

BOOK REVIEWS

***Strange Religion: How the First Christians Were Weird, Dangerous, and Compelling*, by Nijay K. Gupta**

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Nijay K. Gupta is the Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary and author of numerous works in New Testament and biblical studies. His latest book, *Strange Religion*, considers the "strangeness" of early Christians. The seeds of this book were planted when a few students asked him why early Christians called themselves "believers," given that the label would have sounded strange to their fellow citizens. This question sent him on the hunt for the other "weird" beliefs and behaviors that deviated "from cultural norms and society's expectations for how things ought to be done." For Gupta, it is not as if the early Christians were *trying* to be weird, but the gospel fundamentally "changed their orientation" in ways that put them at odds with their culture (3).

Strange Beliefs

In the modern world, religion is often seen as a personal choice, where believers can shop around for the church that best meets their needs, but in the ancient world things were different. The social world of ancient Rome was bound by allegiance to the Roman pantheon of gods, which was "not merely an individual choice but a personal, social, and national obligation" (17). The Romans considered the early Christian church a *superstitio* or "a strange and dangerous religion" (54). It is not hard to see why. Christians had no temples or statues, instead meeting privately in homes and praying to an unseen God, while also worshiping a crucified Savior. The Christians were proselytizers, too, trying to encourage others to join their religion, which brought them under suspicion with various Roman authorities.

Christians were seen as strange because of their "faith," which may sound odd to modern Christians, but the conviction that something transcended the Roman world was "an extraordinary innovation" (32). Gupta concentrates on four "weird" beliefs that set Christians apart: "the supremacy of Jesus, cult without smoke and blood, being possessed by the Spirit of God, and beginning at the end of all things" (63). Their fellow Romans did not necessarily find it strange that a man could become a god, but they found it audacious to claim that Christ was supreme over all things. Greeks and

Romans certainly would not have understood the emerging Christian rituals involving singing and reading Scripture (as opposed to sacrifices or burnt offerings), nor what Christians meant by the indwelling of the Spirit—namely, that “the animating presence of God actually lives in bodies—not statues but the flesh of believers” (104). Nor did the Christians and the Romans share a common vision of “eschatological hope” (116). I was a bit surprised that Gupta did not place more emphasis on the strangeness of the Christian belief in the resurrection, which was for the Romans an audacious claim, but the Christians and Romans certainly had different visions of the eschaton. “Roman writers,” he notes, “held out hope for the future of Rome, but they never came close to the kind of certainty that Christians had” (116).

Strange Practices

Alongside their strange beliefs, Christians had some strange practices that set them apart. The ancient Christians “introduced the world to a religious-technology revolution” with worship that was not relegated to a particular sacred space (86). The Romans found the rejection of their religious cultic practices strange, but Gupta’s explanation of early Christian worship is also strange. He suggests that scholarly literature on liturgics (including the works of Oscar Cullmann, Ralph Martin, and Paul Bradshaw) suffers from “a major methodological flaw” because these authors superimpose later categories of “worship” upon earlier documents (88). Instead, Gupta defines first-century worship with the puzzling categories of “worship as slavery to God, worship as imitation of God, and worship as participating in God’s mission,” terms that capture the assumptions of worship but separate them from the activities of worship (88).

Later, Gupta returns to the topic of worship and complements the assumptions mentioned above with some of the traditional liturgical practices that set Christians apart. Christian worship gatherings reimagined the community of faith in several ways. Christians created a new sense of “family” in ways that “were intentionally deconstructing a Romanized approach to family and constructing a new family and household” (134). They also reconfigured notions of “household leadership” and created a “transformative social table.” These are good observations, but I would have liked to see more specific ways that early Christians reimagined notions such as marriage and sexual immorality in ways that set them apart from the Roman way of life. Nevertheless, Gupta’s explanation of the strangeness of early Christian spiritual communities unearths some of their distinctive features, and there is no question that Romans found those features unusual. Whereas the Romans emphasized secret liturgies and myths, the Christians attempted to imitate Christ. Christians celebrated humility and selflessness and emphasized that “God does not pay attention to status, he has no favorites, all will face judgement, and all have equal access to divine grace and mercy” (181–82).

Compelling Lives

The early Christians were not perfect. Gupta is right to remind readers of these Christians' faults, such as the way they (just like modern Christians) slandered each other and suffered from internal divisions. They were not perfect, and they might have been "weird" and "dangerous," but as history has proven, they were also compelling. Eventually, the church grew, indicating that some found the early Christians "a virtuous, loving community of mutuality, honor, and goodness" and wanted to be part of it (213).

I found Gupta's arguments compelling too. In the opening pages he claims that his book "is not a handbook for how to be Christian today or how to create a 'weird' church"; instead he claims he is merely describing the ancient church (xi). But the book is peppered with exhortations—implicit and explicit—that challenge the church today. For example, Gupta maintains that "the Western world often reflects a 'chemically altered' version of the Jesus movement that has been manufactured for cheap refreshment" (5). Comparatively, he hopes that the first-century way of life is refreshing for the thirsty believer looking for purer ingredients of the Christian faith. To that end, I did find this book refreshing, and I can see why many in the ancient world found early Christianity refreshing too.

Anyone interested in cultural engagement and the early church, or anyone curious about the kinds of beliefs and practices that set the first church apart, will enjoy reading about the strange religion of early Christianity.

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