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Statement of Professional Research Interests and Philosophy

Inasmuch as I continually choose to plumb the diversity and complexity of early Christianity in my scholarly activity, my research interests constitute a reflection and extension of my pedagogical practice. For example, one way to teach Christian origins tracks the sectors of believers that, very early on in the “laboratory” of early Christian development, told their history as the triumph of truth that passed on genealogically from great men to great men. This “canonical” narrative best exemplified by the Acts of the Apostles and the apostolic succession claimed by Christian leaders has only recently come under intense scrutiny for its exclusion of women, Jewish Christians, and a Greco-Roman underclass whose attraction to Christianity remains just as significant as the usual data from the written class of bishops, saints, and master theologians.

On the other hand, from my master’s thesis on the Jewish-Christian Ebionites to my recent dissertation on the popular, yet enigmatic, Christian text known as the *Shepherd* of Hermas, I have pursued the many early Christianities left behind on the march to a tenuous catholic unity. Through my scholarship, I attempt to practice a commitment to diversity that, while not necessarily reflected in my own race or ethnicity, plays out fruitfully in my research and instruction. For I am convicted that a narrow approach using only the favored and “canonical” texts does not reflect the historical diversities of class, thought, belief, and practice in the earliest church. I proudly study a unique Christian text by one Hermas, the only manumitted Roman slave known to have produced such a book in the early church, and which often features women as revelatory agents. The early favor of the *Shepherd*, at least in Egypt, deepens our understanding of early Christian diversity that otherwise tends to be amalgamated to a triumphant and providential narrative of the success of a unified “apostolic,” and particularly Pauline, church. Real diversity can be observed there on rare occasions but, when consciously allied to proto-orthodoxy, this frequently behaves as little more than tokenism to celebrate the spread of a narrow range of beliefs.

These previous research subjects exemplify the active interests of my scholarship, which ranges periodically from the earliest decades of Christian Origins through the fourth century, when heresiological writings reached their apex and when a “canon” of the New Testament first became a possible and resolvable matter of the episcopal enterprise. For the short term, I foresee continuing to problematize the formation, promulgation, and adoption of a New Testament, especially by focusing—novelly, for the state of canon research—on the texts left outside of the episcopal canon. This work requires a depth of knowledge about Egyptian Christianity, not only because Athanasius of Alexandria seems to have been the first to inveigh authoritatively about the canon, but also because the northern African soil both preserved copious manuscripts and supplied other regions of the continent with their earliest Christian texts. Over the long term, however, I remain committed to portraying the “heresies” in a fresh light, in a comprehensive project that might be best described as “A New Epiphanius,” where their origins, motivations, and beliefs can be pursued more charitably, free of the church’s ongoing heresiological posture, with an intent to correct misconceptions and to fulfill our obligation to memorialize the past in accordance with modern notions of human rights.⁴

⁴ I first heard this human rights perspective for biblical studies and Christian origins in November 2015 from historical Jesus scholar Annette Merz, who spoke in veiled frustration with the guild’s tendency to retain “tooth fairy”-esque presuppositions about Jesus’s motivations. In particular, Merz referenced the work of Dutch theorist Antoon de Baets, primarily his “A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations toward Past Generations,” *History and Theory* 43.4 (Dec. 2004): 130–164. This work remains ripe for application to the so-called heretics, historical persons who continue to be prone to caricaturization, especially by systematic theologians, and manipulation into mere antitheses of orthodoxy.

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Statement of Research Trajectories and Objectives

Perhaps more than any other religion, Christianity places nearly equal emphases on adherence to the right combination of belief (orthodoxy) and practice (orthopraxy). Although the precise tenets and rites to be followed have varied by time and place, and by denomination or church, few would contest that Christians have historically prized correctness of doctrine and propriety of behavior as vital to one's Christian identity and one's ultimate hope for salvation.

Rob's research agenda plumbs the historical flexibility of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy, seeking to answer questions at the heart of the matter: who was Jesus and what must one believe about him or his life to be Christian? What texts were considered sources of authority for Christian communities from the first century to the fifth, and why did some fall out of favor toward the end of this period? How can we reconcile the late-coming creation of orthodoxy and orthopraxy from an initial situation of organic religious plurality? Furthermore, why has Christian history generally excluded women, Jewish Christians, and a Greco-Roman underclass whose attraction to the faith was just as significant as the usual data from the written class of bishops, saints, and master theologians? These boundary-probing questions have animated Rob's two largest research projects to date: his master's thesis, which sought to uncover the historically reasonable beliefs of the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, a second-century sect known to us only by Christian heresiographers, and his dissertation on the canonically liminal but eminently popular early Christian book known as the *Shepherd* of Hermas. Rob's **research trajectories**, therefore, explore the boundaries of the New Testament canon, the discursive creation of both orthodoxy and heresy, and the many early Christianities left behind on the march to a tenuous catholic unity.

Additionally, Rob maintains interests in the historical Jesus, textual criticism, the digital humanities, and manuscript preservation, all of which have played key roles in his research. Finally, in a shift to modern-day religious trends, he closely monitors underlying causes for secularization, the slippage of religiosity in Western societies, and the rise of the "religious nones" to keep abreast of the real and imagined boundaries of Christianity in the twenty-first century.

These research trajectories filter into the following **research objectives**, in which Rob intends to:

- Publish reviews of recent works touching on the New Testament canon and other topics of relevance to his dissertation.
- See the recent full revision of his dissertation through to publication as a monograph with Lexington Books (imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, based in Maryland, USA).
- Submit ancillary items from his dissertation for publication, including an article on a fresco painting of a scene from the *Shepherd* of Hermas and the fresh translation of an early Latin sermon on gambling that quotes the *Shepherd* of Hermas to support its rigorist agenda.
- Pursue the viability of a long-term voluntary study gauging religious adherence among students on the university campus, including the reasons why students maintain or sever their religious ties.

Rob is committed, furthermore, to the ideal of scholars serving the public good and wishes to produce knowledge for both the academic community and the general public.