes the woman, Babylon the Great Whore, sitting arrayed in scarlet over the waters, drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus, the great city of the seven hills that rules over all the kings of the earth. She is sitting on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads represent the seven hills, and also seven “kings.” Of those kings five are fallen, one is, and the other is not yet come, and after him comes again one of the first five; he was wounded to death but was healed. He will reign over the world for 42 months or 3½ years (half of a week of seven years) and will persecute the faithful to death and bring the rule of godlessness. But then follows the great final fight, the saints and the martyrs are avenged by the destruction of the Great Whore Babylon and all her followers, *i.e.*, the main mass of mankind; the devil is cast into the bottomless pit and shut up there for a thousand years during which Christ reigns with the martyrs risen from the dead. But after a thousand years the devil is freed again and there is another great battle of the spirits in which he is finally defeated. Then follows the second resurrection, when the other dead also arise and appear before the throne of judgment of God (*not* of Christ, be it noted) and the faithful will enter a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem for life eternal.

As this whole monument is made up of exclusively pre-Christian Jewish material it presents almost exclusively Jewish ideas. Since things started to go badly in this world for the people of Israel, from the time of the tribute to

the Assyrians and Babylonians, from the destruction of the two kingdoms of Israel and Juda to the bondage under Seleucis, that is from Isaiah to Daniel, in every dark period there were prophecies of a saviour. In Daniel, XII, 1–3, there is even a prophecy about Michael, the guardian angel of the Jews, coming down on earth to save them from great trouble; many dead will come to life again, there will be a kind of last judgment and the teachers who have taught the people justice will shine like stars for all eternity. The only Christian point is the great stress laid on the imminent reign of Christ and the glory of the faithful, particularly the martyrs who have risen from the dead.

For the interpretation of these prophecies, as far as they refer to events of that time, we are indebted to German criticism, particularly Ewald, Lücke and Ferdinand Benary. It has been made accessible to non-theologians by Renan. We have already seen that Babylon, the Great Whore, stands for Rome, the city of seven hills. We are told in Chapter XVII, 9–11, about the beast on which she sits that:

“The seven heads” of the beast “are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition.”

According to this the beast is Roman world domination, represented by seven caesars in succession, one of them having been mortally wounded and no longer reigning, but he will be healed and will return. It will be given unto him as the eighth to establish the kingdom of blasphemy and defiance of God. It will be given unto him

“to make war with the saints and to overcome them ... And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb ... And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number

of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.” (XII, 7–18.)

We merely note that boycott is mentioned here as one of the measures to be applied against the Christians by the Roman Empire – and is therefore patently an invention of the devil – and pass on to the question who this Roman emperor is who has reigned once before, was wounded to death and removed but will return as the eighth in the series in the role of Antichrist.

Taking Augustus as the first we have: 2. Tiberius, 3. Caligula, 4. Claudius, 5. Nero, 6. Galba. “Five are fallen, and one is.” Hence, Nero is already fallen and Galba is. Galba ruled from June 9, 68 to January 15, 69. But immediately after he ascended the throne the legions of the Rhine revolted under Vitellius while other generals prepared military risings in other provinces. In Rome itself the praetorians rose, killed Galba and proclaimed Otho emperor.

From this we see that our Revelation was written under Galba. Probably towards the end of his rule. Or, at the latest, during the three months (up to April 15, 69) of the rule of Otho, “the seventh.” But who is the eighth, who was and is not? That we learn from the number 666.

Among the Semites – Chaldeans and Jews – there was at the time a kind of magic based on the double meaning of letters. As about 300 years before our era Hebrew letters were also used as symbols for numbers: a=1, b=2, g=3, d=4, etc. The cabbala diviners added up the value of each letter of a name and sought from the sum to prophesy the future of the one who bore the name, e.g., by forming words or combinations of words of equal value. Secret words and the like were also expressed in this language of numbers. This art was given the Greek name *gematriah*, geometry; the Chaldeans, who pursued this as a business and were called *mathematici* by Tacitus, were later expelled from Rome under Claudius and again under Vitellius, presumably for “serious disorders.”

It was by means of this mathematics that our number 666 appeared. It is a disguise for the name of one of the first five caesars. But besides the number 666, Irenaeus, at the end of the second century, knew another reading – 616, which, at all events, appeared at a time when the number

puzzle was still widely known. The proof of the solution will be if it holds good for both numbers.

This solution was given by Ferdinand Benary of Berlin. The name is Nero. The number is based on **נרון קסר** *Neron Kesar*, the Hebrew spelling of the Greek *Nerôn Kaisar*, Emperor Nero, authenticated by means of the Talmud and Palmyrian inscriptions. This inscription was found on coins of Nero's time minted in the eastern half of the empire. And so – n (*nun*)=50; r (*resh*)=200; v (*vau*) for o=6; n (*nun*)=50; k (*kaph*)=100; s (*samech*)=60; r (*resh*)=200. Total 666. If we take as a basis the Latin spelling *Nero Caesar* the second *nun*=50 disappears and we get 666–50 = 616, which is Irenaeus's reading.

In fact the whole Roman Empire suddenly broke into confusion in Galba's time. Galba himself marched on Rome at the head of the Spanish and Gallic legions to overthrow Nero, who fled and ordered an emancipated slave to kill him. But not only the praetorians in Rome plotted against Galba, the supreme commanders in the provinces did too; new pretendants to the throne appeared everywhere and prepared to march on Rome with their legions. The empire seemed doomed to civil war, its dissolution appeared imminent. Over and above all this the rumour spread, especially in the East, that Nero had not been killed but only wounded, that he had fled to the Parthians and was about to advance with an army over the Euphrates to begin another and more bloody rule of terror. Achaia and Asia in particular were terrified by such reports. And at the very time at which the Revelation must have been written there appeared a false Nero who settled with a fairly considerable number of supporters not far from Patmos and Asia Minor on the island of Kytnos in the Aegean Sea (now called Thermia), until he was killed while Otho still reigned. What was there to be astonished at in the fact that among the Christians, against whom Nero had begun the first great persecution, the view spread that he would return as the Antichrist and that his return and the intensified attempt at a bloody suppression of the new sect that it would involve would be the sign and prelude of the return of Christ, of the great victorious struggle against the powers of hell, of the thousand year kingdom "shortly" to be established, the confident expectation of which inspired the martyrs to go joyfully to death?

Christian and Christian-influenced literature in the first two centuries gives sufficient indication that the secret of the number 666 was then known to many. Irenaeus no longer knew it, but on the other hand he and many others up to the end of the third century also knew that the returning Nero was meant by the beast of the Apocalypse. This trace is then lost and the work which interests us is fantastically interpreted by religious-minded future-tellers; I myself as a child knew old people who, following the example of old Johann Albrecht Bengel, expected the end of the world and the last judgment in the year 1836. The prophecy was fulfilled, and to the very year. The victim of the last judgment, however, was not the sinful world, but the pious interpreters of the Revelation themselves. For in 1836 F. Benary provided the key to the number 666 and thus put a torturous end to all the prophetic calculations, that new *gematriah*.

Our John can only give a superficial description of the kingdom of heaven that is reserved for the faithful. The new Jerusalem is laid out on a fairly large scale, at least according to the conceptions of the time; it is 12,000 furlongs or, 2,227 square kilometres, so that its area is about five million square kilometres, more than half the size of the United States of America. And it is built of gold and all manner of precious stones. There God lives with his people, lightening them instead of the sun, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, neither shall there be any more pain. And a pure river of water of life flows through the city, and on either side of the river are trees of life, bearing twelve manner of fruits and yielding fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree “serve for the hearing of the nations.” (A kind of medicinal beverage, Renan thinks – *L’Antechrist*, p. 542.) Here the saints shall live for ever.

Such, as far as we know, was Christianity in Asia Minor, its main seat, about the year 68. No trace of any Trinity but, on the contrary, the old one and indivisible Jehovah of later Judaism which had exalted him from the national god of the Jews to the one and supreme God of heaven and earth, where he claims to rule over all nations, promising mercy to those who are converted and mercilessly smiting down the obdurate in accordance with the ancient *parcere subjectis ac debellare superbos*.^[4] Hence, this God, in person, not Christ as in the later accounts of the Gospels and the Epistles, will judge at the last judgment. According to the Persian doctrine of

emanation which was current in later Judaism, Christ the Lamb proceeds eternally from him as do also, but on a lower footing, the “seven spirits of God” who owe their existence to a misunderstanding of a poetical passage (Isaiah, XI, 2). All of them are subordinate to God, not God themselves or equal to him. The Lamb sacrifices itself to atone for the sins of the world and for that it is considerably promoted in heathen, for its voluntary death is credited as an extraordinary feat throughout the book, not as something which proceeds necessarily from its intrinsic nature. Naturally the whole heavenly court of elders, cherubim, angels and saints is there. In order to become a religion monotheism has ever had to make concessions to polytheism – since the time of the Zend-Avesta. With the Jews the decline to the sensuous gods of the heathens continued chronically until, after the exile, the heavenly court according to the Persian model adapted religion somewhat better to the people’s fantasy, and Christianity itself, even after it had replaced the eternally self-equal immutable god of the Jews by the mysterious self-differentiating god of the Trinity, could find nothing to supplant the worship of the old gods but that of the saints; thus, according to Fallmerayer, the worship of Jupiter in Peloponnesus, Maina and Arcadia died out only about the ninth century. (*Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea*, I, p. 227.) Only the modern bourgeois period and its Protestantism did away with the saints again and at last took differentiated monotheism seriously.

In the book there is just as little mention of original sin and justification by faith. The faith of these early militant communities is quite different from that of the later victorious church: side by side with the sacrifice of the Lamb, the imminent return of Christ and the thousand-year kingdom which is shortly to dawn form its essential content; this faith survives only through active propaganda, unrelenting struggle against the internal and external enemy, the proud profession of the revolutionary standpoint before the heathen judges and martyrdom, confident in victory.

We have seen that the author is not yet aware that he is something else than a Jew. Accordingly there is no mention of baptism in the whole book, just as many more facts indicate that baptism was instituted in the second period of Christianity. The 144,000 believing Jews are “sealed,” not baptized. It is said of the saints in heaven and the faithful upon earth that they had washed themselves of their sins and washed their robes and made them white in the

blood of the Lamb; there is no mention of the water of baptism. The two prophets who precede the coming of the Antichrist in Chapter XI do not baptize; and according to XIX, 10, the testimony of Jesus is not baptism but the spirit of prophecy. Baptism should naturally have been mentioned in all these cases if it had already been in vigour; we may therefore conclude with almost absolute certainty that the author did not know of it, that it first appeared when the Christians finally separated from the Jews.

Neither does our author know any more about the second sacrament, the Eucharist. If in the Lutheran text Christ promises all the Thyatirans that remain firm in the faith to come *das Abendmahl halten* with them, this creates a false impression. The Greek text has *deipnêsô* – I shall eat supper (with him), and the English bible translates this correctly: *I shall sup with him*. There is no question here of the Eucharist even as a mere commemoration meal.

There can be no doubt that this book, with its date so originally authenticated as the year 68 or 69, is the oldest of all Christian literature. No other is written in such barbaric language, so full of Hebraisms, impossible constructions and mistakes in grammar. Chapter I, verse 4, for example, says literally:

“Grace be unto you ... from he that is being and that was and that is coming.”

Only professional theologians and other historians who have a stake in it now deny that the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are but later adaptations of writings which are now lost and whose feeble historical core is now unrecognizable in the maze of legend, that even the few Epistles supposed by Bruno Bauer to be “authentic” are either writings of a later date or at best adaptations of old works of unknown authors altered by additions and insertions. It is all the more important since we are here in possession of a book whose date of writing has been determined to the nearest month, a book that displays to us Christianity in its undeveloped form. This form stands in the same relation to the fourth century state religion with its fully evolved dogma and mythology as Tacitus’s still unstable mythology of the Germans to the developed teaching of the gods of Edda as influenced by Christian and antique elements. The core of the

universal religion is there, but it includes without any discrimination the thousand possibilities of development which became realities in the countless subsequent sects. And the reason why this oldest writing of the time when Christianity was coming into being is especially valuable for us is that it shows without any dilution what Judaism, strongly influenced by Alexandria, contributed to Christianity. All that comes later is western, Greco-Roman addition. It was only by the intermediary of the monotheistic Jewish religion that the cultured monotheism of later Greek vulgar philosophy could clothe itself in the religious form in which alone it could grip the masses. But once this intermediary was found, it could become a universal religion only in the Greco-Roman world, and that by further development in and merging with the thought material that world had achieved.

Notes

1. *Note by Engels:* A peculiar antithesis to this was the religious risings in the Mohammedan world, particularly in Africa. Islam is a religion adapted to Orientals, especially Arabs, *i.e.*, on one hand to townsmen engaged in trade and industry, on the other to nomadic Bedouins. Therein lies, however, the embryo of a periodically recurring collision. The townspeople grow rich, luxurious and lax in the observation of the "law." The Bedouins, poor and hence of strict morals, contemplate with envy and covetousness these riches and pleasures. Then they unite under a prophet, a Mahdi, to chastise the apostates and restore the observation of the ritual and the true faith and to appropriate in recompense the treasures of the renegades. In a hundred years they are naturally in the same position as the renegades were: a new purge of the faith is required, a new Mahdi arises and the game starts again from the beginning. That is what happened from the conquest campaigns of the African Almoravids and Almohads in Spain to the last Mahdi of Khartoum who so successfully thwarted the English. It happened in the same way or similarly with the risings in Persia and other Mohammedan countries. All these movements are clothed in religion but they have their source in economic causes; and yet, even when they are victorious, they allow the old economic conditions to persist untouched. So the old situation remains unchanged and the collision recurs periodically. In the popular risings of the Christian West, on the contrary, the religious disguise is only a flag and a mask for attacks on an economic order which is becoming antiquated. This is finally overthrown, a new one arises and the world progresses.
2. "Reinstatement of the flesh."
3. In war as in war.
4. "Pardon the humble and make war on the proud."