

NOTE

SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND THE EARLY CHURCH: A DECADE OF RESEARCH

During the past ten years the biblical-theological study of the Church seems to have stood still. Of course, there have been good presentations of the topics that constitute the agenda of this approach: the relation between Jesus and the Church, the images of the Church, diversity of structures, and forms of ministry. Nevertheless, the positions taken and the methods that underlie them are not substantially different from the ones in fashion in the 1960's. Perhaps we should simply be satisfied with the solid results of the biblical-theological approach¹ and put our energies into making them more intelligible to nonspecialists. But there has been a development in biblical studies during the 1970's that may infuse some new life into the study of the Church in the New Testament. It involves the use of the concepts and methods of sociology.

In North America to a great extent and in Europe to a lesser degree the social sciences are playing an increasing role in academic life. Many of the problems and concerns traditionally treated in philosophy have been taken over by psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Even in the traditionally philological disciplines like orientalism² and biblical studies,³ the influx of the social sciences has been noticeable. Those whose primary academic training is in the social sciences now apply their concepts and methods to fields in which philology had reigned.

The past decade has seen the introduction of sociological concepts to the study of the Church in the NT, and this article gathers together that research and explores what impact it might have for our understanding of the early Church and even of the Church today. The presentation is restricted to those books and articles that make explicit use of sociological ideas and methods. It does not treat developments in the social description of early Christianity⁴ or studies of individual documents in the NT, though in the long run such investigations will probably be recognized as more important than the material treated here.

What does the sociological approach do? Gerd Theissen⁵ has defined

¹ H Kung, *The Church* (London Burns and Oates, 1967, Garden City, N Y Image, 1976), is a well-written and intelligible example of this approach

² E Said, *Orientalism* (New York Pantheon, 1978)

³ S Brown, "Biblical Philology, Linguistics and the Problem of Method," *HeyJ* 20 (1979) 295-98

⁴ J G Gager, in *RelSRev* 5 (1979) 174-80, has drawn attention to the important distinction between the social descriptions presented by R M Grant, A J Malherbe, and others, and the thoroughgoing use of sociological methods by G Theissen

⁵ "Die soziologische Auswertung religiöser Überlieferungen Ihre methodologischen Probleme am Beispiel des Urchristentums," *Kaivos* 17 (1975) 284-99

the sociology of early Christianity as the description and analysis of typical, interpersonal behavior displayed by members of early Christian groups. It pays special attention to extraordinary events and conflicts, explicit and implicit norms of conduct, the use of symbols, innovations, causes of success or failure, and adjustments from charismatic to institutional forces. It illumines NT texts by analogies drawn from other religious movements. When comparing the early Church with religious movements from the same time and place (e.g., the Essenes, the Pharisees), it focuses on points of contrast. When the movements differ radically in date and cultural setting, the constants are stressed.

The sociological approach calls on concepts that have proved successful in the sociology of religion.⁶ Among these concepts are anomie, the charismatic prophet, the disprivileged, the routinization of charisma, collective emotion, legitimation, cosmization, and elective affinity. It tries to explain the meaning of words and ideas in relation to the historical situations and cultural contexts of the persons who used them.⁷ The approach corresponds to a large extent to what in biblical studies has been termed the "setting in life" or *Sitz im Leben*. According to K. Berger,⁸ this approach can lead exegetes toward the "location" of the documents (place, time, group, tradition-historical background), the roles of groups and of carriers of traditions, the Christological "life center" operative in the early Christian adaptation of traditions, the process by which opposing groups and positions were brought into harmony, the relation between ideology and activity, and the extent to which theological statements are historically conditioned.

The obstacles to using sociological techniques in NT studies are formidable. They are obvious even to the most ardent proponents of the approach.⁹ There is the obstacle posed by the historical distance of some nineteen hundred years. There is no way to use the refined techniques of observation on the early Church that one might use on a cult today. Furthermore, the NT writings are religious documents, and sociology has no satisfactory method for dealing with the divine or nonrational element

⁶ E. Stevenson, "Some Insights from the Sociology of Religion into the Origin and Development of the Early Christian Church," *ExpTim* 90 (1979) 300-305.

⁷ D. Nineham, "A Partner for Cinderella?" in *What About the New Testament? Essays in Honour of Christopher Evans* (ed. M. Hooker and C. Hickling, London: SCM, 1975) 143-54. See also Nineham's *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Study of the Bible in an Age of Rapid Cultural Change* (New York: Barnes & Noble/Harper & Row, 1977).

⁸ "Wissenssoziologie und Exegese des Neuen Testaments," *Kauros* 19 (1977) 124-33. See also his *Exegese des Neuen Testaments: Neue Wege vom Text zur Auslegung* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1977).

⁹ G. Theissen, "Theoretische Probleme religionssoziologischer Forschung und die Analyse des Urchristentums," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 16 (1974) 35-56.

that is so important in religious experience. Finally, the concepts and models of sociology are not absolutes. They represent conclusions drawn from the careful observation of particular movements or groups. They are subject to the tests and verification processes of the scientific method; they are not necessarily built into the structure of creation.

Given the reality of these obstacles, what can one hope to gain from the sociological approach to the development of the early Church as witnessed in the NT? As I have mentioned, the biblical-theological approach has been fruitful but now seems to need a new lease on life. Perhaps the importing of new ideas and new concepts from the most obviously relevant of the social sciences will exercise a salutary effect, at least to the extent of making biblical theologians more conscious of their own concerns and methods. Moreover, it is possible that the sociological approach will make more intelligible the data presented in the NT and render less foreign the experiences of the people described in those documents. The decision as to whether this approach is of value depends entirely on whether it sheds light on the texts. There is at least the antecedent probability that this will be the case. Lastly, the approach should contribute to the dialogue between theologians and social scientists by providing new questions for both parties to ponder.

TWO MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The two most extensive attempts at applying the concepts of sociology to the development of the early Church have been carried out by John G. Gager and Gerd Theissen. Gager¹⁰ explores the relevance of conceiving Christianity as a social world in the making with reference to the following issues: the relationship between religion and social status, the enthusiastic character of the earliest Christian communities, their gradual transformation into a formidable religious and social institution, and the emergence of Christianity as the dominant religion of the later Roman Empire. The approach is theoretical and comparative: theoretical in the sense that explanatory models drawn from the social sciences are used, and comparative in that much of the evidence for these models is based on studies of non-Christian religious movements.

In the course of his presentation, Gager calls on certain terms and ideas developed in the sociology of religion as a help toward understanding the development of the early Church. For example, the group gathered around Jesus is classed as a millenarian movement. Such groups believe that the present order will soon be overthrown or reversed, and that the promise of a heaven on earth will be fulfilled. They draw heavily from the disprivileged, from those who are either economically poor or perceive

¹⁰ *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

themselves to be shut out of the centers of power. In millenarian movements the charismatic prophet plays the part of a catalyst in articulating the complaints of the disprivileged and in symbolizing the contours of the new humanity. According to Gager, Jesus was a charismatic prophet for a millenarian movement. Even when Jesus' death and the delay of the kingdom seemed to disconfirm the movement's hopes, the group did not die. Instead, it threw itself into a vigorous round of missionary activity.¹¹

Perhaps more significant than the Church's origin as a millenarian movement was its development into a sociologically viable and distinguishable (from Judaism) institution. Here Gager calls on Max Weber's idea of the routinization of charisma. Far from being limited to the initial stages of enthusiastic movements, charisma is viewed as a fundamental component of all institutions at every stage of their existence: "Charismatic authority and the rise of institutional structures are complementary, not antithetical movements" (87). For the first two hundred years of its existence Christianity was essentially a movement among the disprivileged (economically or socially) within the Roman Empire. It incorporated the characteristics of the religion of the disprivileged: a strong tendency toward congregational units, a reliance on future-oriented compensation (salvation), and a rational system of ethics. Why did Christianity succeed? The existence of Hellenistic Judaism in the Diaspora and the peaceful conditions in the Roman Empire were the most powerful external factors. The most prominent internal factor was the radical sense of community—open to all, insistent on absolute and exclusive loyalty, and concerned with every aspect of the believer's life.

Three critical articles in *Zygon* have called attention to the problems involved in Gager's approach. D. L. Bartlett¹² observed that Gager's book is interesting and important more because of what it attempts than what it accomplishes. Questions are raised about the use of sociological models to provide new data, the unclear categories and the uncertain force of the argument, the tendency to homogenize the evidence about early Christianity, the disparity between the evidence and some of the theories, and the lack of attention to the peculiarly religious aspects of early Christi-

¹¹ For discussions of cognitive dissonance in early Christianity, see H. Jackson, "The Resurrection Belief of the Earliest Church: A Response to the Failure of Prophecy?" *JR* 55 (1975) 415-25; U. Wernik, "Frustrated Beliefs and Early Christianity: A Psychological Enquiry into the Gospels of the New Testament," *Numen* 22 (1975) 96-130. For social-science treatments of the traditions about Jesus, see E. L. Abel, "The Psychology of Memory and Rumor Transmission and Their Bearing on Theories of Oral Transmission in Early Christianity," *JR* 51 (1971) 270-81; R. B. Williams, "Reflections on the Transmission of Tradition in the Early Church," *Encounter* 40 (1979) 273-85.

¹² "John G. Gager's 'Kingdom and Community': A Summary and Response," *Zygon* 13 (1978) 109-22.

anity. According to J. Z. Smith,¹³ Gager refuses to accept historical particularities and their consequences, to take seriously the context of the sociological and anthropological models he employs, and to engage in serious methodological and theoretical meditation on the issues raised by them. D. Tracy¹⁴ pleads for the inclusion of fundamental theology in the dialogue between social scientists and historians of religion and for more attention to the internal factor operative in early Christianity.

Gerd Theissen's sociology of early Palestinian Christianity between A.D. 30 and 70 is less ambitious.¹⁵ After defining his task as the description of typical social attitudes and behavior within the Jesus movement and the analysis of its interactions with Jewish society in Palestine, he discusses the wandering charismatics¹⁶ and their sympathizers based in local communities, and then interprets the Son of Man Christology as expressing the experience of the wandering charismatics. In treating the influences of the broader society on the Jesus movement, he examines various factors: socioeconomic (rootlessness),¹⁷ socioecological (rural, ambivalence toward Jerusalem),¹⁸ sociopolitical (nominal theocracy versus the *de facto* aristocracy), and sociocultural (intensification of norms as a reaction toward assimilation). The final section of the book deals with the Jesus movement's functions in containing aggression and its relative lack of success in Palestine.

Theissen's sociological base is functional analysis.¹⁹ He relies heavily on conflict analysis; he assumes that religious renewal movements develop out of social tensions and attempt to give new impulses for their resolution. In addition to leaving himself open to some of the general criticisms raised in the first part of this report and to some of the points made against Gager's book, Theissen appears at times to force the data to fit his theories. For example, the poverty, the poverty and social uprootedness of the Galilean fishermen among Jesus' disciples (34) are strongly empha-

¹³ "Too Much Kingdom, Too Little Community," *ibid* 123-30

¹⁴ "A Theological Response to 'Kingdom and Community,'" *ibid* 131-35

¹⁵ *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums* (Munich Kaiser, 1977) The American edition is *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1978) and the British edition is *The First Followers of Jesus* (London SCM, 1978)

¹⁶ "Wanderradikalismus Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum," *ZTK* 70 (1973) 245-71 See also "Legitimation und Lebensunterhalt Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie urchristlicher Missionare," *NTS* 21 (1974-75) 192-221

¹⁷ "Wir haben alles verlassen' (MC X 28) Nachfolge und soziale Entwurzelung in der jüdisch-palastinischen Gesellschaft des I. Jahrhunderts n. Ch.," *NovT* 19 (1977) 161-96

¹⁸ "Die Tempelweissagung Jesu Prophetie im Spannungsfeld von Stadt und Land," *TZ* 32 (1976) 144-58 See also H. G. Kippenberg, *Religion und Klassenbildung im antiken Judaa Eine religionssoziologische Studie zum Verhältnis von Tradition und gesellschaftlicher Entwicklung* (Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978)

¹⁹ J. G. Gager, *RelSRev* 5 (1979) 174-80

sized, even though in a preindustrial economy fishermen exercised a relatively secure and profitable trade. Also, apocalypticism is interpreted in a somewhat simple manner as a protest against economic and social conditions. But apocalyptic movements arise in a variety of social conditions, even among college-educated men and women of the United States in the 1970's.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The programmatic character of the books by Gager and Theissen should not obscure the fact that other NT scholars have been working in similar directions. B. J. Malina has explored some of the fundamental orientations or attitudes that structured the experiences and expressions of people in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. He has drawn attention to the image of the limited good: that is, all the desired things in life exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply.²⁰ This image can be glimpsed in the understanding of the ideal person as one who neither encroaches on others nor allows himself to be exploited, the discovery of success or wealth at the interfaces of one's closed system or social station, and the search for patrons within the cosmos (God, Satan, angels or spirits, etc.). Malina has also investigated the importance of "dyadic personality" in the Mediterranean world of the Hellenistic period.²¹ The term "dyadic personality" describes individuals as embedded within the group and their behavior as determined by significant others.

The dynamics of millenarian movements with reference to early Christianity have been explored by S. R. Isenberg. In Greco-Roman Palestine the issue that divided the various groups was access to and/or control over the redemptive media, especially the temple cult and the Law.²² Members of millenarian movements like the Essenes and the Christians felt blocked off from the redemptive media. These movements developed according to the following pattern: (1) the feeling of deprivation and oppression, (2) the concrete expression and testing of the new assumptions and beliefs about power along with the appearance of a millenarian prophet, and (3) consolidation or dissolution. Within this framework Isenberg situates the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness, Jesus, and Paul as millenarian prophets.²³ All three claimed authority outside the normal channels of power in the Jewish community, relied on access to a higher

²⁰ "Limited Good and the Social World of Early Christianity," *BTB* 8 (1978) 162-76.

²¹ "The Individual and the Community—Personality in the Social World of Early Christianity," *BTB* 9 (1979) 126-38. See also G. S. Worgul, "Anthropological Consciousness and Biblical Theology," *ibid.* 3-12.

²² "Millenarism in Greco-Roman Palestine," *Religion* 4 (1974) 26-46.

²³ "Power through Temple and Torah in Greco-Roman Palestine," in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty. Part 2: Early Christianity* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 24-52.

truth and a higher power in direct revelation, and drew followings responsive to the messages of hope for the deprived.

Gershom Scholem's massive study of Sabbatai Sevi, a Jewish messianic figure from the seventeenth century A.D.,²⁴ has been hailed by sociologist Daniel Bell not only as a work of magisterial historical scholarship but also as "the most subtle and complex exploration I know of the character of messianic movements and messianic longings. . . ."²⁵ The parallels between that seventeenth-century Jewish movement and early Christianity have been explored by W. D. Davies.²⁶ The primary phenomena of a messianic movement are said to be the radical confrontation with the established order so that faith in the messiah becomes crucial, and the ability to convey the living experience of redemption to many people in many places. Among the secondary characteristics are religious enthusiasm, miracles, the nature and activity of the messiah (hidden, suffering, not having an army, etc.), overcoming death, significant interpreters, and relatively little interest in the messiah's history and character. For all their similarities, Christianity and Sabbatianism are said to differ in two important aspects: (1) the conceptual background of early Christianity was far more complex and varied; (2) the constructive constraint of Jesus' ministry stands in marked contrast to the negative, distorting, and ultimately nihilistic influence of Sabbatai.

These discussions of early Christianity as a millenarian movement naturally lead to analyses of it as a sect. According to R. Scroggs,²⁷ the community called into existence by Jesus fulfills the essential characteristics of the religious sect as defined in recent sociological investigation. It emerged out of protest, rejected the reality claimed by the establishment, was egalitarian in its communal life, offered acceptance and love within the community, was a voluntary association, demanded total commitment from its members, and had an apocalyptic or adventist perspective. W. A. Meeks²⁸ has drawn attention to the fundamental ambiguity in the social character of the Pauline churches. On the one hand, the Church was an eschatological sect with a strong sense of group boundaries. On the other hand, it was an open sect, concerned not to offend outsiders but to attract them to its message and membership. This was an inherently unstable combination, though an enormously creative

²⁴ *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1973).

²⁵ "Immortal Nominations," *New York Times Book Review*, June 3, 1979, 12.

²⁶ "From Schweitzer to Scholem: Reflections on Sabbatai Svi," *JBL* 95 (1976) 529-58.

²⁷ "The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement," in *Christianity, Judaism* (n. 23 above) 1-23.

²⁸ " 'Since Then You Would Need to Go out of the World': Group Boundaries in Pauline Christianity," in *Critical History and Biblical Faith* (ed. T. J. Ryan; Villanova, Pa.: College Theology Society/Horizons, 1979) 4-29.

one. The boundaries between the Pauline churches and the society around them were defined by special language emphasizing separation (the chosen, brothers and sisters, the saints, etc.), rules, the penalty of exclusion from common meals, the creation of autonomous institutions to serve the members, and sanctioned interactions with the society at large.

The Christian community at Corinth has been the subject of several sociological studies. In a fascinating series of articles, Theissen has focused on the social classes that made up that church. The references to official positions, households, provisions made for missionaries and for the community, and journeys to distant places in connection with many of the Corinthians mentioned by name in the NT indicate that the upper classes constituted a substantial part of that group, though not the majority (see 1 Cor 1:26).²⁹ In fact, the "strong" and the "weak" may correlate with the different social levels in the Corinthian community. This class differentiation was probably the background of the controversy over eating meat sacrificed to idols (see 1 Cor 8)³⁰ and the conflict over the common meal (see 1 Cor 11:17-34).³¹ The Christian community at Corinth has also been studied by A. Schreiber,³² who relies heavily on theories of group process and group dynamics from the social sciences. He deals with the formation of the community into a group, its functioning as a group (interactions, group feeling, norms, goals and roles, direction and leadership, etc.), Paul's departure from Corinth and the activity of Apollos, and the exchange of letters between Paul and the Corinthian community. Schreiber is also concerned with the methodological implications of applying social-science techniques to the New Testament and with the light they can shed on the development of primitive Christian communities.

Another important sociological contribution to Pauline studies has been made by J. H. Schütz's work on charisma and social reality.³³ According to him, Paul viewed charisma as ordering the common life by establishing priorities and discriminating among competing manifesta-

²⁹ "Soziale Schichtung in der korinthischen Gemeinde: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des hellenistischen Urchristentums," *ZNW* 65 (1974) 232-72.

³⁰ "Die Starken und Schwachen in Korinth: Soziologische Analyse eines theologischen Streites," *EvT* 35 (1975) 155-72.

³¹ "Soziale Integration und sakramentales Handeln: Eine Analyse von I Cor. XI 17-34," *NovT* 16 (1974) 179-206.

³² *Die Gemeinde in Korinth: Versuch einer gruppenspezifischen Betrachtung der Entwicklung der Gemeinde von Korinth auf der Basis des ersten Korintherbriefes* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977). See the perceptive review by J. H. Elliott in *Biblica* 59 (1978) 589-92.

³³ "Charisma and Social Reality in Primitive Christianity," *JR* 54 (1974) 51-70. See also his *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (New York: Cambridge University, 1975).

tions of the Spirit. It also ordered the individual life by providing the coordinates of its locus within a common framework. If one proceeds on Max Weber's view that charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits, then Paul could not be counted as a charismatic. Weber's scheme fits Paul's opponents better than it fits Paul. Rather, Paul's understanding of charisma is closer to that of Edward Shils, who maintains that the phenomenon of charismatic authority is not inimical to organizational structure.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY

This report has gathered together some of the most important books and articles published in the 1970's that explicitly use sociological concepts for understanding the origin and development of the Church in the NT. I have freely admitted the limitations of the sociological approach: the historical gulf, the nontheological orientation of sociology, and the questionable validity of some sociological models. Nevertheless, the sociological study of the NT Church begun during the past decade promises to make an even greater impact during the 1980's, and so we should try to sketch what contributions we can expect it to make to exegesis and theology.³⁴

The least that we can expect from the sociological approach is a set of new questions, terms, and analogies for studying the Church in the NT period. For example, anyone who has studied the Sabbatian movement in seventeenth-century Judaism is bound to return to the Jesus movement of the first century with new perspectives on Jesus' free attitude toward the law, the roles of John the Baptist and Paul in the movement, the reactions to Jesus' death, and the reinterpretation of the Scriptures in the light of Jesus. Familiarity with the Sabbatian movement should make us more cautious about declaring "unthinkable" some of the things attributed to the earthly Jesus in the Gospels. Furthermore, the sociological approach uses the vocabulary and methodology gaining increasing prominence in the study of religion. This is not to say that the concerns and vocabulary of theology should be abandoned. But theologians ought to be willing and able to join in conversation with researchers who investigate religious phenomena from other perspectives. Finally, the use of sociological analogies and concepts can provide exegetes with clues and hypotheses about the communal setting of NT documents. The great interpreters from Origen to Bultmann have studied biblical texts with an eye toward individual experience and have relied on various kinds of philosophical anthropology. Yet critics of this personalist approach al-

³⁴ In my monograph *God's People in Christ: New Testament Perspectives on the Church and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), I use some sociological concepts in a biblical-theological investigation of the Church as the people of God.

ways point to the communal and social character of the NT writings. They correctly demand a hermeneutic more appropriate to the material being studied. Perhaps the critical use of sociological concepts will help toward developing a socially-oriented method of interpretation.

The most that we can expect from the sociological approach is that it will exercise a significant and even revolutionary effect on the application of the historical-critical method. During the 1970's the sociological approach has been very general in its statements; there was a need to get the ideas and terms into the mainstream of the discussion. The material reviewed in this article is only a beginning and needs to be surpassed by more detailed analyses of individual texts. The value of the sociological approach will be proved primarily by its ability to illumine obscure texts and to provide insight into the social situations in which Christianity arose and developed. The emergence of this new approach in the 1970's means that exegetes and theologians of the 1980's have some new items on their agenda. They must be more sensitive to clues concerning the economic, social, cultural levels of the people mentioned in the NT documents (writers, addressees, opponents, etc.). They must try to determine more precisely the nature of the social conflicts underlying the texts and to discern the principles and methods by which those conflicts were resolved. They must pay more attention to better-documented religious phenomena from other times and other cultures, and explore more critically what value this or that sociological concept might have for understanding aspects of the origin and development of the Church in the New Testament.

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