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Review Article

DEREK J TIDBALL

GERD THEISSEN

A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion

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The publication of any new work by Professor Gerd Theissen, of Heidelberg, is always something to look forward to and his recent 'A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion' is not a disappointment. Theissen has established himself as one of the most fertile thinkers in the field of New Testament scholarship. Freed from the shackles of narrow historical critical approaches to the New Testament he brings the benefits (and the liabilities) of lateral thinking to the task, not least the lateral thinking of sociological insights. Among his wide range of publications are two seminal works on the sociology of the New Testament,[1] a creative approach to the quest for the historical Jesus[2] and a work providing us with a psychological perspective on Pauline theology.[3] Two collections of essays contain some of his most significant sociological papers,[4] while two collections of sermons and a book on homiletics demonstrates his passionate commitment to preaching the Bible and to the church.[5]

His most recent publication takes us in a fresh direction once again. Theissen sets out to provide 'a theory of primitive Christian religion' which finds its home in the field of semiotics rather than either theology or sociology.[6] His quest for a general overarching theory can be traced back to 1991 when he penned a brief

1 *The First Followers of Jesus*, SCM, London 1978; and *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1982. One only has to refer to subsequent studies like David Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1996; and Justin Meggitt, *Paul: Poverty and Survival*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1998 to see how significant Theissen's provocative works have been. Theissen has also published a more detailed work on *Miracles Stories in the Early Christian Tradition*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1983. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent references are to works by Theissen.

2 *The Shadow of the Galilean*, SCM, London 1987. See also his more recent textbook, co-authored by Annette Mertz, *The Historical Jesus*, SCM, London and Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1998.

3 *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1987.

4 *The Gospels in Context*,T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1992; and *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1993.

5 *The Open Door*, SCM, London 1991; and *Signs of Life*, SCM, London 1998. In *The Sign Language of Faith*, SCM, London 1995, he reflects on the preaching task.

6 Theissen correctly admits that this book is not a sociological theory but that a sociological theory as well as a psychological and philosophical one might be developed from it: *Theory*, p 305.

and fragmentary sociological theory,[7] and some of his ideas were anticipated in his reflections on homiletics.[8] But his current work is genuinely new.

He defines religion as 'a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality.'[9] In so doing he is within the mainstream of anthropological and sociological definitions of religion which owe much to the work of Clifford Geertz.[10] And he opts for a definition which is consistent with the work of Berger and Luckman and the approach of the sociology of knowledge, of which more later.[11] He assumes the justifiably accepted sociological axiom that human beings use language to provide an interpretation of their world and lend it meaning. When they do so they not only order their world but provide cognitive (knowledge), emotional and pragmatic (action) structures for their lives. These are the gains in life to which his definition refers.[12] Several strands of the definition are picked up later in the work but this one is not consistently woven into his later argument in a way that might have been useful.

It must be noted that his definition is inclusivist and of a functionalist hue (consistent with his general sociological thrust) rather than substantive and many would consider it too vague to be of operational value.[13] His real contribution lies in the exploration of the 'cultural sign language' which early Christians adopted and the developments which took place in its grammar and language, eventually leading them to a total break from Judaism.

Throughout the book he uses the motif of 'a semiotic cathedral'. He is constructing a cathedral of signs which, he trusts, will be accessible to all, whether people have a faith commitment or not, just as the history or grandeur of a cathedral may inspire awe and appreciation in tourists even if they are not worshippers. He believes the uninvolved visitors may gain much about the meaning of the faith from the tour regardless of faith but his personal faith commitment leads him to believe that to view it just from the 'outside' is not sufficient.[14]

Cathedrals are complex structures. Architecturally they involve foundations, walls, arches, roofs, towers or spires (and the engineering miracles that hold them up). Historically, they are augmented or adapted as the centuries pass. Liturgically they have sanctuaries, naves, lady chapels, crypts, fonts, altars and chapter houses. Decoratively they adopt a certain style and have stained glass windows, altar cloths,

7 *Social Reality*, pp 257-287.
8 *Sign Language of Faith*, pp 6-22, anticipates his interest in semiotics and the motifs he identifies as crucial in *Theory*.
9 *Theory*, p 2.
10 C. Geertz, 'Religion as a cultural system', in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Tavistock, London 1966, pp 1-46.
11 P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1971 and P. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967.
12 *Theory*, pp 7-12.
13 See, for example, *Theory* p 156, where he writes 'If the traditional sacrifices are no longer necessary in primitive Christianity, other elements *must have taken over their function*' (my italics). Hebrews addresses precisely this issue and gives a sustained Christological answer without feeling any need to replace old sacrifices with new rites as Theissen, in part, argues. See B. Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, CUP, Cambridge 1991. Functionalism often predetermines certain answers which can be limiting, even inaccurate.
14 *Theory*, pp 17f. 286, 306f.

memorials, flags and gargoyles. Organically they have bishops, deans, canons, prebends, choirs, worshippers and onlookers.

Theissen's choice of the motif of the cathedral is apt since his theory is complex and many-layered in its exposition. Many of the elements above have their parallels in his theory but perhaps, for me, it never reaches its organic potential. The buzz of lively worshippers, the noise of ordinary people and the bustle of genuine lives never quite surface. Perhaps, in view of his sociological writings, I anticipated more of this dimension whereas it reads much more like the older German works of the history of ideas rather than a really adequate socially-located work on the social construction of knowledge.

Be that as it may, let me tour the cathedral pointing out some of its key features before concluding with an evaluation.

First, note the design he brings to the work

Semiotic cathedrals are composed of three elements: myths, rites and ethics.[15] Myths are the narratives which are the raw materials informing people's appreciation of the world and their lives from which they shape their interpretations. They concern the actions of God (or gods), which raises the question of their relationship to history. Rites are the repetitive patterns of behaviour, involving words, actions and objects, which depict the 'other reality' in the ordinary world. Ethics concerns the way in which people are required to live in the totality of their lives in reference to God.

These elements enable the construction of a theory which is systematic[16] and so organized in itself and clearly distinguishable from other sign languages, such as, in the case of Christianity, from Judaism. It is also a cultural construction which enables one to trace the changes which occurs in it over time due to charisma or crisis.

In chapters 2 to 8 Theissen expounds systematically how the Primitive Christian 'myth' of Christ as Divine; the basic Christian ethics of love of neighbour and renunciation of status; and the rites of baptism and communion, associated with a sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus, were constructed from the raw materials of Jewish monotheism and covenantal nomism.[17]

Assuming, for the moment, the foundations on which he builds, Theissen is, I believe, at his most effective in analysing the way in which the gospels begin to transform the Christian message and introduce a degree of separateness from Judaism, in which, according to his earlier work, it began as a renewal sect.[18]

Mark, he argues, pays particular attention to the transformation of the 'ritual' element. With the destruction of the Jewish temple a new centre for faith is needed and Mark constructs a case for Jesus being the new centre. Controversies over Jewish laws, the the rending of the temple curtain, the voice of God at his baptism, the transfiguration, Jesus' own comments on the Temple and the inclusion of non-Jews in the story all point to Jesus himself being the new centre and the old ritual system of Judaism.[19]

15 *Theory*, pp 2-4.
16 *Theory*, pp 4-7.
17 *Theory*, p 13.
18 *First Followers*, p 1.
19 *Theory*, pp 171-175.

Matthew specifically addresses the ethical dimension. Classically, the Sermon on the Mount lays on Jesus's disciples a radical ethic and a 'better righteousness' than that of the aristocratic Jews. The shows how this new ethic is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets and also radicalizes, democratizes[20] and universalizes an old Jewish aristocratic ethic.[21]

Luke does for the 'myth' (narrative) what Mark has done for ritual and Matthew for ethics. He does it by means of a salvation-historical narrative in which from the infancy narratives, where salvation is said to include the Gentiles, onwards there is a growing inclusion of Gentiles in the stories and an increasing separation of Jews and Gentiles leading to a hardening on the part of the Jews.[22]

Second, note the coherence he brings to his design

Theissen's 'theory' has an elegance about it. It demonstrates a balance and coherence where other theories prove to be much more one-sided and therefore lop-sided. Three illustrations of his balance are offered.

The first example is the balance between myth and history. Remember that by myth Theissen means the basic narrative which informs the primitive Christian worldview which relates to the action of a supernatural agent acting decisively in the world. The 'myth' regarding Jesus is a perfectly consistent development from earlier Jewish 'myths'.[23] But the use of 'myth' should not be read as meaning 'unhistorical'. To him primitive Christianity offers a 'unique combination of history and myth'[24] and in it, 'myth and history enter into a unity in tension'.[25] Neither had priority. The relationship between them is two-way: concrete historical events are transformed into mythical statements and 'mythical expectations are transformed into his history'.[26] The word 'transformed' is perhaps not well-chosen in this regard, but that there is a process of interpretation between event and narrative is an incontrovertible proposition. It is the way he seeks to hold them together which is admirable.

The second example is the balance between social construction of the faith and divine revelation. The 'human construction' of the faith in unavoidable since all interpretations of life, scientific and mathematical no less than religious, are social constructions of meanings. But, he says, the human construction was 'the response to a revelation'.[27] It was not a human creation *ex nihilo* but a making sense of a reality which was experienced, an objective world which imposes itself on people.

The third example is the balance between the forces of radicalism and moderation in the development of the faith. Both he says were necessary, the former giving Christianity its identity and the latter its moderation.[28] This perhaps corrects the overemphasis some have seen in his early work on the significant place of the radical itinerants in shaping the early Christian faith,[29] and rightly

20 On the radicalizing of the ethics, see pp 63-117.
21 *Theory*, pp 175-179.
22 *Theory*, pp 179-184.
23 *Theory*, p 23.
24 *Theory*, p 59.
25 *Theory*, p 286. See also p 22.
26 *Theory*
27 *Theory*, p 292.
28 *Theory*, p 289.
29 For example, John Barclay, in a review of *Social Reality*, questions whether itinerant radicalism was practised as much as Theissen claims: *SJT* 50 (1997) p 509.

acknowledges that renewal movements often have their origins and derives their energy from charismatic, if not itinerant, radicals but cannot sustain themselves on radicalism alone.

Third, note the foundations on which he believes the cathedral is built

Theissen's thesis is that primitive Christianity began as a renewal movement within Judaism and increasingly separated from it until it became a distinct movement in its own right. We will look at the process by which that occurred shortly. For the moment our concern is to emphasize the distinctly Jewish foundation of Christianity. The two significant axioms of Judaism are those of monotheism and covenantal nomism. Given monotheism, how could it be that Christians came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah? The process, he claims, takes place in a way which is perfectly consistent with monotheism since Jesus connects his own history with the traditional apocalyptic expectation of the coming of the rule of God.[30]

Covenantal nomism stresses that Judaism is a religion of grace,[31] a grace which finds expression is the coming of a redeemer and that gradually widens in its scope from being exclusively for the Jews through the Jews still having priority, evident, for example, in Romans 1:16, to being inclusive of all and embracing the Gentiles.

In both these cases then, the cathedral is found on the sign language of Judaism and is in continuity with it.

Fourth, note the development which takes place in the cathedral

It is rare for a cathedral to have been built in one limited single period (Coventry and Liverpool might be examples), without subsequently undergoing development). In the case of Westminster Abbey, for example, part of the attraction and mystery of the building is one's ability to trace the remnants of its Saxon origins and the subsequent expansions and additions to those which reflect the architecture of different periods. Theissen applies such a perspective to the development of primitive Christian sign language.

He traces the chronological development of 'primitive Christian religion from a single unitary origin'[32] through its earliest expressions in Paul, and the synoptic gospels until the reinterpretation of the myth, rite and ethic regarding Christ is fully brought to consciousness[33] in John's gospel and then beyond the development of catholic Christianity. The development occurred because the various crises of early Christianity, such as the conflicts between Hebrews and Hellenists, Antioch and Jerusalem and Peter and Paul at Antioch, and the later Gnostic and prophetic crises[34] 'were not resolved in a uniform way. ' He accepts the basic perspective of the picture of tension put forward in mid-nineteenth century Tübingen but considers it out-dated because in reality there were not two parties but 'a multiplicity of currents, between which there were tensions and conflicts.'[35] The tensions were resolved by the recognition of the canon which defined legitimate diversity within

30 See Isa. 33, 24, Zech. 14 and Dan. 9. *Theory*, pp 23-27.
31 Here Theissen is working within the new understanding of Paul.
32 *Theory*, p 259.
33 *Theory*, p 185.
34 *Theory*, pp 207-248.
35 *Theory*, p 250.

early Christianity, ruled out illegitimate or heretical currents and, just as significantly, defined primitive Christianity over against its mother religion, marking the final separation form Judaism and the final and permanent severance of the bond with it.[36] Another result of the canon was that it defined Christianity vis-à-vis paganism.

In the second generation, then, Theissen sees four basic currents (Pauline, Jewish, Synoptic and Johannine) Christianity which flow, in the early second century, into 'early catholic church Christianity,' as seen in the canon. The outer edges are constantly under pressure from prophetic criticism, as, for example, in Tertullian and the Montanists, on the one side and gnosticism 'which dissolved the Christian sign system into a universal symbolic language'[37] on the other.

It would be an interesting and significant exercise to compare and contrast Theissen's analysis of the diversity of early Christianity with that, say, of James Dunn, posited in his *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, back in 1977.[38] Dunn posits a four-fold scheme of Jewish, Hellenistic, Apocalyptic and Early Catholic diversity on theological grounds. Both are dynamic schemes but there are significant differences between them. Dunn's is a theological scheme and Theissen's a semiotic one. Dunn's more serious place for apocalyptic Christianity seems to me a definite gain on Theissen whilst Theissen seems a little more consistent in parts to the integrity of the New Testament documents as we have received them in the canon.

Fifth, note the mature features which are evident in it

Towards the end of his work he seeks to systematize the motifs of early Christianity where 'a change of position'[39] has occurred with regard to the basic axioms of Judaism, namely, monotheism and covenantal nomism. These form 'a canon within a canon.'[40] He accepts that there is a certain incompleteness and tentativeness about the list[41] but nominates the following as important: creation, wisdom, miracle, alienation, renewal, representation, indwelling, faith, agape, change of position (status), judgement,[42] Their chief value, for Theissen's present purpose, is to demonstrate how primitive Christianity's development are consistent with its Jewish parent but nonetheless a separation from her. They also draw the boundaries of what is acceptably 'Christian' and thus exclude certain Gnostic and pagan positions.[43]

The list provides much illumination but two criticisms are perhaps permissible. The motifs seem somewhat arbitrarily introduced rather than a logical outcome of what has gone before. Little has prepared the way for them in the earlier exposition of the theory. And the absence of any real concentration on motif of atonement weakens the scheme.[44]

36 *Theory*, p 251.
37 *Theory*, p 257.
38 Westminster Press, Philadelphia and SCM Press: London.
39 *Theory*, p 272.
40 *Theory*, p 271.
41 *Theory*, pp 274 and 282.
42 *Theory*, pp 274-282. The list is anticipated in his previous work *Sign Language* pp 18-20, where a list of fifteen basic motifs in given including incarnation and justification.
43 *Theory*, p 282.
44 I recognize that it is implicit in a number of motifs, e.g., that of wisdom.

Sixth, note the evaluation he gives to the cathedral: the question of plausibility

The cathedral may be very enterprising but might it be nothing but a Disney-like fantasy? How does the semiotic cathedral relate to objective reality? The question can be answered from a variety of angles, such as from the perspective of historical accuracy. Our concern, however, is with its integrity as a social construction. How far does it succeed in expressing the 'objective' world we experience?

Theissen's approach falls within the school of Berger and Luckmann and those who have argued for 'the social construction of reality.'[45] In it he focuses on the question of plausibility which he develops in a different way to Berger and Luckman. He develops three theses[46] which, to summarize, are:

1. It is basic axioms and motifs rather than specific statement which create plausibility.

2. Three sources of evidence help construct plausibility, namely, the world to which our interpretation must correspond; the self to which plauisiblility must give coherence and other people with whom it must reach a consensus.

3. The plausibility is shaped by a process of trial and error and is eventually based on 'the concentrated experiences of many generation.'[47]

Each of these is then examined in depth against the evidence and using the dimensions of the motifs to which we referred in the last section. His conclusions is that 'in the framework of a theory of primitive Christian religion it is possible to explain how these heightened convictions were arrived at: the first Christians were deeply convinced of the superiority of their sign world to all other rival worlds of convictions.'[48]

He makes the interesting observation that when the plausibility of the religious axioms reach their limits of explanation believers often turn to 'a strict theology of revelation which says that God can be understood only through himself.'[49] One recognizes how many an exasperated youth leader or church pastor, having reached the end of their tether, or their skill, in seeking to provide an apologetic for some aspect of the faith or other, resorts in the end to 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 by way of asserting their authority. It is a pity he does not develop that thought more fully and test out its historical accuracy.

There are several elements of the plausibility structure to which he gives little attention such as those of the defence against alternative explanations,[50] the therapeutic practices of plausibility structures, the numerical strength and political power of one plausibility structure against another, why some should have become 'significant others' and so on. Furthermore, some of his earlier work in terms of myths, rites and ethics would have been more helpfully handled if a more general framework about plausibility structures had been used right from the beginning. His 'ps' about plausibility is not really sufficient to be useful within the approach he has chosen and suffers from a failure to really ground his theory in the social world of real people.

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45 See footnote 11. Also see Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1969, pp 50-55.

46 See *Theory*, pp 292-304.

47 *Theory*, p 294.

48 *Theory*, p 304.

49 *Theory*, p 294.

Seventh, let me offer some comments by way of evaluation of the tour we have undertaken

The construction of any cathedral is a courageous, visionary and awe-inspiring act. The construction of Theissen's semiotic cathedral is no less courageous. It is a vast and complex building which brings into a coherent structure disparate and diverse elements at many different levels. It assumes a pattern of historical development which, once granted, makes sense of the construction. But whether it assumes too much by way of an evolutionary theology – a theology being worked out and modified on the hoof – is perhaps debatable. He adopts the current fashion which emphasizes diversity and leaves all too little room for unity in our understanding of New Testament Christianity. Some of the earlier criticisms of his interpretation of the evidence about Christianity as a Jewish renewal movement dependent on itinerant charismatics still apply here.

But my concerns would be to raise questions about its adequacy at a number of levels.

As a theory, what does it explain? Is it any more than expressing in different terms, using the discipline of semiotics, what was known and believed by many all along? Certainly the theory applies a new grammar to an old story but is there anything desperately new and insightful in total picture as a result? There are certainly many helpful detailed insights built into the construction. But, to a sociologist at least, one is left at the end saying yes, and ...

As an apologetic, it does not seem ultimately persuasive. Theissen's hope is that it will provide a two-fold reading of the text – from outside and from within. To some extent it does this and, particularly in regard to its discussion of the ethics of Christianity it provides a fresh way of looking. But it is doubtful that it will lead many to a fresh appreciation of the ancient Christian story in and of itself. What is the purpose of someone admiring the aesthetics of the cathedral unless they are led to the God of the cathedral to whose glory it is built?

As an argument it perhaps does not sufficiently keep in mind its original definition of religion where the 'promise of a gain in life' is a vital element. Rational choice theories of religion, which also aim to provide a comprehensive theory of religion, akin to the grand schemes of Durkheim and Weber, for all their numerous limitations, seem to work this element through in a much more satisfactory way. Stark's more adventurous approach to the early church from a rational choice perspective seems to me to open many more windows of understanding to the real lives of early Christians than Theissen's.[51]

50 He alludes briefly to the limitations experienced regarding convictions namely, *deus absconditus*, the folly of the cross and the failure of communication but he does not develop them: *Theory*, p 305.

51 For rational choice theories of religion generally see, R. Stark & W. Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, Lang 1987. L. Young, ed., *Rational Choice Theory and Religion*, Routledge, London 1997, provides a good critique of the theories and W. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton University Press, 1996, applies the approach in a fascinating and innovative way to early Christianity.

As a sociological interpretation it seems to lack the presence of real people. It portrays his basically functionalist approach to religion but lacks anything of the more convincing interpretive social action approach of Weber or even the 'earth-relatedness' of those who posit a social construction of reality approach.[52] It reflects much more a reversion to the 'history of ideas' approach to early Christianity to some of the more innovative work which has come hitherto from the pen of Theissen.

If Theissen is building a cathedral it seems to me he's building one more like Coventry rather than one like Durham. Like Coventry it has many positive features and enriching aspects. It tries to be innovative. Yet, overall its effect is to be curiously modern, somewhat utilitarian and it domesticates rather than enlarges the vision. Durham, by comparison is built on the solid rock of the peninsula, can be seen for miles, lifts the eyes heavenwards and fills the visitor with the sense of grandeur and awe. It leads into the presence of God. Attention to the sign language and grammar of faith is worthwhile but ultimately somewhat reducing. It is more of a 'technological' approach than one which 're-enchants' the world. With time, the theory may grow to merit the respect of a vast and ancient cathedral. But for the present, in spite of its interesting features, it seems to lack the compelling majesty which resonates with either the human spirit or the divine revelation.

The Revd Dr Derek Tidball is Principal of London Bible College

52 Having said which he avoids the subjectivism of which this school can be accused.