
Countercultural Character of Johannine Christianity

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Abstract

The paper presents the rhetorical aspects of Johannine literature and shows the countercultural character of the community that produced it. Although different in genre, content and scope, the Gospels, the three Epistles and the Book of Revelation exude the same countercultural mechanism. To recognise these mechanisms on the literary level, the first part of the paper shows the impulses of countercultural interaction with the audiences. They are marked as a confrontation with religious and political authorities. Being in constant conflict with the Jewish synagogue and God-defying structures of the Greco-Roman world, the Johannine community built its own world. This world is legitimised as countercultural, i.e. constructed in opposition to the prevailing social structures and cultural practices. René Girard's anthropological concept of the scapegoat serves to observe the countercultural basis of Johannine Christianity, which is contained in the Christological symbol of the lamb. In the second part of the paper, examples of the operation of the countercultural mechanism are listed, and how it reshapes cultural practices and social structures is shown. The Johannine motifs of love and sacrifice are crucial in this process. Finally, the paper's conclusion briefly discusses the potential of the countercultural contribution of Johannine literature to Christianity and contemporary society.

Keywords: Johannine Christianity, counterculture, anthropology, theology, religion, New Testament, New Testament scholarship

Countercultural Character of Johannine Christianity

Introduction

In contemporary scholarship, 'Johannine Christianity' refers to a distinctive group or movement in the apostolic age of Christianity, connected with one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, John (Attridge, 2006). As an eyewitness to Jesus's work, he wrote one Gospel, three letters (Catholic Epistles), and the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse). Because of the usual dating of this literature towards the end of the first century, Johannine theology is sometimes considered one of the latest developments in the New Testament. Still, there is enough historical evidence to directly connect Johannine Christianity and theology with the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Considering the genre and thematic diversity of the Johannine writings and how they develop theological thought, it was also often assumed that behind this literature stands a group of authors or 'Johannine school' (Culpepper, 1975; Brown, 1979). This meant that the movement, which, after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, continued its activity in Asia Minor (Ephesus), was distinguished by a certain hierarchical organisation: in the heart of the group stood Apostle John, who together with his disciples produced five writings, and around that leading part of the group there were other Christians too, who formed a wider network of the 'Johannine community'.

Identifying layers, circles and persons in this movement has a hypothetical character. Nevertheless, it helps scholars to explain the theological, conceptual, and structural peculiarities of the Johannine writings, whose mutual similarities indicate that they might have originated within a distinctive Christian group. One of this literature's special features belongs to the cultural segment, which has not been given enough attention in recent scholarship. However, this feature is noteworthy since it reveals that the cultural factors within Johannine Christianity are inherently connected to the broader cultural landscape of the Greco-Roman world but are also deliberately shaped through a

countercultural interaction with certain aspects of that same world. This paper aims to shed light on this specific feature and thus portray the countercultural character of Johannine Christianity.

Confronting Religious and Political Authorities

Among numerous research studies into the background of the Johannine writings, the idea that the community lived in sharp conflict with the Jewish synagogue stood out over time. Both praised and criticised, the originator of this thesis, James Louis Martyn (1925-2015), was still remembered as a researcher who crucially contributed to elucidating the life circumstances in which Johannine Christianity found itself at the end of the first century. His concept begins with the premise that the Gospel is the earliest among five Johannine writings and concludes with the thesis that narrating the story of Jesus Christ in the Gospel simultaneously recounts the story of the community (Martyn, 1968). This is why it is impossible to establish a precise difference between the levels of history and theology within the Gospel (Frey, 2018, 1-13). Events, characters, symbols, comments, and other elements of its narrative world systematically direct the reader's perception, who, according to that exact text, is constantly faced with the hostility of Jewish groups.

The reason for this conflict should be found in the fact that the community considered itself also Jewish, but one that found its Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:41). Several facts may support the assumption that Jewish religious leaders, willing to eradicate the Christian movement, applied the method of excluding 'enlightened' members from the Jewish synagogue (Martyn, 1968, p. 46-66). This is symbolically illustrated by the episode about Jesus' healing of a man born blind (John 9). Enlightened in body and spirit, this man had to be excluded from the Jewish synagogue (John 9:22). The Book of Revelation may mark this kind of synagogue as "Satan's" (Rev 2:9; 3:9).

The fact of God's incarnation certainly represents the basis of the Christian contrast with the Jewish religion and culture. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' public confession in the Sanhedrin –

that he is the Son of God – leads to a death sentence (Mark 14:62-64). In the Gospel of John, however, there are many more statements like this (5:18; 7:1; 11:5 etc.). The reader encounters them throughout the text because the plot has an episodic and thematic structure (Culpepper, 1983, 77–98). Likewise, the Epistles state that opposition to the fact of the incarnation is a sign of the 'antichrist' (1 John 2:22; 4:3). However, with the concept of incarnation, Johannine writings tie another important idea. Rooted in Jesus Christ, the incarnated Logos, the community represents a new temple: it participates in the eschatological glory of Jerusalem temple and even overcomes it (John 1:14).

This idea is not originally Johannine but comes from an earlier period of Jewish history. Around the second century BC, a Jewish sect emerged in Qumran, believing that the Jerusalem temple had lost its authority and their community had formed a true one. A similar concept characterises the Johannine community, with the difference that it builds its temple concept on the fact of the incarnation. During Jesus' first stay in Jerusalem, no one understood his programmatic words – "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19) – refer to the temple of his body (John 2:21), i.e., community. Jewish authorities did not consider this statement serious because it had taken 46 years to build the temple, while Jesus' disciples understood these words only after his resurrection (John 2:20-22).

The implication of this theological standpoint has a significant rhetorical impact on the Johannine literature. The narration of Jesus' activity contains many allusions and references to the temple cult. The symbolic motifs of light, water, wine, bread, way, truth, and life, together with the way of structuring the narrative units, form the point where the story about Jesus Christ (history) intersects with the representation of the community as a new temple (theology). A programmatic demonstration of these relationships is the episode about Jesus' first miracle, which tells about his turning water into wine during the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-12). The six stone water jars used by ordinary wedding guests symbolise Jewish law and ritual, and these jars lose their function due to the miraculous

action of Jesus Christ. The outcome of the miracle was that there was no more water, and the wine was given to the banquet guests. Omitting to say something else about the wedding, the author gives this event a symbolic level. The episode thus narrates the transformation of the old rites into the new and messianic reality and invites the reader to engage in the countercultural space of a messianic feast (Tatalović, 2019, p. 905). That is why turning water into wine is not considered a miracle but a sign (John 2:11). That is also why the episode about Jesus' announcement of the temple's destruction was narrated immediately after this sign. The loss of the importance of stone jars in Cana anticipates losing the role of the central 'stone jar' or Jerusalem temple.

As can be seen, the Gospel of John is characterised by a high level of meaningfulness in narrating the key theological themes. The author of this text, named 'the Theologian' because of his literary and theological abilities, undoubtedly relied on the literary skills of the Greco-Roman world. However, he did not remain indebted to that world and its culture. The turning of water into wine also shows that Jesus is incomparably more powerful than Dionysus, whose cult was very popular in Ephesus and Israel (Eisele, 2009, p. 23). Dionysus could only be the inventor but not the creator of wine. Creation is a divine attribute which belongs only to the true God. This aspect of the confrontation with beliefs and structures of the Greco-Roman world is certainly the most visible in Jesus' conversation with Pilate (John 18:28-40), portrayed as an encounter between the representatives of two kingdoms, the heavenly and the earthly (Brown, 2015, p. 85). Therefore, the community's rhetoric of confrontation referred to the wider social and cultural reality of its time. Due to its sectarian mentality, the concepts and rhetoric of the Qumran sect might have suited her well. The Johannine literature abounds in dualisms that are typical of Qumran. Allusions to the temple cult are also used in the dualistic concepts, so light is opposed to darkness, water to thirst, bread to hunger, life to death, etc. From the viewpoint of the Johannine community, the authority of religious and political institutions, especially Judaism, is turned upside down. Johannine Christianity

positions itself as a dynamic opposition to established institutions. In broad terms, Johannine culture can be characterised as countercultural.

The same language is used in the Revelation, although of a different genre. As an apocalypse, it reveals God's vision of the world and its structures. Religious and political authorities are presented as a single entity, a polycephalic dragon or snake, representing collective evil (Van Henten, 1994). In contrast to the existing civilisation, in which primacy belonged to the type of anti-God city called Babylon, which could be Rome, Ephesus and any other city in the ancient Mediterranean world, the Apocalypse introduces the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (John 21-22). The Apocalypse symbolically points to this distinction at the crossroads between history and eschatology in a time that exudes an insufficiently clear distinction between good and evil. In addition, the rhetoric of the Apocalypse takes a step further and visualises the liturgical space by which it offers an anticipation of the eschatological reality (Ruiz 2006, p. 232). At the heart of this expanse resides the throne of God, surrounded by diverse celestial and terrestrial beings. Here, Christians collectively partake in their shared experience of belonging to the heavenly civilisation. Recent research shows that the description of this heavenly court was created by combining ideas about the throne of God in Jewish mysticism and imagining the throne of the supreme earthly ruler or the Roman emperor (Morton, 2007). It tells those who read the Apocalypse that God's throne will prevail over all other human and demonic thrones. Therefore, the audience of the Apocalypse also engages with countercultural rhetoric. In opposition to the worship of Roman emperors and other deities, it employs language that is an integral component of the God-defying culture.

However, the authorities that the community confronted were not only outside of it. In the remaining three writings, which are also considered the product of Johannine Christianity, it is noticeable that there was also a conflict within the community. If the epistles of John are read in their canonical order, from the first to the third, one may conclude that the community lost its strength over time and fell into

the shadow of the dominant Gnostic group (Brown, 1982, pp. 30-32). The question is, however, what led to such a situation. Contemporary scholarship assumes that the main reason is to be seen in the Gnostic potential of the community (Zumstein, 2004, p. 3-5). Indeed, the sectarian mentality of the Johannine community could have been construed and maintained with the help of this distinctive factor. The literature of Johannine Christianity was written in such a manner that only those with special knowledge could benefit from it. In this sense, it is possible that the Johannine principle of confrontation and the countercultural identity was transferred to its internal structure and thus led to its downfall.

The demise of a (small?) Christian community in the turbulent circumstances of the ancient Mediterranean world was probably not particularly noticed. The early Christian world was also very diverse and fluid. Interestingly, early Christian authors began to rely on the Johannine literature only in the middle of the third century, while the Apocalypse remains unacceptable for many. Nevertheless, this community left behind a literature that significantly influenced the development of Christian thought and, thus, the development of modern society. The fact that its message was imbued with a significant aspect of universality, reflecting the conviction that other Christians should share its beliefs, also helped in that process. However, the principle of confrontation would have no impact if it was not imbued with the countercultural interaction with the ancient world's social structures and cultural practices. I will briefly review two key Johannine motifs in the following lines, showing their impact and reception implications. These are the motifs of sacrifice and love.

Reshaping cultural practices and social structures

From the first lines of the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented with the terminology of sacrifice. Seeing him by the river Jordan, John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin" (John 1:29). This characterisation is deeply rooted in the Jewish cult and theology. A lamb was sacrificed in the Jerusalem temple to

commemorate the Passover event that formed the Jewish national and spiritual identity. Referring to this practice as an indicator of Jewish identity in ancient times, the Gospel presents Jesus as the lamb through which a new and different Passover is performed (Lam, 2020). The description of Jesus' death on the cross exudes Paschal and sacrificial terminology (John 19:34). Other Gospel writers were also aware of this interaction with the Jewish ritual, associating the moment of Jesus' death with the destruction of the temple and the abolition of sacrificial offerings (Mark 15:38). The community thus exemplified that their identity was no longer maintained by the memory of the event of liberation from Egyptian slavery but rather by the memory of the event of liberation from spiritual slavery.

Interestingly, the Book of Revelation does not separate the same motif from the basic Johannine manner of confrontation with God-defying authorities. This is evident in the 'lamb Christology' of Revelation. A reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is made by introducing the Lamb on the heavenly throne and depicting it in the standing position despite its mortal wound (Rev 5:6). However, the Lamb also has horns on its head and is ready to clash with its enemies. At the end of the drama, the Lamb defeats a fiercer creature, the beast, which represents evil (Rev 17:14). Finally, the centre of the heavenly Jerusalem will not be a temple but the Lamb and God. The heavenly city itself is the bride of the Lamb (Rev 21:9) and is illuminated by the light that is the Lamb (Rev 21:23).

Based on these few characteristics of the Gospel and the Apocalypse, which, although not explicitly mentioned in the Epistles, are nevertheless present through many allusions (e.g. 1 John 1:7), it may be concluded the concept of 'Lamb sacrifice' represents the basic code of Johannine Christianity. In this respect, the Johannine thought is close to the native Jewish mentality, built on the idea of sacrifice. Moreover, the community thereby shows similarity with all (archaic) societies, which, too, were built on ritual and sacrifice. According to Girard, the basis of human culture lies in the sacrifice and scapegoat mechanism (Girard, 2001, p. 90-91). In moments of internal hostility within a group, there is a necessity for an outlet, as the group risks

self-destruction due to its own violent tendencies (this is what Girard identifies as 'mimetic violence'). This outlet manifests as a scapegoat, becoming the sacrificial victim for the group (Girard et al., 2007, 48-49). Although such sacrifices may assume an infinite variety of outer forms, they all represent ritualistic elaborations of the original human scapegoat, who was the victim of collective murder (Leyf, 2024). As a counterweight to this mechanism, John pictures Jesus' death as a sacrifice of an innocent lamb. He thus eliminates negative attributes and other unsympathetic connotations of the scapegoating theme (Girard, 2001, p. 156) and instates a central motif of the Johannine counterculture. However, this motif is considered cultural within the Johannine optics because of the reversal that had turned the victim into the keystone of the community. Standing upon the heavenly throne despite the mortal wound, the Lamb receives the ultimate glory (Rev 5:12-13) and will eternally reign in New Jerusalem.

The crucifixion is thus central to the memory in the Johannine community. When the Gospel reader reaches the narrative pivot, they hear the crucified Jesus uttering the words: 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). The concept of the innocent victim and the Paschal terminology underscore the centrality of this event. However, by embracing the crucifixion, an act typically reserved for slaves and criminals in the ancient world, Jesus subverts societal norms. For a community primarily of Jewish origin, it was initially unacceptable to believe in the incarnation and death of God, especially on the cross. From this inverted perspective, significant transformations in cultural practices and social structures follow, highlighting the countercultural nature of Johannine Christianity.

This aspect is programmatically shown in the episode about Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the beginning of his farewell discourse (John 13-17). According to the ancient custom, the hosts offered the guests water to wash their hands or feet before the meal. The general rule was that this task was assigned to a slave or a person from a lower social class (Bauckham, 2007, p. 193). The reverse situation was unthinkable, as seen by Peter's refusal to let the Lord and the teacher wash his feet (John 13:8). This act of Jesus shows an

example of humility in serving others and the community. If he is willing to do such a humiliating thing, then those who serve him as a master should be ready to do the same and even more. However, as this episode in the plot of the Gospel proleptically and symbolically presents the sacrificial death of Jesus, the act itself is countercultural. The death of the Lamb becomes the principle that (re)shapes the cultural structure of the community. Cultural practices change, and the social structure becomes different. The one who wants to be the first should serve others, not vice versa.

Jesus expresses the verbal side of this act through the main commandment about love: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The love Jesus proposes and puts into practice becomes a sign of belonging to the community. The validity of that love is confirmed by the willingness to lay down one's life for the sake of another (John 15.13). Such love opposes violence as the root of society and functions as a countercultural mechanism that frees society from its original, scapegoating sin. This is precisely what is expressed in the first epistle of John, which elaborates the love commandment theme of the Gospel:

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain, who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet

refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:11-18).

Having permanently taken over the place and role of the scapegoat, the Lamb signifies the New Passover or liberation from slavery to the core social structure, norms and values. This is already indicated in the wording of the love commandment. By connecting two mutually opposed semantic domains (love vs. commandment), Jesus reshapes the moral and legal language of Jewish law. The commandment is, therefore, new since it represents a specific interpretation of what is old. In the same way, Jesus' ultimate act of love calls into question the perception of reality and the structure of society. However, its effect is not permanently possible without a community that, through its ritual and culture, performatively commemorates the sacrificial death of the Lamb. The existence of this community in the world guarantees its salvation.

The Book of Revelation clearly shows that the interplay between love and violence played an essential role in Johannine's maintenance of countercultural rhetoric. After introducing the throne of God and the heavenly beings participating in the cosmic liturgical scene (Rev 4), the author directs the reader's attention to the scroll sealed with seven seals and placed in the right hand of God. In the apocalyptic imagination, such a scroll represents God's hidden plan for the world (Koester, 2014, p. 373). Having expressed regret because "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it" (Rev 5:3), the author or the seer is comforted by the words of one of the presbyters who are standing around the throne: "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev 5:5). These statements reflect ancient Jewish beliefs that anticipated the Messiah to possess qualities of a military and political leader. Symbols like a lion and references to David align with such expectations. However, anticipating a lion or a Davidic king, the seer unexpectedly encounters a lamb (Rev 5:6). Jewish messianism, at the root of which were the symbols of a bloodthirsty animal and a warlike ruler, was thus reshaped by the concept of the innocent sacrifice. In

this context, when it is later stated that the adherents of the Lamb have triumphed over the beast or devil through the Lamb's blood (Rev 12:11), it signifies that they have embraced the authentic principle of community functioning that opposes the logic of the fallen world. That is why in the New Jerusalem, as the eschatological realisation of the community, their light will be the Lamb (Rev 21:23).

Conclusion

In early Christianity, which, as a whole, also manifests a subversive attitude towards the Greco-Roman world, the Johannine community makes up only a small part. Nevertheless, it develops rhetoric that makes it a countercultural social cell. Such a way of self-understanding of an early Christian group was not unique. First of all, the subversive character of Christianity enabled other communities within early Christianity to define themselves similarly. However, the question can be raised as to what extent this phenomenon is only Christian and to what extent it is social in general. Teodor Roszak, in his influential book *The Making of a Counter Culture*, explored the counterculture phenomenon that emerged among Anglo-American youth in the 1960s. Characterised by a profound discontent with conventional social beliefs, counterculture surpasses mainstream consciousness and derives its influence from the moral and imaginative aspects of human personality or "non-intellectual consciousness". Any movement or individual embodying non-intellectual understanding and personal perspectives of truth, as opposed to cultural constructs of knowledge, reflects the essence of the counterculture (videti Roszak, 1968, p. 42-62).

Closeness to the Gnostic mentality and the revelatory nature enabled Johannine Christianity to develop its countercultural identity. The contribution of such theological thought to the Christian heritage is reflected in the strengthening of its ability to enter into a dynamic relationship with dominant social and cultural norms. However, this potential was unsuitable for orthodox Christianity in its tumultuous formation period (Deconick, 2016, p. 28). If counterculturality is the

reason for the downfall of the Johannine community, then the authentic Johannine thought threatens every religious system of which it becomes a part. On the other side, counterculturality was only one of the facets of Johannine Christianity that also developed a profound theological language. The theologians of the third and fourth centuries made no small efforts to make Johannine Christianity Orthodox based on its other qualities. The concept of the Lamb and other theological constructions became universal Christian symbols. Nevertheless, neglecting the countercultural nature of (Johannine) Christianity can significantly weaken the power of the authentic Christian message. The idea of this paper is to recall this aspect as well as to encourage further research.

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Kontrakulturni karakter Jovanovskog hrišćanstva

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Sažetak

Radom se prezentuju retorički aspekti Jovanovske književnosti i pokazuje se kontrakulturni karakter zajednice koja ju je proizvela. Iako različitog žanra, sadržine i obima, Evanđelje, tri poslanice i Knjiga otkrivenja odišu istim kontrakulturnim mehanizmom. U cilju prepoznavanja ovog mehanizama na literarnom planu, u prvom delu rada se pokazuju impulsi kontrakulturne interakcije sa auditorijumima. Oni su označeni kao konfrontacija sa religijskim i političkim autoritetima. Nalazeći se u stalnom sukobu sa jevrejskom sinagogom i bogoprotivnim strukturama grčko-rimskog sveta, Jovanovska zajednica je izgradila sopstveni svet. Budući konstruisan u suprotnosti sa vladajućim društvenim strukturama i kulturnim praksama, ovaj svet se legitimiše kao kontrakulturni. Antropološki koncept žrtvenog jarca Renea Žirara služi uočavanju kontrakulturnog temelja Jovanovskog hrišćanstva, koji je sadržan u hristološkom simbolu jagnjeta. U drugom delu rada navedeni su primeri delovanja kontrakulturnog mehanizma i pokazani su načini na koje on preoblikuje kulturne prakse i društvene strukture. Jovanovski motivi ljubavi i žrtve pokazuju se ključnim u ovom procesu. Zaključkom su, konačno, diskutovani potencijali kontrakulturnog doprinosa Jovanovske književnosti hrišćanstvu i time savremenom društvu.

Ključne reči: Jovanovsko hrišćanstvo, kontrakultura, antropologija, teologija, religija, Novi Zavet, novozavetna nauka