Hurtado sets out to establish some of the distinctive or odd features of earliest Christianity in the first three centuries CE. Moreover, he argues that in the first three centuries, these distinctive—or bizarre—features were considered a dangerous and challenging force to “accepted notions of religion, piety, identity, and behavior” (xii). He also proposes that these features have shaped assumptions about religion in large parts of the contemporary world.

The introduction (1–13) emphasizes the distinctiveness of early Christianity as a translocal, transethnic, and growing religious movement that from the outset generated tensions with and opposition from civic and imperial authorities. Both insiders and outsiders regarded it as distinctive, even strange. Hurtado suggests that its distinctives also made it noteworthy and attractive to converts. He recognizes considerable diversity within early Christianities but chooses to focus on “the emerging mainstream tradition” of proto-orthodoxy (11).

Chapter 1, “Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians,” turns to the generally negative remarks of outsiders about Christian beliefs and practices to sustain the claim that they regarded this emerging movement as “different, odd, and even objectionable” (15). Hurtado first notes Jewish responses, particularly those of the opponent and zealous Saul of Tarsus (16–20). He then examines (the unfortunately named) “Pagan Criticism” (20–34; the derogatory term pagan should be eliminated from scholarly discourse), discussing comments by Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny,
Galen, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian, and Celsus. Complaints included the early Christians’ immoral behaviors (incest, cannibalism, human sacrifice), delusions about immortality, claims about Jesus, intellectual and social inferiority, and refusal to honor traditional gods that threatened civil and political order.

Chapter 2, “A New Kind of Faith,” takes up the strange Christian distinctive, labeled impiety and atheism by opponents, of affirming monotheism and rejecting polytheism. Hurtado distinguishes contemporary understandings of religion as distinct, chosen, and recognizable cross-cultural activities from ancient understandings that did not recognize religious activity as a distinguishable entity and that valued practices or rituals more than beliefs. Most important, his emphasis falls on the distinct Christian insistence on loyalty to one God in contrast to the ubiquitous observance of multiple divinities. But further, the Christian refusal of such honoring was especially offensive. Jewish refusal was deemed a national peculiarity and somewhat tolerated. Christian refusal had no such framework; their withdrawal from honoring gods was unprecedented, incomprehensible, and objectionable in putting civic order at risk (also 90–91). Hurtado concedes, however, that actual Christian practice may not have been as consistent as the texts prescribe (57–58, 87–88). He notes other distinctive practices: baptism, sacred meal, assembling together regularly, prayer. The last part of the chapter (62–76) takes up distinctive Christian beliefs about God: the lack of images, intense divine love for humanity, and a novel “dyadic” devotion to Jesus that linked him with God.

Chapter 3, “A Different Identity,” begins with contrasting contemporary understandings of religious identity as separate from nationality with ancient understandings of religion as an aspect of ethnic or cultural identity from birth. Emperor cults linked people across the empire with the ruling regime, though without abandoning traditional practices and allegiances. Voluntary religious groups also existed to which people chose to belong but that did not demand the distinctive exclusive allegiance as did Christian groups. Again central to Christian identity was the avoidance of idolatry; also important were baptism, common meal, an prayer in constituting a translocal, transethnic identity. This identity was expressed by particular terms such as “Christian” and “church/assembly.”

Chapter 4, “A ‘Bookish’ Religion,” argues that the “reading, writing, copying, and dissemination of texts” (105) was a distinctive feature of the early Christian movement, was unusual in relation to other Roman-era religious groups, and is responsible for “our” contemporary association of “scriptures” with religion. Hurtado elaborates this distinctive “textuality” in relation to the practice of reading epistle and gospel texts in private and corporate settings (akin to synagogue and philosophical-group practices), the hard work of composing numerous new and innovative texts, the commitment of time, energy, and resources to copying and circulating texts, and the distinctive physical and visual characteristics of Christian texts (the codex, bookroll, nomina sacra).
Chapter 5 “A New Way to Live,” pursues the distinctive Christian behavioral expectations that were departures from cultural practices. For initial illustrations of cultural practices, Hurtado chooses practices of infant exposure (though numerous Jewish and gentile writers also opposed it) and gladiator contests and other blood-sport public spectacles. Hurtado argues that sexual matters in particular required distinctive Christian behaviors, especially in promoting marital fidelity and limiting the sexual activity of Christian husbands, thereby challenging the sexual double standard of the culture that permitted latitude for men and restriction for women. Hurtado recognizes the challenge for Christian groups of fitting in and being different, as well as some affinities with Jewish practices and some philosophical groups. He argues, however, that Christian insistence on appropriate behaviors along with the group’s house-based gatherings had greater social reach and impact.

Hurtado’s study is readable, accessibly written, insightful, and wide-ranging. He declares at the outset that it is a nontechnical study, and so the chapters are, but the 70 pages of endnotes that accompany a main text of 190 pages reveal its technical foundations. Certainly the argument concerning distinctive practices seems more convincing than the attempts to claim the shaping of contemporary understandings of religion. The sheer diversity of contemporary practices in the global village makes the latter a difficult sell.

Nevertheless, framing the book in terms of identifying distinctive Christian practices and beliefs gives me pause. Hurtado justifies the emphasis by claiming the neglect of or amnesia about what made the early Christian movement “odd, bizarre … even dangerous” (2), and he claims that “classic liberal forms of modern Christianity” have been too aligned “with the dominant culture,” so attention to distinctives is necessary (7).

But emphasizing distinctives engages only part of the story and a distorted one at that. Hurtado himself recognizes occasionally that no religion can exist only “over-against” or trade only in distinctives. He quotes at the outset—approvingly—Rodney Stark’s maxim that successful religions must have both continuities and tensions with their cultural settings (7). Throughout he notes, albeit in a very qualified way, indebtedness to Jewish characteristics (renunciation of idols and other gods, rejection of infant exposure) and to some philosophical schools (marital fidelity) that at least mitigates to some extent claims of distinctiveness and points to some continuities. Yet despite these passing recognitions, his thesis explicitly emphasizes distinctiveness and gives little attention to continuities.

One of Hurtado’s favorite passages, for example, is 1 Cor 8–10 (the index lists twenty entries). Through several discussions of the passage, Hurtado emphasizes the distinctives of the rejection of idolatry and meat offered to idols. It is not until page 151, however (the last of the discussions), that he discusses Paul’s permission for the Corinthians to purchase meat from the market without inquiring about sacrificial origin (1 Cor 10:23–26) and to eat whatever non-Christian hosts provide.
in their homes if they invite a Christian to a meal (10:27; both passages are mentioned in passing on 87). Interestingly, this brief recognition that distinctives are not the whole story comes in the last of the five chapters in a five-page discussion entitled “fitting in and being different.” This title and focus differ significantly from the pervasive emphasis on distinctives and would, I suggest, offer a more historically viable and nuanced analysis of early Christian negotiations of its various worlds. It would also allow Hurtado to explore, with the aid of some postcolonial theory about ambivalence or anthropological theory concerning the self-protective and multivalent ways powerless or marginalized folks negotiate power and dominant cultures (James Scott), the more persuasive diverse, tensive, and multivalent ways early Christians made their way in their complex worlds.

Attention to multivalent negotiation rather than distinctives would also prevent the dichotomy between religion and politics that emerges at the end of chapter 3. Hurtado has spent several pages rightly emphasizing that religion was not a distinguishable or independent sphere of life (38–44), yet he ends chapter 3 claiming that “pre-Constantinian Christianity took a stance in which political loyalty was disconnected from religious identity and practice” (103). He offers as examples for this rupture and binary respect for rulers and paying taxes. But both practices were very political as well as religious. Honoring the emperor in 1 Pet 2:17, contextualized by “fearing God,” is part of 1 Peter’s accommodationist and “good name” strategy and would be impossible to do without participation in imperial cult activities: political and religious. Jesus’s instructions about paying taxes in Matt 17:24–27 and 22:15–22 create ambivalence whereby tax payment is simultaneously a cooperative and resistive practice, recognizing Roman rule as well as divine sovereignty. Of course, being loyal to one who was crucified but risen keeps questions of political loyalty very much connected to religious identity and practice. Finally, the claim that Tertullian offers “the first reasoned defense of religious liberty” (103) conveniently overlooks the narratives of Daniel and Esther and the Maccabean struggles (even if there is an ethnic basis). Attention to distinctives alone does not allow the nuances and ambiguities to emerge and, in this instance, replaces first-century connections with contemporary divisions. Attention to nuances and ambivalences would move beyond a onesided attention to distinctives or the binary of similarities and differences.

Good books raise good questions. Hurtado’s insightful and accessible discussion engages significant issues and provokes consideration of important historical and contemporary matters.