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JEROME H. NEYREY, *PAUL, IN OTHER WORDS: A CULTURAL READING OF HIS LETTERS*: A REVIEW ARTICLE

Don Garlington

Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of books and articles devoted to an examination of the historical and social setting of the New Testament generally and the letters of Paul in particular. Among the most prominent names are Bruce J. Malina, Gerd Theissen, Wayne Meeks, Anthony J. Saldarini, Francis Watson, Ronald F. Hock, and James D. G. Dunn, to mention only a few. As an outgrowth and revision of previous work on Paul and his social milieu, J. H. Neyrey has now presented us with his *Paul, in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters.*[1]

The present volume approaches the writings of Paul from the vantage point of social (symbolic) anthropology. As B. J. Malina explains in the preface, this particular discipline seeks to understand human society generally in terms of the contextual contours which shape attitudes and behaviour. Comments Malina: "We might say that the type of analysis in this book is based on the human propensity to draw lines and thus recognize shapes in their environment." To put it otherwise, "The common perceptions and feelings that are shared by members of a group constitute the group's culture" [p.8]. Thus, Neyrey's book is an attempt to understand Paul in other words, i.e., in terms of the first-century Mediterranean setting presupposed by Paul and his contemporaries, not by way of the thought-forms which we, as people of the late twentieth-century West, bring to Paul's letters. Paul, in short, is to be placed within his own proper environment and context and interpreted accordingly, because "by his own admission, Paul thought and behaved like a typical, first-century Jew in the Eastern Mediterranean" [p.11]. Accordingly, Neyrey seeks to address the cultural gap between us and him.

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[1] Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, 263 pages. Outside of the Pauline corpus, Neyrey's kindred contribution on "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel" appeared in *Semeia*, 35 (1986), 91-128.

As "a typical first-century Eastern Mediterranean Jew," Paul was thoroughly socialized by a people who had very definite ways of looking at the world. As such, the Jews are no different than other peoples, inasmuch as "all people operate with a set of assumptions about how the world works, assumptions that are usually implicit and unexamined" [p.15]. These assumptions are all brought to bear on basic questions, such as: Is the world orderly? Does it have a pattern and purpose? How do people define themselves in relation to this world, whether orderly or chaotic? How do they view or explain the presence of evil and suffering in this world? For ancient man, as well as modern, the answers are provided by the social milieu of one's origins, because "from birth, people are socialized by family and clan to imagine the world and its workings in certain ways" [p.15].

In seeking to explain why things are the way they are, Paul, like all other ancient Mediterraneans, lived within a "symbolic universe." As Neyrey explains, "symbolic universe" is a broad, general concept which can be specified by six areas in a given culture:

1. Purity: patterns of order and classification.
2. Rites: either rituals of making and maintaining boundaries or ceremoniesconfirming values and institutions.
3. Body: the social perception of the human physical body.
4. Sin: the social definition of sin and deviance.
5. Cosmology: who is in the world, and who is doing what?
6. Evil and Misfortune: how are they to be explained?

Within the cadre of such a symbolic universe, particularly as perceived by the Pharisees, Paul is seen to be a person preëminently concerned with order: "a place for everything and everthing in its place" [p.22 and *passim*]. The term which best articulates Paul the Jew's passion for order is purity. When things are in their place, they are "pure," "clean," or "holy"; when they are out of place, they are "impure," "unclean," "profane," or "polluted." Purity thus is the term used to describe the patterns of order and the system of labeling and classification. "In general, an object or action is pure (or clean, holy) when it conforms to the specific cultural norms that make up the symbolic system of a particular social group. That is, something is pure when it is 'in place,' when it belongs in a particular, orderly context" [p.23]. Correspondingly, "the labeling of something as 'dirty' or 'polluted,' implies that people are socialized to know a group's symbolic universe whereby they appropriately classify, situate, and organize persons, objects, places, and times in their world. Purity and pollution are but the code names for that abstract system and its contravention" [p.23-24].

Underlying Neyrey's approach to Paul is the work of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose most influential book in the realm of biblical studies is *Purity and Danger*.[2] According to Douglas, all cultures, in order to define the world and particularly their place in it, seek to establish boundaries for themselves. These boundaries function as guide-posts to acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. To observe the boundary markers is to keep oneself pure; to transgress the boundaries is to become polluted. Along with numerous other scholars, Neyrey has taken up Douglas' thesis and applied it to the exegesis of the New Testament, with the net result that Judaism and early Christianity are to be understood in terms of various "maps," which serve to set the boundaries for the service of God within the covenant. There are, consequently, maps of things, persons, places, activities, time, and space. Perhaps the most important of the maps is that of the body, because, as Douglas has argued, the body is itself symbolic of the universe. Hence, the treatment of the body is reflective of the way in which reality is assessed.

If it be asked, "What is the origin of such maps for biblical religion?", the answer is creation. In creation God established the principle of holiness or separation, thus implying a distinctive sense of being "in place." "The holy God expressed holiness by creating a holy/orderly cosmos. God acted to bless this creation precisely by the divine ordering and structuring of all relationships" [p.26]. Thus are born patterns of classification.

> The holy God expressed holiness precisely through these patterns of classification and order. If Israelites wished to be 'holy as God is holy,' they must imitate God's holiness as this was expressed in God's orderly creation. For God expressed divine holiness in the precise series of maps of place, things, times and persons that serve to classify and locate each item in its proper place. Israelites must know the maps and keep them. Therefore, subsequent holiness among God's creatures involves maintaining these distinct categories of creation [p.28-29].

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[2] London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

With this distinctively Jewish — especially Pharisaic — heritage in mind, Neyrey reasons that Paul entered Christianity with a ready-made conception of order and disorder. To be sure, his encounter with Christ radically altered the shape of his previous Jewish maps, which are no longer acceptable guides to purity and impurity. It is, most pointedly, the death of Christ which marks the boundary line between the former covenant of law and the new covenant of faith and grace [p.187]. However, Paul the Christian is no less zealous for purity and order than Paul the Pharisee. This Paul, too, has his maps: maps of the cosmos and heavenly figures, people within creation and the church, spiritual gifts, times, place, and even apostolic space. True, Paul came to see that certain maps needed to be redrawn in light of the Christ-event. Nevertheless, he was convinced that God had legitimated these new maps. Therefore, he is not guilty of heresy and disorder, as charged by the synagogue; he is, rather, a reformer. The particulars of his system may be different from those of his Jewish kinsmen, but he embraces order and classification all the same. "As a reformer he sees new and different patterns, and so he sets out to rearrange maps, not to discard them entirely" [p.71].

It is according to Paul's new Christian patterns of perceiving the world that he regulates his churches. This is why he is still concerned with ritual and ceremony, because both serve to define the boundaries of entrance into, life within, and exit out of the church. As ever, there is a place for everything, and everything is to be in its place. The body particularly receives a good deal of attention from Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians, because the body continues to be symbolic for the universe as a whole [again with reference to Douglas, on p.104-106]. Paul the Christian, then, even as Paul the former Pharisee, lays down detailed instructions regulating the body, with special emphasis on the orifices. Hence, sin is defined "not simply as violation of rules but as pollution that invades the body and threatens to pollute its pure insides. Moral norms are well defined and are sociocentric, that is, learned from the group and measured in those terms" [p.108-109].

Paul, then, is particularly outraged when his maps are disregarded, because to obliterate or even to blur the boundaries is to introduce chaos into an orderly existence. And, as a child of his time, Paul has no compunctions about accusing his opponents of witchcraft. Witchcraft, however, is not broomsticks and black magic, but rather the alignment of oneself with Satan in opposition to the purposes of God. In this sense, people in the New Testament regularly accuse one another of witchcraft [p.182]. The practice of

making such accusations stems from the "witchcraft society" of which Paul was a member. According to Mary Douglas [cited on p.185], a witchcraft society is characterized by six features:

1. External boundaries are clearly marked.
2. Internal relations are confused.
3. There is close, unavoidable interaction.
4. Tension-relieving techniques are underdeveloped.
5. Weak authority characterizes this type of group.
6. Intense and disorderly competition occurs constantly in this group.

Each of these factors pertains to Paul's churches, says Neyrey, and it is this paradigm which is applied particularly to Paul's controversial letters and his battles with the Judaizers.

> Paul's strong sense of an orderly, holy cosmos has come under fierce attack. Paul writes his letter to the Galatians precisely because some people, presumably Judaizers, have come to Galatia and attacked Paul's ordering of the world in the way described above [i.e., on p.186-188]. They urge a different system of ordering, not the covenant with Abraham but the covenant with Moses....Paul perceives their presence and preaching of 'another gospel' as a pollution of God's holy church because it attacks the pure way of serving God that Paul enunciated [p.188].

Paul, in short, expects that his boundaries will be honoured, not those of the circumcision party, because his converts have themselves crossed a significant boundary when God freely gave them the Spirit through faith, when they were shown grace and favour by God in Christ. Indeed, Christ himself is the "official boundary line, namely, the end of the law" [p.189]. The Galatian letter particularly reflects "Paul's incessant boundary marking," his perception of two mutually exclusive systems or ways of serving God [p.190].Paul, as a result, is "fiercely jealous of his turf" [p.204]; his "apostolic space" must not be invaded [p.92-95].

Neyrey concludes his study with the plea on which it began, viz., that we need to hear Paul in other words. That is to say, we need to assess Paul and his letters on the basis of the model provided by cultural anthropology. To be sure, we are not accustomed to hearing Paul in these particular words, and the initial results are apt to be off-putting. When placed in his own proper setting of the first-century

Mediterranean world, most notably as regards witchcraft, Paul begins to look less like Saint Paul [p.216].

> What we have learned, then, is a way of perceiving the world and a social strategy quite different from those to which we are socialized. This should not surprise us, given the distance in time, place, and social location between Western, post-industrial people, and ancient, Mediterranean peasant societies. We need special tools to allow us to hear Paul on his own terms, for he speaks in words other than those familiar to us [p.217].

Neyrey disclaims, however, that this approach reduces the New Testament from theology to sociology; rather, it gives a fuller reading of the theology embedded in a lively social context. By reading Paul in this way, we pay closer attention to the way grace is incarnated in genuinely human beings [p.217].

The positive side to Neyrey's study is its focus on the actual setting in which Paul lived and laboured. It is well known that the task of hermeneutics is that of bridging the various gaps which separate us from the biblical authors. Certainly one of the most formidable gaps is the social/historical difference between the first and twentieth centuries. By calling attention to Paul's own milieu, as distinct from that of succeeding centuries, we are alerted to the actual issues under debate in the first century, and, in some cases at least, we are surprised to learn that the apostle's battles were not necessarily those of subsequent church history. Along these lines, the basic methodology employed by Neyrey has been used to advantage by James Dunn, among others, in the current debate which still rages over Paul and the law.[3] In point of fact, there was a pronounced sociological dimension to Paul's struggle over the law. The people of God for centuries had been identified by such boundary markers as circumcision, the dietary laws, and the sabbath. These were the acid tests of one's loyalty to Judaism; and it was for this reason that the Pauline gospel was rejected by the mass of the Jewish people as being

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[3] Dunn's essays have now been collected under the title *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

deleterious to Israel's status as the glorious and exalted people of God (an idea attested many times in Jewish literature).

It is true that Neyrey distances himself from historical exegesis as such, inasmuch as his intention is to apply a sociological model to the text of Paul. However, here and there he does provide such exegesis with some very interesting results. The treatment of circumcision is a good example. Whereas for the Judaizers circumcision was the ritual of entrance into God's covenant, for Paul it is the ritual of exit from Christ. It is, therefore, a ritual of apostasy in the case of those who prefer circumcision over Christ. Using a pun on the word "cut" which makes up the word circum*cision*, Paul tells the Galatians that if individuals baptized into Christ afterwards cut around the foreskin, they themselves are "cut off" from Christ [p.89]. Moreover, when Paul wishes that the Judaizers would "cut" (i.e., castrate), themselves, underlying what appears to be an emotional outburst is actually a theologically significant point; that is, castration in a Jewish cultural system meant being "cut off" from the temple of God and being rendered permanently unclean. "Mutiliation is a richly charged word here, suggesting ritual impurity, which comes from bodily mutiliation" [p.192]. It is such mutiliation which cancels the "glory" that the Judaizers seek from a circumcised male organ (Philippians 3:19). These remarks are quite suggestive and certainly tally with Paul's penchant to engage in role-reversal in his interactions with Israel and the circumcision party, as illustrated, for instance, by his treatment of the Sarah and Hagar story of Genesis 21 (Galatians 4:21-27), in which he identifies the Judaizers with Hagar and Ishmael, rather than Sarah and Isaac. Many such examples can be found in Paul, and one wishes that Neyrey had delivered more of this kind of genuinely helpful exegetical material.

It is precisely in this regard that the defect of Neyrey's book emerges. By purposely not engaging in historical exegesis, Neyrey has made the same basic mistake that interpreters of Paul have made for centuries, namely, of imposing on his thought models which are largely, if not essentially, extraneous to him. This is not to disregard or downplay the substantial portion of the study given to purity, etc. In fact, in this respect the book serves as a continual reminder that such matters were foremost in Paul's debates with Israel and Judaistic Christianity. The point, rather, is that Neyrey has incorporated lock, stock, and barrel into the study of Paul a sociological method which, by his own admission, is a modern one and which, I would argue, is not altogether helpful in reconstructing the world of Paul's day and the emphases of his own letters. I would

submit that Neyrey has short-circuited his book's stated purpose (i.e., of hearing Paul within his first-century Mediterranean world) by his methodology. The ideal is a good one, but the means employed are not entirely compatible with the end sought.

More precisely, the anthropological insights of Mary Douglas and others can and have been used to advantage in the study of the Bible generally. However, much as introductory Greek and Hebrew grammars employ paradigm words to illustrate the systems of inflection of those languages, Neyrey has applied Douglas' paradigm to Paul, so that he and his churches are obliged to conform to the pattern established by her particular cultural anthropology. To say the least, the shoe does not always fit, especially as Neyrey would have us view the apostle's congregations as "witchcraft societies." Certainly all of Douglas' six points describing such societies can only very artificially be made the marks of the Pauline churches. While it is true that the social sciences can be used heuristically to generate questions in the study of a text, it is nonetheless true that a reconstructed context can be given more priority than a text itself. This, it seems to me, is the effect of Neyrey's book.

The discussion of Anthony Saldarini on the use of sociological methods in biblical study is well worth consulting.[4] Says Saldarini [p.14]:

> The overwhelming danger in the use of the methods and especially the results of sociology and anthropology is the cookie cutter approach in which abstract categories created for the organizing data and testing hypotheses are imposed on or read into texts. Such eisegesis lacks sensitivity to the texts and to the limits of scientific categories. Theories should guide and illuminate exploration of texts and be in turn corrected by what is found there. Another danger in understanding both modern and ancient categories stems from changes in society over time. The same office, group designation, or social entity may vary greatly, though the name remains the same.

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[4] *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 12-20.

Another way to state it is that Neyrey does not make sufficient allowance for the distinctiveness of either Judaism or Christianity. He does acknowledge that the social structures of ancient Israel stem from creation, as confirmed in the holiness code of Leviticus. However, one receives the impression that the person of Yahweh and his holiness are but the occasion for the matter of outstanding importance: "a place for everything and everything in its place!" No account is taken of the underlying motivation of holiness among the godly of Israel, especially in the Psalms, i.e., a passion to be in fellowship with the God of the covenant (e.g., Psalm 42:1-2) and to bear his likeness.

The same impression is buttressed by the treatment of Paul. Neyrey does acknowledge the pivotal significance of Christ for Paul's particular outlook on purity and order. Nevertheless, the Paul of Neyrey's reconstruction emerges as an eccentric person, ultra-fastidious about order and obsessed with purity, rather than the man of Galatians 2:18-21 who grounds his new-found convictions about the law in the love of Christ flowing from the cross. As presented at least, Christ appears to be little more than the historical rationale for Paul's redrawing of the purity maps. The person of Christ, in short, plays no particularly important role in the formulation of the Pauline message: what really counts is a place for everything and everything in its place.

If this is an accurate appraisal of Neyrey's work, the conclusion is unavoidable that Neyrey's Paul is essentially irrelevant to the modern world. The author senses this throughout and acknowledges it in his conclusions. However, for him the bottom line is whether we have accurately understood Paul [p.224]. In so saying, Neyrey, in my view, has missed the balance of the descriptive and the prescriptive in biblical interpretation, or, in terms of the current jargon, the interplay of the meaning and the significance (application) of the biblical text. Whatever may be said about the study of ancient literature generally, it will not do simply to relegate the Bible to antiquity. The effect, though perhaps not the intention, of Neyrey's book is that we are left with a Paul who is merely the product of his age and people, not the Paul who was impelled by the awareness that he was an eschatological person, through whom God was announcing to the nations his new creation purposes in Christ. The only attempted application of Pauline thought appears briefly on p.217: "One might say that by reading Paul this way, we pay closer attention to the way grace is incarnated in genuinely human beings." The great apostle's theology and mission could not be more drastically trivialized.

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