

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

***On Wooing a Crocodile:
An Historical Survey
of the Relationship between Sociology
and New Testament Studies****

Derek J. Tidball

[p.95]

It would be absurd to claim that men did not reflect critically on their social relationships until the nineteenth century. Such reflection has been an enduring characteristic of mankind. Nonetheless it is possible to recognize the emergence of a distinctive discipline which concerns itself with the understanding of social relationships developing out of the turmoil of revolutionary Europe, the anxieties of an unstable United Kingdom and the aspirations of her rebellious child the United States. The birth of the new discipline of sociology went almost unnoticed by those engaged in the study of the New Testament, pre-occupied as they were at the time by their own engagements with the discipline of history with its disturbing questions regarding documentary sources and its unsettling implications for faith.

The debate regarding history was to have a profound effect on the shape of New Testament studies in the twentieth century right up to our own time. But there is evidence of a new protagonist, or perhaps as many would prefer, suitor claiming the attention of New Testament scholars, namely, sociology. This suitor is likely to have a profound effect on the shape of New Testament studies in the next stage of its development, not in the sense that existing approaches are obsolete but in the sense of expanding our understanding of the New Testament text.¹

At root sociology is the study of man in relationship and it investigates how he constructs those relationships, how he organizes them, how he passes them on, how he changes them and how he interprets them. It would seem therefore to be of self-evident interest to scholars of the New Testament; so much so that it appears strange that they often fall into the trap of, in the words of Robin Scroggs, 'methodological docetism as if believers had minds and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate bodies'.² At the very least it will be admitted that it is incomplete to work as if the writings of the New Testament 'were formed during the early decades of the church's existence by a process of intellectual debate—the first century equivalent of a present day theological seminar'.³ But sociologists would claim even more. Not only does the sociological perspective add a dimension to our understanding but it illuminates the

[p.96]

* A revised version of a paper read to the 1984 summer meeting of the New Testament study group of the Tyndale Fellowship.

¹ J. G. Gager, 'Shall We Marry Our Enemies?', *Interpretation* 36 (1982) 256.

² R. Scroggs, 'The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research', *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980) 165.

³ H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London 1977) 9.

whole and its absence may lead us to serious misunderstandings and wrong interpretations.⁴

It is not the purpose of this paper to give an apologetic for the relationship between sociology and New Testament studies—that has been done admirably elsewhere⁵—but rather to trace the history of the relationship which is emerging between them.

1 Initial Awareness

Sociologists noticed the significance of the New Testament before New Testament scholarship became aware of the existence of formal sociology. Every major sociologist of the late nineteenth century gave religion a place of central significance in their interpretation of society. For different reasons they believed it to be impossible to understand society if religion were ignored.

Emile Durkheim's understanding of religion was greatly influenced by the writings of Robertson Smith who in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* had provided a sociological account of Near Eastern religion.⁶ Durkheim was to apply this same perspective to totemism but never himself applied it directly to early Christianity.⁷ Even so, his work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was to provide a structuralist-functionalist view of religion which has not only endured but subsequently became the dominant interpretation of religion to be found among sociologists.

Curiously, the other great sociologist of the classical period also says little about the New Testament. Max Weber wrote prolifically on religion and made much of the Old Testament; particularly the concept of the prophet which lay behind his concept of charisma. He also made much of church history. However, his specific references to the New Testament are few although, as always with Weber, they are fertile soil for later sociologists. Referring to the way in which Jesus simply looked for faith as a response to his ministry, Weber assumed that the early church quickly rejected faith as a means of salvation and permitted intellectual belief to replace it.⁸ In addition, he concluded his work *Ancient Judaism* with a brief explanation of the inability of the apostles to break the firmly structured communities of the Jews with the result that few Jews were converted to Christ.⁹

It is Ernst Troeltsch, Weber's friend and colleague, to whom we must look for a more substantial exposition of the sociological perspective applied to the New Testament. Troeltsch set out to discover what constituted the 'social' element in relation to the churches and to Christianity.¹⁰ By any standards, he produced a magisterial work which seriously earthed the development and ethic of the early church in concrete, if sometimes questionable, social reality. The work, however, was very much a product of its time and was marred by being built on the foundations of Schleiermacher. On the one hand it devalued the socio-

⁴ C. Hill, *The Sociology of the New Testament* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham 1972) 8-20.

⁵ *ibid.* 8-20; B. J. Malina, 'The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation', *Int.* 36 (1982) 229-242; J. G. Gager, 'Shall We Marry Our Enemies?', *Int.* 36 (1982) 256-265; H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (London 1980) 11-29, and for an argument applied to a particular gospel see Kee, *Community* 1-13.

⁶ S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (Harmondsworth 1975) 237-240, 450-1.

⁷ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (first published 1915; ET London 1976²).

⁸ M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (first published 1922; ET Boston 1964) 191 f.

⁹ M. Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (New York and London 1952) 421-424.

¹⁰ E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (first published 1911; ET London and New York 1931) 1, 26.

[p.97]

logical factors and argued that the growth of the early church was attributable to religious rather than social factors,¹¹ whilst on the other hand his rejection of special revelation led him to overvalue sociological factors. The relationship Troeltsch proposed between sociology and theology is unsatisfactory and his lasting contribution has been to enunciate the church-sect typology,¹² much used by later sociologists, rather than any overall sociological illumination of the early church.

Among the early sociological statements about the New Testament those of the Marxists have proved the most durable. In 1894 Frederick Engels set out the thesis that the 'history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement'.¹³ This became the unchallenged dogma of Marxism until recent times. The thesis was further expounded in 1925 by Karl Kautsky who argued that the New Testament church was almost exclusively proletarian in character and that the subsequent history of the church was a betrayal which had transformed the religion of Jesus into 'the most tremendous instrument of domination and exploitation in the world'.¹⁴

All these initial approaches to the New Testament betray their sociological origin. They have imbibed the Tübingen spirit which divorced Jesus from Paul; they reflect an uncritical acceptance of wider contemporary theological trends and they rest on what, for us, would be scant historical data.

2 Early Flirtations

Without demonstrating any awareness of sociological concepts or theories, the early twentieth century saw a number of New Testament scholars beginning to assert the importance of an understanding of the social and cultural background to the New Testament. Oscar Cullmann's plea in 1925 for a 'special branch of sociology, devoted to the study of the laws which govern the growth of popular traditions' as a means of substantiating a form-critical approach to the New Testament is often cited as a land-mark.¹⁵ Whilst not wishing to detract from its significance, it is true to say that a number of New Testament scholars had already been making overtures in the direction of sociology. Besides the work of Lohmeyer,¹⁶ Schumacher,¹⁷ Cadoux¹⁸ and Cadbury,¹⁹ the work of Adolf Deissmann deserves note. Deissmann's chief concern was linguistic and, basing his research on a host of newly discovered papyri and inscriptions, he concluded that the New Testament was a monument, for the most part, to popular colloquial language. It reflected a non-literary culture and placed the early Christians firmly among the common people rather than coming from those of a

¹¹ *ibid.* 1, 39-43.

¹² *ibid.* 1, 331-343.

¹³ F. Engels, 'On the History of Early Christianity', *Marx and Engels On Religion* (New York 1954) 316-347.

¹⁴ K. Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity* (New York 1973) 381.

¹⁵ O. Cullmann, 'Les récentes études sur la formation de la tradition évangélique', *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 5 (1925) 573, cited in Gager, *Int.* 36 (1982) 260 and J. H. Schutz's 'Introduction' to G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh 1982) 7.

¹⁶ E. Lohmeyer, *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum* (Darmstadt 1921).

¹⁷ R. Schumacher, *Die soziale Lage der Christen im apostolischen Zeitalter* (Paderborn 1924).

¹⁸ C. J. Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World* (Edinburgh 1925).

¹⁹ H. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London 1927).

higher social status.²⁰ Deissmann hoped that 'some day, when yet stronger waves of light come flooding over to us from the East, it will be recognized that the restoration of the New Testament to its native home, its own age and social level, means something more than the mere repatriation of our sacred Book. It brings with it new life and depth

[p.98]

to all our conceptions of Primitive Christianity.'²¹ He urged theologians to respond to the urgent demands of contemporary (rather than antiquated) philology in order to improve their understanding of the New Testament text and church.

Deissmann's assessment of the literary nature of the New Testament documents and of the close connection between the gospel and the lower classes has been the subject of much debate in recent years.²² But scholars were slow to engage in the debate and most of Deissmann's followers remained concerned with the limited issue of lexicography. For the debate to move outside of that sphere it was essential that a more adequate sociological framework be adopted than had been available to Deissmann.

The second major overture in the direction of sociology came from the Chicago school and is associated with Shailer Matthews²³ and more particularly Shirley Jackson Case. Robert Funk has argued that, 'the lines in biblical study were significantly redrawn during the period, roughly 1890-1920' and that the early biblical faculty established at Chicago is a paradigm of that remapping.²⁴ During that time the stand taken by W. R. Harper, who enthusiastically welcomed higher criticism whilst remaining confident about and remaining loyal to the authority of the Bible, was replaced by the stand of E. De Witt Burton, Shailer Matthews and Shirley Jackson Case for whom scripture ceased to be normative because of the place given to extra-biblical history as a means of interpreting biblical history itself.

Burton, Matthews and Case were sceptical about the value of the linguistic emphasis in biblical criticism and claimed that contemporary New Testament study was a 'veritable barrier to an understanding of the beginnings of Christianity'.²⁵ The documentary approach led to a static view of history and failed to unearth the real social processes involved. Case argued that the attempt of the early church to win Jewish converts became increasingly futile; its failure being due not to its message but to its sociological environment. Gentile soil was open to receive the germ of the Christian message whereas Jewish soil had rejected it, as Gentile soil would also have done had it arrived fully developed.²⁶ Christianity succeeded because it answered the quest among Gentiles for safety in a demon-infested world, for triumph over misfortunes and for satisfaction in the worthy quests of life.²⁷

²⁰ A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (first published 1908; ET London 1927) *passim*.

²¹ *ibid.* 394.

²² A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia 1983²) 29-59.

²³ S. Matthews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York 1897) and *The Atonement and the Social Process* (New York 1930).

²⁴ R. W. Funk, 'The Watershed of the American Biblical Tradition: The Chicago School, First Phase 1892-1920', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976) 7.

²⁵ S. J. Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago 1923) 1-36.

²⁶ *ibid.* 74-78, see also, *The Evolution of Early Christianity* (Chicago 1914) and *Jesus: a New Biography* (Chicago 1927).

²⁷ *ibid.* 126-133.

The irony is that although Case's historically relativist approach was much more in tune with the broader drift of cultural history, it was the Harper line of biblical criticism which was to be followed generally and Case and his colleagues who were to be left out in the cold.²⁸ The unnecessary threat to the normative position of scripture would have caused conservative scholars to shun the approach, while the unnecessary debunking of the literary approach to biblical scholarship led others to shun it too.²⁹

The most lasting contribution from this early period was the work of

[p.99]

Joachim Jeremias in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* which, although it was not published in English until 1969, had been available in German from 1923 onwards. Jeremias' painstaking research of original sources resulted in a rich mine of information on the economic, commercial and social life of Jerusalem. It was a necessary prolegomenon to the construction of a sociological interpretation of the New Testament and provided a standard by which to test subsequent research in this field. Only when such data is obtained can the risks involved in constructing historical sociology be minimised.

3 Marking Time

Following these initial overtures the relationship between New Testament study and sociology marked time. Deissmann's wish of 1908 was to be unfulfilled until E. A. Judge's seminal work, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* appeared in 1960. Cullmann's plea of 1925 was not to receive an adequate response until Gerd Theissen's work, most notably in this connection in an article on 'Itinerant Radicalism' in 1973.³⁰

During this period there was only an occasional indication that the sociological voice had been heard by New Testament scholars. One such indication was Floyd Filson's article 'The Significance of the Early House Churches.' In it he was critical of earlier expositions of the New Testament church, such as those of Newton Flew, Schmidt and Streeter, for failing to take into account 'the actual physical conditions under which the first Christians met and lived'.³¹ Filson set out to discover the social reality which lay behind 1 Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15 and to trace its ecclesiological implications. He constructed his argument on data drawn from both the New Testament and other ancient literary and archaeological clues. His success may be measured by the fact that subsequent discussions of the topic sooner or later return to what Filson wrote in 1939.

Mainstream New Testament study, however, was not prone to flow through a sociological channel. The point may be illustrated by reference to R. Bultmann's *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*.³² Bultmann's form critical approach to the gospels had acknowledged the significance of the *sitz im leben* in the formation of the gospel documents but there was no real engagement with the social setting in his writings. The *sitz im leben* to

²⁸ Funk, *art. cit.* 4-22.

²⁹ Schutz in Theissen, *Pauline Christianity* 7.

³⁰ G. Theissen, 'Itinerant Radicalism: the Tradition of Jesus' Sayings from the Perspective of the Sociology of Literature', *Radical Religion* 2 (1975) 84-93, originally published in German, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirch* 70 (1973) 245-271.

³¹ F. V. Filson, 'The Significance of the Early House Churches', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939) 105-112.

³² R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (ET London 1956).

which reference was made was literary and theological rather than social or historical. *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* not only espoused the Gnostic Redeemer myth but failed to grapple with the contemporary setting in any meaningful way. It lacked any sociological dimension in its perspective.

The one bright light in the period is E. A. Judge's, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*. He began by remarking that although a generation earlier it had been common to attempt to discover

[p.100]

the principles of social obligation held by the early church, interest in the subject had now petered out. Some of the problems encountered by New Testament scholars, he argued, arose through their neglect of the situation which the New Testament writings actually addressed. The time had come for a revival.³³ As a historian equipped to scrutinize ancient documents, Judge wrote primarily with a view to rediscovering what the social setting of the early church was like. The basic thrust of the work was devoted to analysing the political structure of the Roman republic, the household structure and the unofficial associations which provided structures for fellowship. Each of these was related to facts and themes in the New Testament. In addition, an assessment was given of the social status of early Christians, their relationship to legal authority and outworking of their social obligations in relation to their eschatological views.

4 Growing Romance

The revival which Judge had sought began to occur a decade or so later. The 1970s were to see first a reawakening of interest, then a developing affection, and finally a full-scale romance. Like most romances it was not always to be smooth and the partners were not always to be sure of each other, but it seemed nonetheless that they were now inextricably involved with each other. Clifford Hill³⁴ was to produce in 1972 the first of a series of Ph.D.'s which researched general or specific aspects of the relationship, and numerous others have appeared from the mid-seventies onwards. Hill's stimulation, like that of others, came from Judge's earlier work. What else gave rise to the new stage of the romance? There was the blossoming of the discipline of sociology which took place in the 1960s and had repercussions far wider than its own boundaries. It would have been just as difficult for New Testament scholars to ignore their noisy adolescent neighbour as it was for medics, educationalists or even scientists to do so. There was also a growing interest in hermeneutics, within theological circles, and sociology seemed to have something to offer to the quests pursued there.³⁵

Judge, then, had anticipated the mood which was to blossom in the late 60s and early 70s and he was to serve as a direction-finder for many in the area.

Any analysis of recent history is fraught with difficulties. Different frameworks of analysis have already been suggested. Jonathan Smith³⁶ has differentiated a description of the social

³³ E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London 1960) 7.

³⁴ C. Hill, *Sociology of NT*.

³⁵ J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London 1973) 35-52.

³⁶ J. Z. Smith, 'The Social Description of Early Christianity', *Religious Studies Review* 1 (1975) 19-21.

facts from social history, social organization and the social world of meaning. Malina³⁷ has used sociological theory as his method of analysis, distinguishing between those writings based on a structural-functionalist approach; those on a conflict approach; and those on a symbolic interactionist approach. Scroggs³⁸ opts largely for a methodological analysis. This paper will pursue a topical analysis of recent studies, recognizing that topics spill over into each other since reality is never as neat as students would like it to be.

[p.101]

4.1 *The Origin of the Christian Movement*

The dominant sociological model adopted has been that of the millenarian movement. The model which enjoys currency in mainline sociology³⁹ emphasizes that in situations of social unrest or deprivation it is not uncommon for a leader to arise who, emerging through none of the socially accepted channels, feels called of God to offer the people a radical re-interpretation of life. His message is full of crisis, choice and eschatology. His ministry is self-authenticating through wonders and success. His style is authoritative and his disciples are prepared to endure much in order to be counted among the élite.

Given what was known of the political, cultural, economic and social background of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, it is not surprising that scholars find the model of a millenarian movement readily applicable to his ministry. G. Theissen,⁴⁰ H. Kee⁴¹ and J. G. Gager⁴² all make use of this model in one way or another. Theissen's is the most complex analysis from this perspective, mixing it as he does with a Freudian explanation of how Jesus refocused aggression and an analysis of the roles and functions within the Jesus Movement. Kee's approach is the most closely related to New Testament scholarship. He sets out to reproduce a redaction criticism of Mark's gospel which is firmly rooted in the real-life situation of Mark's readers. He concludes that Mark was written as a handbook for wandering charismatic preachers in the late 60s, emanating from Syria. On other grounds this may be disputed, but in the process Kee, drawing on Theissen, provides a thorough application of a millenarian model to Mark's gospel. Gager's analysis is the most straightforward introduction to the application of this model.

The model had not gone unchallenged. E. A. Judge's writing on 'The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community' unwittingly offered a critique of the model in proposing that it was more helpful to interpret Jesus as a rabbi than a prophet and to stress his continuity with tradition rather than his radical discontinuity.⁴³ The peril of sociology is its desire to trace what social relationships have in common rather than what is unique about them, with the consequence that it is easy to press unwilling details into inflexible models at the expense of

³⁷ Malina, *Int.* 36 (1982) 233-237.

³⁸ Scroggs, *NTS* 26 (1980) 171-177.

³⁹ P. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (London 1957); N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London 1957); B. R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (London 1973); K. Burrige, *New Heaven, New Earth* (Oxford 1969) and Y. Talmon, 'The Pursuit of the Millennium: the Relation between Religious and Social Change', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 2 (1962) 125-148.

⁴⁰ G. Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus* (London 1978).

⁴¹ Kee, *Community*.

⁴² J. G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community* (Englewood Cliffs 1975) 20-37.

⁴³ E. A. Judge, 'The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community', *Journal of Religious History* 1 (1960-1) 9-11; for the contrary view see M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers* (Edinburgh 1981) 42-83; see also D. J. Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exeter 1983) 23-40.

true understanding. Nonetheless, the millenarian perspective restores a cutting edge to the gospel which more theologically abstract interpretations sometimes lack.⁴⁴

4.2 The Rebirth of the Movement

Charismatic movements are precarious and never more so than when their founder dies.⁴⁵ In many cases this threatens the survival of the movement. In the case of the followers of Jesus it is argued, from a sociological perspective, that their survival only occurred at the expense of their being reborn as a very different movement. John Gager⁴⁶ has exploited the theory of cognitive dissonance⁴⁷ to account for their survival. The theory claims that under certain conditions a movement based on a

[p.102]

prophecy which has proved false will not disappear, but that its adherents will become vigorous propagators of their revamped prophecy so that by persuading others to believe what they believe they will ease their sense of dissonance. The application of this theory to the church in Jerusalem has a number of weaknesses,⁴⁸ and is in any case based on the assumption that the words of Jesus concerning his mission were proved false.

The rebirth of the movement involves its crystallization as a sect; a concept which goes back to Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of Christian Churches* and which has been much developed in recent years by Bryan Wilson.⁴⁹ Robin Scroggs in applying this typology has built his thesis on W. Stark⁵⁰ rather than Wilson's more acclaimed exposition. Scroggs argues that the synoptics reflect the earliest Palestinian communities in their interaction with the larger social context, and reveal them to have been movements of unconscious social protest.⁵¹ Wilson's analysis is, however, a more fruitful guide and enables one to explain the more fluid nature of the early church in Jerusalem. The sect model is certainly a useful tool for the understanding of the social dynamics, both internal and external, of the early church.

The second phase of any charismatic movement inevitably confronts the issue of authority and leadership. The authority of the charismatic leader may continue in numerous ways but no subsequent leaders can exercise pure charismatic authority again. The charismatic is original and points to himself as the solution; his followers can only ever be charismatic in a secondary sense. Essentially, the early church transferred authority to the apostles, the inner core of Jesus' disciples.⁵² But they also resorted to election and to traditional Jewish forms of authority, and they were surprised by the divine election of Paul as an apostle. Most of the attention has centred on the authority of Paul, especially in relation to the church at Jerusalem and the churches he himself founded. Both John Schutz⁵³ and Bent Holmberg⁵⁴ have

⁴⁴ D. B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale 1978).

⁴⁵ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York 1964) 358-386.

⁴⁶ Gager, *Kingdom* 37-49.

⁴⁷ L. Festinger, H. W. Riecken and S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York 1964) 358-386.

⁴⁸ Scroggs, *NTS* 26 (1980) 173-174 and P. Henry, *New Directions in New Testament Study* (London 1980) 187-188.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Magic and Millennium and Patterns of Sectarianism* (London 1967).

⁵⁰ W. Stark, *The Sociology of Religion* 2 (London 1967) 6-29.

⁵¹ R. Scroggs, 'The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement', *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, ed. J. Neusner (Leiden 1975) 2 3ff.; see also, Scroggs, *NTS* 26 (1980) 171-172.

⁵² Theissen, *First Followers* 7-23.

⁵³ J. H. Schutz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (Cambridge 1975).

presented substantial works in this area which not only explore the dynamics of the authority in itself but also illuminate some of the relationships and stresses which underlie Acts, Galatians and 2 Corinthians.

4.3 The Development of the Movement

In 1960 Judge pinpointed the reason why the early Christian movement holds such fascination for sociologists. He wrote,

While Christianity originated in Galilee, it flourished in the great cosmopolitan cities of the eastern Mediterranean. The New Testament is itself the product of this shift. Its writers are mainly Jews of Palestinian associations; their readers Greek-speaking members of Hellenistic communities.⁵⁵

The social context and cultural adaptation of the Christian gospel therefore became of paramount importance. The theological significance

[p.103]

of this is readily recognized today in the writings, for example, of James Dunn.⁵⁶ Earlier New Testament scholars recognized the significance of the historical context and some, such as A. D. Nock⁵⁷ and F. C. Grant,⁵⁸ had explored the religious context. Little, however, apart from Jeremias on Jerusalem and an early work by F. C. Grant,⁵⁹ had been done explicitly on the social context.

The task demanded both a general exploration of the social context, as became available in E. Lohse's *The New Testament Environment*⁶⁰ and more recently in W. Meeks' *The First Urban Christians*,⁶¹ and also an exploration of specific social locations and institutions. The working group on The Social World of Early Christianity set up by the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion has recently demonstrated what might be achieved in reference to particular locations in the publication of a recent study of Antioch.⁶² Numerous studies on particular social institutions, such as slavery,⁶³ and tent-making⁶⁴ are already available from ancient historians, but still more needs to be done with regard to the application of their findings to the understanding of the New Testament. Filson, Judge, Malherbe and Verner have shown the value of this line of research by their writings on the

⁵⁴ B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund 1978). For some trenchant comments see E. A. Judge, 'The Social Identity of the First Christians; a Question of Method in Religious History', *Journal of Religious History* 11 (1980) 209-211.

⁵⁵ Judge, *Social Pattern* 8-9.

⁵⁶ J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London 1975); *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London 1977) and *Christology in the Making* (London 1980).

⁵⁷ A. D. Nock, *Conversion: the Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford 1933).

⁵⁸ F. C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions. The Age of Syncretism* (New York 1953) and *Ancient Judaism and the New Testament* (Edinburgh and London 1960).

⁵⁹ F. C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (London 1926).

⁶⁰ (London 1974).

⁶¹ (New Haven and London 1983).

⁶² W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era* (Missoula 1978); see also, W. A. Meeks, 'The Social World of Early Christianity', *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 6 (1975) 1-5.

⁶³ e.g., W. Westerman, *Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia 1955).

⁶⁴ R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tent Making and Apostleship* (Philadelphia 1980).

household system.⁶⁵ Martin Hengel's numerous writings have also provided rich material from this perspective and have shown how an integrated sociological and theological approach is possible.⁶⁶

One recurring aspect of the early church's environment, wherever she was geographically located, was hostility. In addition to the theological issues involved in persecution, sociological factors can be observed shaping the particular course which the conflict followed. The study of conflict sheds light not only on the opposition, but also on the internal dynamics of the Christian groups themselves and the ways in which they articulated their faith. Jeremias and Hengel have set out the reasons for the various roles played by the different parties in Jerusalem in their opposition to the Jerusalem Christians.⁶⁷ Gager has traced the correlations between persecution and theology in the book of Revelation.⁶⁸ The most thorough exposition of this relationship, however, has occurred in John Elliott's commentary on 1 Peter⁶⁹ where he rejects the spiritual interpretation of *paroikoi* in favour of a literal economic and political interpretation of the word. The context of the suffering in which his readers dwelt gave rise to the need for a distinctive Christian lifestyle; communal identity to be asserted; group cohesion to be reinforced; and a plausible interpretation of the seeming incompatibility of their faith and experience to be given.

A further issue regarding the development of the early church has to do with the process of institutionalization which any organization experiences as time progresses. Although the process has been helpfully set out by Thomas O'Dea for religious organizations generally, it has yet to be thoroughly applied to the New Testament. O'Dea has described the way in

[p.104]

which unusual religious experiences become routinized in institutional structures, and has analysed the process in terms of motivation, worship, administration, belief and power.⁷⁰ Such a perspective has much to contribute to our understanding of the later New Testament documents and carries implications for current claims and counter-claims regarding the diversity of the New Testament.

4.4 The Membership of the Movement

The debate which is best established among sociologists of the New Testament concerns the social composition of the New Testament church. The Marxists had long maintained that early Christianity was a movement of the lower classes, when Deissmann and Troeltsch injected new arguments regarding the literary level of New Testament writings into the debate. Malherbe has recently reopened the debate on Deissmann's view and argued that he

⁶⁵ Filson, *JBL* 58 (1939), Judge, *Social Pattern*, 30-39, Malherbe, *Social Aspects* 60-91 and D. C. Verner, *The Household of God. The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* (Chico 1983).

⁶⁶ M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London 1979); *Christ and Power* (Philadelphia 1977); *Crucifixion* (London, 1977); *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians, Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the pre-Christian Period* (London 1980); *Judaism and Hellenism. Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, two vols (London 1974); and *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (London 1974).

⁶⁷ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (ET London 1959) *passim* and Hengel, *Acts* 71-81.

⁶⁸ Gager, *Kingdom* 49-57.

⁶⁹ J. H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless. A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, its Situation and Strategy* (London 1982).

⁷⁰ T. F. O'Dea, *Sociology and the Study of Religion* (New York 1970) 241-254.

set the cultural level of the early church too low.⁷¹ Judge similarly holds that members of higher social classes are more significant than had been allowed by many.⁷² But not all would agree. Elliott's work on 1 Peter is relevant here. So is the work of John Gager. Gager believes that most members of the early Christian churches came from the lower classes, and has rightly stressed the need to interpret the New Testament evidence in the light of the system of stratification more widely adopted in the Roman world.⁷³ Assessments regarding the New Testament are impossible unless the general social structure is known.⁷⁴

Theissen's interest in the social class position of the early followers of Jesus extends from the gospels⁷⁵ into the epistles. His work on 1 Corinthians⁷⁶ demonstrates the usefulness of a sociological framework in interpreting an epistle. Theological differences have often been held to account for the tensions in that troublesome church. But in themselves they leave one wondering whether all the members at Corinth would have understood such issues, or at least reacted at such a level. Theissen's work has suggested that sociological divisions make better sense of some of those tensions. 1 Corinthians contains sufficient evidence of the membership of the church to say more about its social composition than Paul himself does in 1 Corinthians 1:26, and Theissen shows how such an understanding may apply to the division between the strong and the weak, and the extraordinary behaviour at the Lord's Supper.⁷⁷

The most useful and detailed introduction to this whole question is undoubtedly that of Wayne Meeks who in *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* provides a very careful analysis of the issue of class and its repercussions for a wide range of other issues. All in all this is probably the best single original work in this field. Closely related to class is the issue of poverty. The consensus view, much encouraged by liberation theologies, is that the gospels teach an ethic of poverty which was increasingly compromised as the church became a more settled member of the social structure. Theissen has discussed the issue in

[p.105]

terms of the transition from itinerant charismatics to settled communities.⁷⁸ But others, including Hengel,⁷⁹ Mealand⁸⁰ and France⁸¹ have faced the issue more explicitly in terms of wealth or its absence. Their studies honestly examine the various strands of New Testament teaching on poverty and prevent the all-too easy resort to the theory of relative deprivation so beloved of sociologists.⁸²

⁷¹ Malherbe, *Social Aspects* 59.

⁷² Judge, *Social Pattern* 49-61 and 'Social Identity', *Journal of Religious History* 11 (1980) 201-217.

⁷³ Gager, *Kingdom* 93-113 and *Int.* 36 (1982) 261-263.

⁷⁴ On which see R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 BC to AD 284* (New Haven and London 1974).

⁷⁵ Theissen, 'Itinerant Radicalism', *Radical Religion* 2 (1975) and *First Followers* 76.

⁷⁶ Theissen, *Social Setting* 69-174.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* 121-174.

⁷⁸ Theissen, *Social Setting* 27-53 and 'Itinerant Radicalism', *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Hengel, *Property and Riches*.

⁸⁰ D. Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels* (London 1980).

⁸¹ R. T. France, 'God and Mammon', *Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979) 3-21.

⁸² C. Y. Glock, 'The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups', in R. Lee and M. E. Marty (eds) *Religion and Social Conflict* (New York 1964) 24-36, and B. R. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford 1982) 27-52 and 115-118.

4.5 The World Views of the Movement

Since theology traditionally deals in ideas, it is not surprising that a sociological approach to the construction of ideas should be attractive to theologians. Scroggs rightly points out that 'the single most important approach within the field of sociology comes from the sociology of knowledge'.⁸³ Potentially, sociology of knowledge is the most relativizing of all sociological approaches. On the other hand, it is also possibly the most liberating approach. Sociologists of knowledge argue that the world and the interpretations of the world which we believe to have the character of objective reality are in fact social constructions created by men. These constructions assume the appearance of having an ontological status and then act back on man. Mathematics, science, language, culture and religion all come under the same condemnation.⁸⁴ The social context, then, is seen not just as conditioning the expression of ideas but as leading to its construction. Having traced the process by which this symbolic world is constructed, the sociologist leaves the question of its validity unanswered, a problematic issue but one which is not primarily his concern.⁸⁵

The application of this perspective to the New Testament has already begun. Theissen has demonstrated the perspective in his exposition of the concept of the Son of Man⁸⁶ and more fully in his study of the miracle stories in Mark.⁸⁷ Kee has pursued the issue in relation to the various life worlds before and after the rise of Christianity⁸⁸ and also in relation to Mark's gospel.⁸⁹ Gager, too, has illustrated the perspective with reference to the book of Revelation.⁹⁰ Perhaps, however, special attention may be paid to Wayne Meeks' application of this perspective to John's gospel.

In his article 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', Meeks argues that 'it is astonishing that attempts to solve the Johannine puzzle have almost totally ignored the question of what social function the myths have had'.⁹¹ Then exploring the ascent/descent motif he concludes that the stylistic structure of the gospel appeals to the subjective experience of its readers and functions for them 'in the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions within its narratives and dialogues'.⁹² Their situation, according to Meeks, was one of progressive alienation from the Jewish synagogue with all its attendant stresses and with its need for them to justify their new relationships within the Johannine community and with God. The implications of their situation are then applied to the selection and shaping of the material in John's gospel and are seen to explain the particular choices made. Meeks rejects the ideas that John's

[p.106]

⁸³ Scroggs, *NTS* 26 (1980) 175.

⁸⁴ P. L. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth 1967) remains the best introduction to this perspective, and P. L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London 1969) remains the best application of the approach to religion.

⁸⁵ P. L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Harmondsworth 1970) 43-65.

⁸⁶ Theissen, *First Followers* 24-30, 99-110.

⁸⁷ G. Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh 1983).

⁸⁸ H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (London 1980) 30-53 and 126-70.

⁸⁹ Kee, *Community*, see also J. A. Wilde, 'The Social World of Mark's Gospel: a Word about Method', *SBL 1978 Seminar Papers* 2 47-70.

⁹⁰ Gager, *Kingdom* 49-57.

⁹¹ W. A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972) 49.

⁹² *ibid.* 69.

gospel is an evangelistic tract and that interpreting the gospel through the eyes of the history of ideas will lead to an understanding of its complexity.

On a broader canvas a recent book by Bruce Malina should be mentioned. Malina's *The New Testament World* is written from the standpoint of anthropology rather than sociology but illuminates the biblical text in the same way. The central cultural value which Malina selects is that of honour and the way in which challenges to honour were met. This is related to the perception of personality, the accumulation of wealth, kinship and purity. His essay on personality shows the fundamental importance of understanding the way in which people of this period perceived themselves if we are ever to understand New Testament teaching. Malina believes that psychologically the New Testament man did not see himself as a subjective individual but only as a dyadic personality 'in terms of what others perceive and feed back to him'. The idea that men saw themselves only as individuals embedded in a group whose behaviour was determined by significant others brings a whole new complexion to our view of spiritual experience and the doctrine of sanctification in the epistles.⁹³

5 Concluding Remarks

Winston Churchill once remarked, 'Trying to maintain good relations with the Communists is like wooing a crocodile. You do not know whether to tickle it under the chin or beat it over the head. When it opens its mouth you cannot tell whether it is trying to smile or preparing to eat you up.' One detects the same ambivalence in the relationship between sociology and New Testament studies.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, despite all its uncertainties, the relationship must be fostered for it is greatly to the benefit of those who seek to understand the New Testament. Much remains to be done and many of the early hopes, including that of Cullmann for a sociology of popular traditions, are as yet inadequately fulfilled.

As to the way forward, the five-point programme recently proposed by Thomas Best⁹⁵ has much to commend it. First, a wider range of sociological techniques must be adopted. Secondly, the New Testament student must help to generate new models which sociologists can apply elsewhere. Thirdly, he must continue to insist on the faith-dimension of the texts he handles. Fourthly, we must not amend the data to fit the models just because sociology deals in the common rather than the unique. And fifthly, the tendency to abstraction must be resisted and the real world of experience must always be at the forefront of our thinking.

© 1985 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁹³ B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London 1983) 51-70.

⁹⁴ see, for example, P. W. Hollenbach, 'Recent Historical Jesus Studies and the Social Sciences', *SBL 1983 Seminar Papers* 61-78; S. R. Isenberg, 'Some Uses and Limitations of Social Scientific Methodology in the Study of Early Christianity', *SBL 1980 Seminar Papers* 29-50 and J. K. Riches, 'The Sociology of Matthew: Some Basic Questions Concerning its Relation to the Theology of the New Testament', *SBL 1983 Seminar Papers* 259-72.

⁹⁵ T. F. Best 'The Sociological Study of the New Testament: Promise and Peril of a New Discipline', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983) 190-194.