

SOCIOLOGY, SCRIPTURE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

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Though there had been earlier attempts to apply the insights of the social sciences, especially of sociology, to the interpretation of Scripture (such as Max Weber's analysis of the prophets,¹ and the interpretation of the NT by scholars from the University of Chicago early in this century), it has only been in the 1970s that we have witnessed a veritable flood of articles and monographs that have consciously employed sociological models to explain Biblical texts and the history of the early Church. John Gager, writing in 1979, remarked, "As recently as five years ago, scarcely anyone would have ventured to predict a revival of interest in the social history of early Christianity."²

Particularly for those who may not be aware of this important trend, which has been hailed by some scholars as the wave of the future, I would like to do the following: (1) survey some of the most important recent contributions; (2) sketch the nature of sociological inquiry; (3) assess critically some of the results of recent studies; and (4) consider some positive developments and prospects.

I. RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS

1. *Old Testament*. Comparative and anthropological studies may help illumine the nature of OT genealogies. A. Malamat has compared Biblical and Mesopotamian genealogies.³ Robert K. Wilson has used anthropological data to analyze the OT genealogies.⁴ He contends that genealogies were transmitted not for purely historical purposes but with certain social aims in view. They contain accurate data insofar as these goals were concerned.⁵

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¹H. F. Hahn, *The Old Testament Speaks* (rev. ed; Philadelphia, 1966) chap. 5, "The Sociological Approach to the Old Testament"; D. Petersen, "Max Weber and the Sociological Study of Ancient Israel," *Sociological Inquiry* 49/2-3 (1979) 117-149.

²J. Gager in *Religious Studies Review* 5/3 (1979) 175; cf. D. J. Harrington, "Sociological Concepts and the Early Church," *TS* 41 (1980) 181.

³A. Malamat, "King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies," *JAOS* 88 (1968) 163-173.

⁴R. K. Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," *JBL* (94 (1975) 169-189; *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven, 1977).

⁵Cf. also M. E. Donaldson, "Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JAAR* 49 (1981) 77-87; T. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and the Genesis Genealogies," *JNES* 40 (1981) 87-98.

In contrast to studies comparing the Israelite patriarchs with the pastoral nomads of Mari,⁶ Norman K. Gottwald has vigorously denied that the earliest Israelites were pastoral nomads.⁷ He would prefer to see them as rural tribes opposed to the urban states.

Anticipating the revisionism of Gottwald was an article by George Mendenhall in 1962 that proposed that Israel was not formed by a conquest of Canaan from without but by an internal revolt of peasants within Canaanite society.⁸ As developed in his magnum opus published in 1972, Mendenhall's conclusions were not dictated by any sociological model but by the observation that major changes frequently occur at intervals of 250 to 300 years—i.e., the "tenth generation."⁹ The catalyst for the formation of Israel was the introduction of the ideology of monotheism.¹⁰ Mendenhall's revisionism has influenced John Bright to suggest that "the exodus group led by Moses and Joshua did not actually conquer the land but sparked an internal rebellion which had the same effect."¹¹

The most ambitious attempt to interpret the OT from a sociological perspective is the massive opus of Norman K. Gottwald entitled *The Tribes of Yahweh* and subtitled *A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.*, published in 1979.¹² Though he acknowledges his debt to Mendenhall's work,¹³ Gottwald rejects the latter's "idealism," which viewed the "idea" of monotheism as the formative force in the creation of Israel. Rather, emphasizing material and social factors Gottwald maintains that what motivated some of the Canaanite peasants to rebel and form Israel was their conscious social egalitarianism. This involved a process of "retribalization," which rejected the Late Bronze Age culture of the Canaanite cities.

For the period following the conquest we have A. Malamat's study, "Charismatic Leadership in the Book of Judges,"¹⁴ which applies the model of Max We-

⁶M. B. Rowton, "Dimorphic Structure and the Problem of the *'Apiru- Ibrim*," *JNES* 35 (1976) 13-20; V. H. Matthews, *Pastoral Nomadism in the Mari Kingdom* (Missoula, 1979); "Pastoralists and Patriarchs," *BA* 44 (1981) 215-218.

⁷N. K. Gottwald, "Were the Early Israelites Pastoral Nomads?," *Biblical Archeology Review* 4 (1978) 2-7; "Nomadism," *IDBSup* 629-631.

⁸G. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *BA* 25 (1962) 66-87.

⁹G. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore, 1972) 217. J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Atlanta, 1979) 99, observes: "Mendenhall appears to be mainly dependent on one American anthropologist (E. R. Service), whom, however, he does not follow slavishly."

¹⁰Mendenhall, *Tenth* 223.

¹¹J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (3d ed.; Philadelphia, 1981) 60.

¹²Cf. also N. K. Gottwald, "Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel," *Encounter with the Text* (ed. M. J. Buss; Philadelphia, 1979) 69-82.

¹³Gottwald, *Tribes* 225 ff. and *passim*.

¹⁴In *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God* (ed. F. M. Cross et al.; Garden City, 1976) 152-168.

ber's "charismatic" leader to the judges. For the period of the monarchies Walter Brueggemann in programmatic fashion traces two contrasting trajectories: (1) a liberation trajectory from Moses to the prophets, versus (2) a royal trajectory representing the conservative interests of the urban classes.¹⁵

It was Max Weber who set forth a sociological model of the ideal type of the prophet as a bearer of charisma in his seminal works, *Ancient Judaism* (published in 1921)¹⁶ and *The Sociology of Religion* (published in 1922).¹⁷ Though Weber's formulation is still influential, it was of necessity dependent on the Biblical studies then current and is in need of revision.¹⁸ Among recent studies of the prophets in their social settings are works by M. Cohen,¹⁹ Robert R. Wilson²⁰ and David L. Petersen.²¹

Paul Hanson's important monograph, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*,²² attempts to set forth a new understanding of the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic by using among other sociological concepts Karl Mannheim's view of ideology as a self-serving justification for the status quo as opposed to a utopian longing for an alternative future. According to Hanson's reconstruction based on an analysis of Deutero-Isaiah 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14, two factions developed in the century after the exile: (1) the victorious priestly faction of Zadokites (represented in Ezekiel, Chronicles), and (2) the defeated visionary apocalyptists (of Deutero-Isaiah), who turned prophetic eschatology into an apocalyptic vision of God's sovereign intervention at the end of history.²³ As the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded in reducing these socio-religious tensions, apocalypticism did not re-emerge until the Maccabean era.

¹⁵W. Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Literature," *JBL* 98 (1979) 161-185. Cf. M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York, 1971).

¹⁶Reprinted (Glencoe, 1952). Though some have found Weber's notion of an "ideal type" a valuable heuristic tool, it can distort the historical data, as it disregards crucial chronological factors.

¹⁷Reprinted (Boston, 1963).

¹⁸P. Berger, "Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelitic Prophecy," *American Sociological Review* 28 (1963) 940-950.

¹⁹M. Cohen, "The Prophets as Revolutionaries: A Sociopolitical Analysis," *Biblical Archeology Review* 5/3 (1979) 12-19.

²⁰R. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1980).

²¹D. L. Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* (Sheffield, 1981). On the application of the prophets' messages to contemporary society see J. A. Dearman, "Hebrew Prophecy and Social Criticism," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 9/2 (1982) 131-143.

²²Philadelphia, 1975.

²³Cf. B. O. Long, "The Social World of Ancient Israel," *Int* 36 (1982) 246.

Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*,²⁴ uses the theory of cognitive dissonance to analyze the reinterpretations of prophecy in Ezra and Chronicles—that is, when prophecies apparently were not fulfilled, the tension of conflicting cognitions was reduced by reinterpreting the prophecies.

On a less theoretical level several studies based on extra-Biblical data that provide insight into the social world of the exilic period include works by Muhammad A. Dandamayev,²⁵ J. P. Weinberg,²⁶ and H. Kreissig.²⁷

2. *New Testament.* At the beginning of the twentieth century, famed liberal scholars at the University of Chicago concentrated on the social teachings of Jesus both in historical analysis and in practical application.²⁸ Shailer Mathews published a nine-part essay, "Christian Sociology," in the first issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895; these were revised and published as *The Social Teachings of Jesus*.²⁹ Stressing social relations, S. J. Case explained the breach between Jesus and his critics as follows:

Probably the fundamental ground of opposition between him and the contemporary religious leaders lay in the fact of his failure to appreciate their feeling toward the established social structure. He had not received that professional training necessary to produce the attitude of mind which emphasizes the importance of a traditional technique for the preservation of values.³⁰

Currently (since 1974) the most prolific writer to apply sociological analysis to

²⁴London, 1979. C. S. Rodd, "On Applying a Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies," *JSOT* 19 (1981) 102-103, who considers Carroll's work "an example of the most effective application of a specific sociological theory to the biblical documents," nevertheless expresses two reservations: "First, I think that Carroll has exaggerated the awareness of dissonance on the part of the prophets and the later editors of the traditions"; and "My second demurrer is simply to say that Carroll provides an excellent example of the way a theory derived from social psychology can be used as a heuristic device, but I wonder whether the detailed theory is needed since it cannot be applied in this developed form."

²⁵M. A. Dandamayev, "Politische und wirtschaftliche Geschichte," *Beiträge zur Achämenidengeschichte* (Wiesbaden: 1972) 15-58.

²⁶J. P. Weinberg, "Demographische Notizen zur Geschichte der nachexilischen Gemeinde in Juda," *Klio* 54 (1972) 45-59.

²⁷H. Kreissig, *Die sozialökonomische Situation in Juda zur Achämenidenzeit* (Berlin: 1973). Cf. E. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Ezra," *BSac* 137 (1980) 195-211; "The Archaeological Background of Nehemiah," *BSac* 137 (1980) 291-309.

²⁸R. W. Funk, "The Watershed of the American Biblical Tradition: The Chicago School, First Phase (1892-1920)," *JBL* 95 (1976) 4-22.

²⁹New York, 1897. Also originally published as studies in the *American Journal of Sociology* was L. Wallis' *Sociological Study of the Bible* (Chicago, 1912).

³⁰S. J. Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago, 1923). Cf. W. Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus* (Chicago, 1916). See J. M. Sasson, "On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History," *JSOT* 21 (1981) 11-12.

the NT is German scholar Gerd Theissen. In addition to his writings in German,³¹ two major works have now been translated into English. The first is titled *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*.³² Theissen's is basically a functionalist approach, following the formulations of Talcott Parsons and J. M. Yinger. While his analysis of the expansion of Christianity is based on a sociological theory of integration, his analysis of the Jesus movement in Palestine is based on a sociological theory of conflict. He has analyzed the two social forms of the Jesus movement as consisting of wandering charismatic preachers and the communities that sustained them.

In his second work, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*,³³ Theissen contrasts the hard-pressed village economy of Palestine with the prosperity of the cities in the Mediterranean. This set up the conflict between the self-sufficient Paul and the itinerant charismatics from a Palestinian background as reflected in the Corinthian letters.³⁴ That is, the newcomers claimed to be following Jesus' commands in accepting financial support, but Paul was a false apostle in not conforming to their example.

A provocative attempt to apply a variety of sociological models to nascent Christianity is John G. Gager's *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*.³⁵ Following the writings of Peter Worsley on Melanesian cargo cults and Kenelm Burridge³⁶ on millenarian movements, Gager also uses the concept of cognitive dissonance to explain the spread of Christianity.

Following the lead of Adolf Deissmann,³⁷ Gager has stressed the view that most of the early Christians were drawn from the disinherited lower classes.³⁸ Recently, however, many scholars have underlined the important role played by the few but influential members of the elite and also the broad representation from every class attested not only in the NT but also by the Younger Pliny.

³¹For a list of G. Theissen's German articles see R. Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament," *NTS* 26 (1980) 174 n. 33, and also n. 34 below. For attempts by earlier NT scholars see D. Gewalt, "Neutestamentliche Exegese und Soziologie," *EvT* 31 (1971) 87-99.

³²Philadelphia, 1978; the British edition is entitled *The First Followers of Jesus* (London, 1978).

³³Philadelphia, 1982.

³⁴Theissen, *The Social Setting* 49: "His competitors were scarcely 'false apostles, deceitful workmen,' and servants of Satan (2 Cor 11:13, 15), as Paul disparaged them. They were normal early Christian missionaries, who held more closely to the rules for itinerant charismatics than did Paul." Even those who cannot accept Theissen's sociologically oriented conclusions will profit from his well-documented discussions on Erastus (pp. 75-83), on "God-fearers" (pp. 99-102), and on social distinctions at meals (pp. 125-129, 156-163). For an invaluable work that describes "The Social World of the Apostle Paul" see now W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, 1983).

³⁵Philadelphia, 1982.

³⁶*New Heaven, New Earth* (New York, 1959) is also cited by H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1980).

³⁷A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids, 1965 repr. of 1922 ed.).

³⁸J. G. Gager, "Shall We Marry Our Enemies?," *Int* 36 (1982) 262.

The earliest writer to maintain this when it was a minority position was E. A. Judge in *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century*,³⁹ a pioneer contribution to this field. W. H. Wüllner also challenged the traditional interpretation of 1 Cor 1:26-28 as implying a basically proletarian Christianity.⁴⁰ Judge has been followed by Martin Hengel,⁴¹ Abraham J. Malherbe,⁴² Wayne Meeks⁴³ and Gerd Theissen.⁴⁴ The fact that Paul was warned of danger at Ephesus (Acts 19:31) by the Asiarchs implies that Paul was in friendly contact with the highest social levels.⁴⁵

Robin Scroggs used the model of a religious sect developed by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch to analyze early Christianity as essentially a protest movement that was egalitarian in nature.⁴⁶ John H. Schütz applied Weber's model of a charismatic leader not to Paul but to his opponents at Corinth.⁴⁷

We now have a full-fledged sociological exegesis of 1 Peter in John H. Elliott's *A Home for the Homeless*.⁴⁸ Elliott acknowledges his debt to Norman Gottwald's stimulus.

Adela Y. Collins has analyzed the Revelation to John as an apocalyptic response to a complex social crisis.⁴⁹ She traces the conflict to four factors: (1) a painful split with local Jewish communities; (2) a rejection of the surrounding culture; (3) hostility toward Rome; and (4) resentment of the wealthy provincial elite. On the basis of this analysis, she summarizes what she believes to be the double-edged significance of the book of Revelation as follows:

Its roots in social crisis make it an ideal vehicle for the expression and outlet of feelings of envy, resentment and desire for revenge. Its images of battle and blood-

³⁹London, 1960; E. A. Judge, "The Social Identity of the First Christians," *JRH* 11 (1980) 202.

⁴⁰W. H. Wüllner, "The Sociological Implications of 1 Corinthians 1.26-28 Reconsidered," *SE VI* (= TU 112 [1973]) 666-672.

⁴¹M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, 1975).

⁴²A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge, 1977).

⁴³W. A. Meeks, "The Social Context of Pauline Theology," *Int* 36 (1982) 271; *The First Urban Christians* chap. 2; Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation" 170.

⁴⁴Theissen, *The Social Setting* 106-108. For the practical implications of this new sociological understanding see F. W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context* 2 (1979) 4-14.

⁴⁵See E. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (Grand Rapids, 1980) 109-110.

⁴⁶R. Scroggs, "The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden, 1975), 2.3. 1-23.

⁴⁷J. H. Schütz, "Charisma and Social Reality in Primitive Christianity," *JR* 54 (1974) 63; *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (New York, 1975).

⁴⁸Philadelphia, 1981.

⁴⁹A. Y. Collins, "The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John," *JBL* 96 (1977) 241-256.

shed may function in either of two ways. They may allow for a release of psychological tension and thus a nonviolent resolution of conflict. On the other hand, in some circumstances, quite apart from the author's intention, these images could move a person or group from violent fantasy to violent deeds.⁵⁰

Wayne Meeks has attempted to interpret the theology of the gospel of John as the result of a sectarian development, rather than as an adaptation of a pre-Christian Gnostic myth as Rudolf Bultmann had maintained.⁵¹

3. *The Early Church*. On the development of heresy in the early Church, S. J. Case expressed the following opinion:

Heresy was fundamentally a social phenomenon rather than an intellectual problem. Differences of opinion, that were always present even in the most peaceful community, never resulted in heresies until rival social attitudes crystallized around specific centers of interest and thus gave real vitality to the opinions in question.⁵²

A frequently cited example of the polarization along social/ethnic/cultural lines as well as theological issues is the controversy between the Donatists and the Catholic Church in Augustine's day. But even in this case A. H. M. Jones warns against facile generalizations.⁵³

Following the lead of W. Bauer,⁵⁴ who suggested that heresy was as early an option as so-called "orthodoxy," Elaine Pagels in a widely acclaimed book, *The Gnostic Gospels*,⁵⁵ has analyzed the differences between the Gnostics and the orthodox almost exclusively in terms of sociological and political rather than ideological factors.⁵⁶ Gedaliahu Stroumsa expresses a criticism of Pagels' approach with which I would agree:

Rather, Pagels' account tends to deny the essential and intrinsic seriousness of these theological debates and to see them mainly as disguised struggles between

⁵⁰A. Y. Collins, "The Revelation of John," *CurTM* 8 (1981) 12. Cf. D. E. Aune, "The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 26 (1981) 16-32.

⁵¹W. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72. On John and Gnosticism see E. Yamauchi, "Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the Trimorphic Proténnoia," *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (ed. R. Van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren; Leiden, 1981) 467-497.

⁵²Case, *The Social Origins* 199.

⁵³A. H. M. Jones, *Were Ancient Heresies Disguised Social Movements?* (Philadelphia, 1966).

⁵⁴W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971).

⁵⁵New York, 1979.

⁵⁶For sociological studies of the early Church and Gnosticism see H. G. Kippenberg, "Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus," *Numen* 17 (1970) 211-231; P. Munz, "The Problem of 'Die Soziologische Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus'," *Numen* 19 (1972) 41-51; W. Meeks, ed., *Zur Soziologie des Urchristentums* (Munich, 1979); K. Rudolph, "Gnosis-Weltreligion oder Sekte," *Kairos* 21 (1979) 255-263; "Basic Positions of Religionwissenschaft," *Religion* 11 (1981) 97-107.

divergent social or political conceptions. Moreover, the alleged socio-political divergences occasionally have little or no factual basis.⁵⁷

It is quite clear that at least a part of Pagels' interpretation is strongly influenced by current feminist concerns.⁵⁸ But even if, for the sake of argument, we granted her view that the female was accorded great prominence in Gnostic circles, her further suggestion that this should stimulate us to reconsider the ordination of women would carry weight only with those who agree with her that Gnosticism was an equally early and valid version of Christianity.

II. THE NATURE OF SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

In contrast with history, which examines the particular actions of unique individuals,⁵⁹ the social sciences (anthropology, political science, sociology) seek to discover general patterns in order to develop models of how men interact in social groups. Specifically, the sociology of religion "as a scientific endeavor is limited to the analysis of generalizable social phenomena that may be empirically linked to religious behavior."^{60, 61}

The "Father of Sociology," Auguste Comte (1798-1857), coming after the period of the French Enlightenment, wished to develop a "positivistic" or scientific study of society. In studying the evolution of society from simple to more complex forms, he declared: "Let us continue the solid tradition of the work of Galileo and Newton."⁶² By 1885 the faculties of theology in French universities were almost completely replaced by new departments of "Sciences Religieuses,"

⁵⁷"The Gnostic Temptation," *Numen* 27 (1980) 279. See my review in *Eternity* 31 (September 1980) 66-67, 69.

⁵⁸K. McKey, "Gnosticism, Feminism, and Elaine Pagels," *TToday* 37 (1981) 498-501.

⁵⁹H. Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* (Toronto, 1979) 192.

⁶⁰R. Friedrichs, "Sociological Research and Theology," *Review of Religious Research* 15 (1974) 119; B. J. Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Int* 36 (1982) 232.

⁶¹Back in 1920 M. Weber had written (*Economy and Society* [New York, 1968] 19): "As we have taken for granted throughout this presentation, sociology formulates type concepts and searches for general uniformities (*Regeln*) within the stream of events, in contrast to history, which aims at the causal analysis and causal attribution of individual actions, structures and personalities that have cultural significance." According to L. A. Coser, ed., *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965) 7: "Yet, if one looks at history through the peculiar lenses of the sociologist, one need not concern himself with the uniqueness of these events but, rather, with their underlying uniformities." Cf. Theissen, *The Social Setting* 121. On the contrast between history and sociology and attempts toward integration see C. Tilly, "Clio and Minerva," *Theoretical Sociology* (ed. J. C. McKinney and E. Tiryakian; New York, 1970) 434-466; P. Burke, *Sociology and History* (London, 1980); R. P. Swierenga, "Social Science History: A Critique and Appreciation," *Fides et Historia* 14/1 (1981) 42-51; P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Somerset, 1982).

⁶²Cited by Dooyeweerd, *Roots* 191. See also R. Heddendorf, "The Evolution of Social Evolution," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* [hereafter *JASA*] 28 (1976); B. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford, 1982) 5.

which were dedicated to studying religion in a "scientific" manner.⁶³

Though Comte rejected Christianity (i.e., Catholicism), he esteemed religion, the family, and the community for their unifying values. In place of traditional religion he attempted to establish a bizarre religion of humanity, complete with rituals and a priesthood.

The leading exponents of the nascent social sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were inspired by a zeal to explain—one might well say "explain away"—religious beliefs as the projections of men's minds and societies rather than as extra-phenomenal realities. Gager comments, "For many of them a primary goal of social science was to empty religious claims and beliefs of any truth-value."⁶⁴

This was true of the pioneer anthropologists, Sir James Frazer, compiler of the monumental *The Golden Bough*,⁶⁵ and of Sir Edward B. Tylor. Herbert Spencer, who did so much to apply the doctrine of evolution to sociology, is also to be numbered among the pioneer scholars who viewed religion in "positivistic" terms.⁶⁶

One of the towering figures in the sociology of religion, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) viewed gods as "the symbolic expression of society." He declared:

The religious surge is nothing more than a feeling which a collectivity inspires in its members, but this feeling has been projected out of the consciousness of those who experience it, and objectified it. In the process of objectification, the feeling is concentrated onto an object which then becomes sacred.⁶⁷

Thus early classical sociology was "Euhemeristic"⁶⁸—that is, it tried to explain the supernatural and deities purely in terms of human projections. As such it would clash with Christian views of a reality revealed in Scripture and history by a supernatural Deity.⁶⁹

Max Weber (1864-1920), the great German sociologist who wrote the classic analysis, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, also contributed many seminal studies that continue to influence the sociological interpretation of

⁶³H. Desroche, *Jacob and the Angel: An Essay in Sociologies of Religion* (Amherst, 1973) 129; cf. R. A. Nisbet, "The French Revolution and the Rise of Sociology in France," *The Phenomenon of Sociology* (ed. E. A. Tiryakian; New York, 1971) 27-36.

⁶⁴Gager, "Shall We Marry" 257.

⁶⁵M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (London, 1973) 30-33.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 13, 20; Heddendorf, "The Evolution" 110. Sociologists from Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber to Bellah have considered religion in "evolutionary terms." See R. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *Sociological Review* 29 (1964) 358-374. Tilly, "Clio and Minerva" 451, comments: "History abounds with devolutionary processes; sociological theory does not."

⁶⁷Cited by Desroche, *Jacob and the Angel* 39.

⁶⁸M. A. Cavanaugh, "Pagan and Christian: Sociological Euhemerism Versus American Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 43 (1982) 113-116.

⁶⁹M. M. Poloma, "Toward a Christian Sociological Perspective," *Sociological Analysis* 43 (1982) 95.

the Bible and of Judaism.⁷⁰ Though Weber recognized that unlike the natural sciences the social sciences must also interpret as well as observe human behavior⁷¹—that is, the interior or subjective aspects—he insisted that such interpretations must be *wertfrei* or “value-neutral.”

The desirability or even the possibility of such “value-free” studies has been increasingly questioned since the 1960s.⁷² Such a positivist/empirical approach deliberately shuts out from its interpretive grid what its subjects hold most dear. As Hill observes:

The questionable aspect of this procedure is the assumption that such a translation is possible without eliminating a meaningful part of the phenomenon being studied, and since religious adherents themselves regard certain kinds of non-empirical statements as meaningful, this would seem to indicate that a satisfactory explanation of their actions must at some point include—at least in part—this aspect of their definition of the situation. Any attempt to explain away religion in naturalistic terms presents the sociologist with an unnecessary and, I think, misguided task.⁷³

In the 1950s the structuralist-functionalist model of society became the dominant theoretical perspective among sociologists under the leadership of Talcott Parsons.⁷⁴ This view emphasizes three principles: (1) Men are “actors” who are subject to certain institutionalized “role” expectations; (2) such “actors” operate according to certain psychological laws, such as the “reinforcement” principle; and (3) the “actors” share a “cognitive consensus”—that is, a system of symbols and meanings that serve as a common medium of communication.

According to Malina’s summary:

Every element in society has a function, a purpose; it renders a contribution to the maintenance of society as a whole, integral system. Every functioning social struc-

⁷⁰See R. Aron, *German Sociology* (Westport, 1978 repr. of 1964 ed.) chap. 3. Weber’s analysis of “The Protestant Ethic” was welcomed by theologians but was criticized by economists and historians. See E. Fischhoff, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: The History of a Controversy,” *Social Research* 2 (February 1944) 53-77; B. Nelson, “Weber’s Protestant Ethic: Its Origins, Wanderings, and Foreseeable Futures,” in *Beyond the Classics* (ed. C. Y. Glock and P. E. Hammond; New York, 1973) 71-130. On Weber and Judaism see C. S. Rodd, “Max Weber and Ancient Judaism,” *SJT* 32 (1979) 457-469; J. Neusner, “Max Weber Revisited: Religion and Society in Ancient Judaism,” *The Second Century* 1/2 (1981) 61-84; E. Otto, “Hat Max Webers Religions-soziologie des antiken Judentums Bedeutung für eine Theologie des Alten Testaments?,” *ZAW* 94 (1982) 187-202.

⁷¹R. Martin, “Sociology and Theology,” in *Sociology, Theology and Conflict* (ed. D. E. H. Whiteley and R. Martin; Oxford, 1969) 17.

⁷²G. W. Barger, “A Christian Sociology?,” *JASA* 34 (1982) 100; D. Lyon, *Christians and Sociology* (Downers Grove, 1976) 28. As A. W. Gouldner, “The Sociologist as Partisan,” *The American Sociologist* 3 (May 1968) 103-116, points out, sociologists are almost always sympathetic to the “underdog” and committed to political liberalism. The common perception that evangelicalism is politically conservative and is retrogressive historically serves to bias many sociologists as noted by R. S. Warner, “Theoretical Barriers to the Understanding of Evangelical Christianity,” *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979) 1-9.

⁷³Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* 13.

⁷⁴See T. Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, rev. ed. 1954) 228-235.

ture is based on a consensus of values among its members. In this still picture type of model, any non-adaptive social change is regarded as deviance.⁷⁵

Almost the reverse of the functionalist "consensus" model is the "conflict" model inspired by Georg Simmel, who viewed "deviance" or social change as normal:

An entirely harmonious group, Simmel argued, could not exist empirically. It would not partake of any kind of life process; it would be incapable of change and development. Any social relationship needs attractive and repulsive forces, harmony and disharmony, in order to attain a specific form. . . . For him, conflict is the very essence of social life, an ineradicable component of social living.⁷⁶

By the 1960s only six of thirty eminent sociologists interviewed by M. Popovich conceded that a general theory of sociology was prevalent.⁷⁷ New approaches—such as the ethnomethodological approach of Harold Garfinkel, which seeks to uncover the "common-sense" expectations of commonplace activities—have been advocated.⁷⁸

III. CRITICISMS

1. *General Criticisms.* Four general criticisms have been leveled against much of the prevailing sociology (of religion) and more specifically against attempts to apply such methods and models to Biblical hermeneutics.⁷⁹

(1) The problem of disputable theories. Charles Tilly, who is both a sociologist and an historian, observes: "Sociology as a whole has moved back toward history. Why and how? The most important single reason for the shift, I believe, was increasing dissatisfaction with developmental models of large-scale social change. . . . In fact, the sociological models were weak, the processes hypotheti-

⁷⁵Malina, "The Social Sciences" 234; *The New Testament World* (Atlanta, 1981) 19-20.

⁷⁶L. A. Coser, ed., *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965) 12; *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956) 31. E. A. Tiryakian, "Introduction to the Sociology of Sociology," in Tiryakian (n. 63) 14 observes: "Most of the prominent figures today identified with the structural-functional school (or the 'consensus' model) were graduate students at Harvard in the 1930's while most of the prominent 'conflict' theorists (Coser, Horowitz, Gouldner, etc.) did their advanced graduate work at Columbia in the 1940's or 1950's." For a well-informed analysis from a conflict perspective see A. W. Gouldner, *The Hellenic World: A Sociological Analysis* (New York, 1969).

⁷⁷M. Popovich, "What the American Sociologists Think about Their Sciences and Its Problems," *The American Sociologist* 1 (May 1966) 133-134.

⁷⁸For an attempt to use this new approach to analyze the gospels see C. Flynn, "Commonsense Reality and Christian Teachings: Jesus Christ as Ethnomethodologist," *Social Thought* (Fall 1976) 5-12. R. Heddendorf comments (in a personal letter, January 17, 1983): "I'm skeptical of attempts to evaluate Christianity in terms of one theoretical view. It's more likely that the complexity of 'ambiguities in religion' . . . can only be explained with several theoretical models. Hence, structural-functional analysis may describe certain ideals but conflict theory may explain the results of our *actual* behavior."

⁷⁹Malina, "The Social Sciences" 237; Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation" 166.

cal.”⁸⁰ An even harsher indictment is issued by Gareth Stedman Jones against “academic sociology”:

The vague and shifting character of its object, the inconstancy of its definitions, the non-cumulative character of much of its knowledge, its proneness to passing theoretical fashions and the triteness of some of its “laws” suggest that its theoretical foundations are contestable and insecure.⁸¹

It is not only the historians who are critical. The sociologists interviewed by Popovich were self-critical:

The great majority of American sociologists whom I interviewed are more or less critical toward the results and weaknesses of their research. Lack of developed and integrated general theory, loose correlation between theory and empirical research are considered to be serious shortcomings that are to be overcome.⁸²

(2) The problem of reductionism. Sociologists focus selectively on certain data, often with acute insight. But as Samuel and Jones object, “More doubtful are some of the sociological categories or concepts which have guided and channelled their enquiries—endowing certain types of data with an unargued importance, while filtering out others as irrelevant.”⁸³ According to Hill, the common sociological assumption “that it is necessary to reduce religion to its *real* components, which can be seen to lie entirely in the economic and social environment of its devotees, means that sociology necessarily takes the form of a critique of religion.”⁸⁴ Against such analyses Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade have protested that religion is irreducible inasmuch as the “numinous” and the “sacred” are unique categories.⁸⁵ But the epistemology of a sociology that focuses only on “the inter-subjective, the recurrent, and the relational” rules out *ipso facto* “the existential, the unique, and the absolute.”⁸⁶

(3) The problem of a value-free posture. The attempt by sociologists to act as “neutral observers” with a “value-free” posture toward the “social facts” of their studies is identified by Friedrichs as “self-serving propaganda.”⁸⁷ As Dooyeweerd has acutely observed: “Modern sociology, however, has actually attempted to ‘explain’ the phenomena of human society after it had—as a matter of

⁸⁰C. Tilly, “Historical Sociology,” *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 1 (1980) 56.

⁸¹G. S. Jones, “From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History,” *British Journal of Sociology* 27 (1976) 300.

⁸²Popovich, “Sociologists” 135.

⁸³R. Samuel and G. S. Jones, “Sociology and History,” *History Workshop* 1 (1976) 7.

⁸⁴Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* 16-17.

⁸⁵H. H. Penner and E. A. Yonan, “Is a Science of Religion Possible?,” *JR* 52 (1972) 130; cf. B. Nelson, “Is the Sociology of Religion Possible?,” *JSSR* 9 (1970) 107-111.

⁸⁶Friedrichs, “Sociological Research” 120.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 124; R. W. Friedrichs, *A Sociology of Sociology* (New York, 1970) chap. 4, “The Cloak of Neutrality.”

principle—discarded these structures which make possible these very phenomena as well as our experience of them.”⁸⁸ Moreover, as Peter Berger notes, there is inherent in sociology a debunking tendency: “The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social systems he is studying.”⁸⁹

(4) The problem of determinism. Some sociological models of society, such as the structuralist functionalist view, seem to leave little room for human freedom.⁹⁰ The analysis of religion by Stark and Bainbridge as a system of rewards and compensations reads like a treatise on economics.⁹¹ The logical conclusion of such deterministic analysis is the behaviorism of B. F. Skinner.⁹² The Christian must object that under such perspectives man is viewed solely as a “socially” or “psychologically” determined object.⁹³

2. Specific Criticisms. As for specific criticisms of this recent trend in applying social science models to Scripture, John Gager writes:

For students of early Christianity, however, the final test must be whether the perspective that we have adopted makes good on the claim to appreciate the genesis and growth of the Christian religion in ways that have not hitherto been possible.⁹⁴

There is no question that part of the appeal and excitement of these new techniques is their novelty. This may appear to be a welcome innovation in view of what are acknowledged widely as the diminishing if not nihilistic returns from the older approaches of form criticism. In a candid appraisal a leading form critic, Reginald H. Fuller, observes wryly: “Again, it seems to be a real sign of originality and intelligence to deny the authenticity of something everyone has previously accepted.”⁹⁵

But granting their novelty, let us examine whether these approaches offer us a profounder insight into Scripture. Let us examine critically four authors: (1) Gottwald, (2) Theissen, (3) Aune, and (4) Gager.

(1) Norman Gottwald is quite explicit in his theoretical sociological orientations. He refers frequently to structural/functional models (pp. 66-68, 608-611,

⁸⁸Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* 215.

⁸⁹P. L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (Garden City, 1963) 38; cf. fn. 151.

⁹⁰C. Y. Glock and R. Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago, 1965) 298-304.

⁹¹R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, “Towards a Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment,” *JSSR* 19 (1980) 114-128.

⁹²For a critique see F. A. Schaeffer, *Back to Freedom and Dignity* (Downers Grove, 1972).

⁹³J. Balswick and D. Ward, “The Nature of Man and Scientific Models of Society,” *JASA* 28 (1976) 182.

⁹⁴Gager, *Kingdom and Community* 13; cf. Harrington, “Sociological Concepts” 183: “The decision as to whether this approach is of value depends entirely on whether it sheds light on the texts.”

⁹⁵R. H. Fuller, “What Is Happening in New Testament Studies,” *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* 23 (1980) 95; cf. G. Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis, 1977).

passim) and is quite forthright in his utilization of the insights of Karl Marx. He writes:

I concluded that Marx provided the most inclusive dynamic and incisive model of human society, within which the work of Durkheim, Weber and others can be incorporated constructively (*Tribes of Yahweh*, chaps. 50-51).⁹⁶

Granted that much of Marx's criticism of industrial capitalism was acute and even prescient, the retrojection of that perspective to analyze pre-industrial societies often has an anachronistic ring.⁹⁷ For example, Gottwald in commenting on Judg 5:6-7 writes:

The loot was appropriated for the needs of the free producers of Israel, who did not think of this action as "stealing" but rather viewed it as the rightful reappropriation of wealth that had been extracted by kings, aristocrats, landowners, and merchants from the raw labor of the lower classes. Israel saw itself as legitimately reclaiming what belonged to Yahweh and to the oppressed whom he upheld.⁹⁸

For Gottwald the driving impetus that led to the formation of Israel is no longer faith in Yahweh but an innate striving for egalitarianism. "Yahwism" was merely the symbol of Israel's socio-economic revolution (chap. 56).⁹⁹ Though Gottwald is critical of Durkheim's idea of gods as "the personified spirits" of the community (p. 697), his own view of Yahweh as the personification of Israel's dynamic struggle remains as much of an anthropomorphic projection as Durkheim's. Gottwald writes:

If my line of reasoning about the relation of biblical theology and biblical sociology is correct, the most important contribution of a social analysis of early Israel to contemporary religious thought and practice is to close the door firmly and irrevocably on the idealist and supernaturalist illusions still permeating and bedeviling our religious outlook. Yahweh and "his" people Israel must be demystified, deromanticized, dedogmatized and deidolized.¹⁰⁰

Gottwald, who is quite skeptical about many parts of the OT, none the less somehow knows that "Israel *thought* it was different because it *was* different: it constituted an egalitarian social system in the midst of stratified societies."¹⁰¹ As

⁹⁶N. K. Gottwald, "Sociological Criticism of the Old Testament," *Christian Century* 99 (April 21, 1982) 477.

⁹⁷For the application of Marxist perspectives in classical studies see *Arethusa* 8/1 (1975).

⁹⁸Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh* 506. The same criticism that Rodd (n. 70) 467 makes of Weber may be made of Gottwald: "But the Old Testament specialist will regard his use of terms like peasants, plebeians and petty bourgeoisie as a misleading terminology which may highlight features about the society that might otherwise be overlooked, but which has the same danger as is contained in describing the racial divisions in the Southern United States as a caste system."

⁹⁹F. Brandfon, "A Critique of Gottwald's Four Points," *JSOT* 21 (1981) 109.

¹⁰⁰Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh* 708.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 693. For the criticisms of an eminent sociologist, see G. Lenski, *Religious Studies Review* 6 (1980) 275-278.

Long comments, for Gottwald "Biblical theology seems to have become a kind of liberation socio-theology."¹⁰²

Indeed, it is quite clear that Gottwald is no neutral bystander as far as the socio-political crises of our day are concerned. He concludes his essay on his view of the sociological interpretation of the OT by affirming:

Insofar as theology is an arm of the church, the church itself is called to grapple with the social conflictual origins and substance of its own Bible and to ponder deeply what all this means for the church's placement in society and for its social mission.¹⁰³

It is not insignificant that Gottwald's magnum opus was published by Orbis, the publishing arm of the Catholic Maryknoll Mission, which has also published such landmark works as J. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (1974), which claims that the OT prophets opposed private property and profit, and G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1973). Gottwald commends another Orbis work translated from Spanish, George V. Pixley's *God's Kingdom* (1981), which declares that the "kingdom" means "a struggle against class systems that systematically exploited the working people of Israel" (p. 101).¹⁰⁴

Despite his massive erudition, Gottwald reads into the OT his ideological biases in his imaginative reconstruction that disregards both the Biblical¹⁰⁵ and the archaeological data.¹⁰⁶

(2) In analyzing the early "Jesus movement" in Palestine, Gerd Theissen has focused his attention on the disciples of Jesus who functioned as charismatic prophets alienated from their society. He writes of them:

The more they detached themselves from this world in their everyday actions, the more they kept destroying this world in their mythical fantasies, as if they had to work off their rejection by this world. How natural it was to consign hostile places to the fire and flames of the last judgment (Luke 10.14f)! Granted they fought against such visions of vengeance (Luke 9.51ff.), but this only confirmed their existence.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰²Long, "Social World" 255.

¹⁰³Gottwald, "Sociological Criticism" 477. Cf. Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh* 706: "All theologizing will henceforth be a function of social situation, and our judgment about the truth of religious ideology will be a judgment on the promise of particular social tendencies, linked with particular religious symbols, to further the evolution of social relations in a productive way for the maximum number of people."

¹⁰⁴For problems in deriving a liberation theology from revisions in the social understanding of the Scriptures see F. W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context* 2/1 (1979) 4-14.

¹⁰⁵J. Milgrom, "Religious Conversion and the Revolt Model for the Formation of Israel," *JBL* 101/2 (1982) 169-176.

¹⁰⁶The archaeological evidence of Late Bronze sites does not support the polarity and dichotomy between the city-state and village-farmer/pastoralist assumed by Mendenhall and Gottwald. See T. L. Thompson, *The Settlement of Sinai and the Negev in the Bronze Age* (Wiesbaden, 1975); "Historical Notes on 'Israel's Conquest of Palestine: A Peasant's Rebellion,'" *JOSOT* 7 (1978) 20-27.

¹⁰⁷Theissen, *Sociology* 15-16.

But when we turn to the passages he cites, we find that in Luke 9:51 ff. it is Jesus who warns his disciples against any display of such rancor and resentment, and that in Luke 10:14-15 it is Jesus himself warning of the final judgment reserved for the cities that rejected him.

It seems that for all of his sociological acumen¹⁰⁸ Theissen is not able to separate the sayings of Jesus from his disciples, as in his view they all seem to converge. He writes:

It is noteworthy that one of the features of the expectation of the Son of man among his followers was that he was independent of them. Consequently sociological analysis cannot answer the question who the Son of man is, whatever other contribution it may make.¹⁰⁹

In an extreme attempt to buttress his argument that the early disciples functioned as alienated charismatic prophets, he suggests in regard to the patronymic of Simon Peter: "In my view it is worth considering the interpretation which derives bar Jonah from 'wild, empty, desolate', and understand the surname in the sense of 'outlaw', 'outcast'."¹¹⁰

It should be said to his credit that Theissen's later work on the Pauline church at Corinth stays closer to the data and does not attempt to stretch them as much to fit the Procrustean bed of a preconceived sociological model.

(3) In an erudite article in a prestigious reference work,¹¹¹ David Aune analyzes the miracles of Jesus by utilizing consciously a structural/functional model:

Sociologically, millennial movements are a collective form of deviant behavior. Consequently, in line with the definition of magic which we have formulated above, we are disposed to regard wonderworking within the context of a millennial movement as essentially magical.¹¹²

As a consequence of working with a definition of magic that is sociologically derived, rather than one that would theologially distinguish between the miracles of the Son of God and the manipulations of magicians, Aune concludes:

The thrust of our discussion to this point should make it abundantly clear that, in our opinion, Jesus did in fact make use of magical techniques which must be regarded as magical because they were effected within the socially deviant context of a millennial movement and because he was able to harness supernatural power in

¹⁰⁸Rodd, "Max Weber" 469, comments: "I find it interesting that the most recent attempt to carry sociology into the biblical area, Gerd Theissen's *The First Followers of Jesus* (London, 1978), contains the same weakness that we have seen in Weber's study of Israel."

¹⁰⁹On the issue of the "Son of Man" see J. A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean* (Missoula, 1979) chap. 6; I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids, 1978) 367-371, 376-379, 532-545, 648-677, and *passim*.

¹¹⁰Theissen, *Sociology* 11; cf. *Social Setting* 58. J. M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (London, 1970) 215, attempted to analyze the name as Sumerian *BAR-IA-U₅-NA "sac of fecundity"!

¹¹¹D. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin, 1980) 2.23, 1507-1557. I am indebted to Professor Aune for supplying me with an offprint of his article.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, p. 1527.

such a way that he and his followers believed that success was virtually guaranteed.¹¹³

This is quite similar to the conclusions reached by J. M. Hull,¹¹⁴ who comes to this conclusion primarily because he has already predetermined that exorcisms are *ipso facto* acts of magic,¹¹⁵ and of Morton Smith, who uses a manuscript of Clement of Alexandria referring to a secret gospel of Mark,¹¹⁶ and the accusations of hostile sources such as the Talmud and Celsus.¹¹⁷ While such a conclusion from an iconoclastic scholar like Smith¹¹⁸ is not surprising, it is rather startling coming from an evangelical scholar like Aune.¹¹⁹

When confronted with Aune's presentation, I experience what the sociologists call "cognitive dissonance." I am faced with three options: (1) Aune's conclusions are correct and my own perceptions wrong; (2) Aune's use of the sociological method is faulty; (3) there is an inherent limitation in the use of sociological models to analyze such a unique figure as Jesus.

I am not prepared to grant the first option, and I believe that Aune is too gifted a scholar to have abused the method. I believe that the answer lies in the third conclusion.

(4) John Gager appropriates a number of different sociological studies to provide models for his analysis of the triumph of Christianity. He makes particular use of the work of Leon Festinger, who developed the theory of "cognitive dissonance." According to Festinger, the theory holds that:

1. There may exist dissonant or "nonfitting" relations among cognitive elements.
2. The existence of dissonance gives rise to pressures to reduce the dissonance and to avoid increases in dissonance.
3. Manifestations of the operation of these pressures include behavior changes,

¹¹³Ibid., p. 1538.

¹¹⁴J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (London, 1974).

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 158 n. 102.

¹¹⁶M. Smith, *The Secret Gospel* (New York, 1973); *Jesus the Magician* (New York, 1978). See E. Yamauchi, "A Secret Gospel of Jesus as 'Magus'?", *Christian Scholar's Review* 4 (1975) 238-251.

¹¹⁷Cf. E. V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (Chico, 1982).

¹¹⁸Aune, "Magic" 1508, expresses his admiration for Smith's "superb discussion affirming the widespread influence of ancient magic on Jesus and earliest Christianity." We can hardly deny the widespread prevalence of magic in the ancient world. See E. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven, 1967); "Magic in the Biblical World," *TB* 34 (1983) 169-200. But it is a perverse and hostile judgment to reduce Jesus to a magician. See Kee, *Christian Origins* 181 n. 23.

¹¹⁹A major problem that arises immediately from Aune's functionalist definition of magic is that the term in antiquity was not neutral but almost always implied a pejorative connotation. See A. F. Segal, "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (ed. R. Van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren; Leiden, 1981) 349-375. Cf. H. Remus, "'Magic or Miracle'? Some Second-Century Instances," *The Second Century* 2/3 (1982) 127-156; "Does Terminology Distinguish Early Christian from Pagan Miracles?", *JBL* 101/4 (1982) 531-551.

changes of cognition, and circumspect exposure to new information and new opinions.¹²⁰

According to Gager, the early Christians faced two crises: (1) the crucifixion of Jesus, and (2) the failure of the Parousia, the second coming. Even the "resurrection" did not eradicate doubts from the Christians, according to Gager.¹²¹ To surmount such a "dissonance" between their hopes and reality, the Christians threw themselves into a frenzied round of missionary activity. They triumphed especially through their sense of "community."¹²²

Bartlett notes a fatal flaw in Gager's theory: "For Paul the crucifixion of Jesus was not the disconfirmation of any cherished belief that Jesus was the Messiah. He had no such belief until after the crucifixion and resurrection."¹²³ That is, it is quite incredible to believe that Paul launched his extraordinary missionary endeavors to overcome his disappointment in Jesus' failure to rise from the dead or to return to the earth. He owed no allegiance to Jesus until his confrontation with the risen Christ.¹²⁴

The analogy sometimes cited of the disillusioned followers of Sabbatai Zvi,¹²⁵ who revised their beliefs concerning the messianic figure who apostatized to Islam, is such a poor analogy that it in fact demonstrates that we have something quite different in early Christianity.

When we delve further into the modern study that supposedly confirmed Festinger's original theory, we discover that Festinger and two colleagues pretended to join a flying saucer cult that had predicted that they would be rescued from a flood on December 21 in a flying saucer.¹²⁶ The cult was led by a Mrs. Marian Keech, who received messages from outer space. The reactions of the group to the failure of this prophecy were predicted by Festinger and confirmed

¹²⁰L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, 1957) 31.

¹²¹For another use of Festinger's cognitive dissonance to explain belief in the resurrection of Christ see U. Wernik, "Frustrated Beliefs and Early Christianity," *Numen* 22 (1975) 96-130.

¹²²On the multiple reasons adduced by other scholars for the expansion and triumph of Christianity see A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (New York, 1961 repr. of 1908 ed.); J. Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca, 1970) 124-128; E. Yamauchi, "How the Early Church Responded to Social Problems," *Christianity Today* 17 (November 24, 1972) 6-8.

¹²³D. L. Bartlett, review of J. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, in *Zygon* 13 (1978) 119.

¹²⁴Cf. E. Yamauchi, "Easter—Myth, Hallucination, or History?," *Christianity Today* 18 (March 15, 1974) 4-7; (March 29, 1974) 12-14, 16.

¹²⁵As argued by H. Jackson, "The Resurrection Belief of the Earliest Church: A Response to the Failure of Prophecy?," *JR* 55 (1975) 421-425.

¹²⁶L. Festinger, H. Riecken and S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Minnesota, 1956).

his theory—or did they?¹²⁷

Quite apart from the fact that since the original formulation of the theory of cognitive dissonance by Festinger in 1957 empirical studies have failed to confirm many of his original formulations¹²⁸ and have in fact so changed the theory that it is barely recognizable,¹²⁹ one may be pardoned for wondering about the appropriateness of using such models for interpreting Scripture.¹³⁰

Appropos of the use of such models, Judge remarks:

Until the painstaking field work is better done, the importation of social models that have been defined in terms of other cultures is methodologically no improvement on the "idealist fallacy." We may fairly call it the "sociological fallacy."¹³¹

Rodd, who is quite critical of Gager's use of such models, is indeed pessimistic: "I would claim that the attempt to apply sociological theories to biblical documents is not likely to be fruitful. The chance of testing a hypothesis is so slight as to be negligible."¹³²

¹²⁷R. Brown, *Social Psychology* (New York: 1965) 601-604, is quite critical. He comments (p. 602): "Is all of this or any of this predicted by dissonance theory? Certainly not in any explicit deductive way. Is the outcome then a disconfirmation of the theory? The authors of the study do not say so, they conclude that the theory has been confirmed. They must be privy to some assumptions and understandings which the theory does not make clear." Brown also notes that the results of dissonance experiments can usually be explained without recourse to the principle of dissonance.

¹²⁸J. A. Hardyck and M. Braden, "When Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 65 (1962) 136-141. N. P. Chapanis and A. Chapanis, "Cognitive Dissonance: Five Years Later," *Psychological Bulletin* 61/1 (1964) 1, report: "The criticisms which can be made of this literature fall into 2 main classes. 1st, the experimental manipulations are usually so complex and the crucial variables so confounded that no valid conclusions can be drawn from the data. 2nd, a number of fundamental methodological inadequacies in the analysis of results . . . vitiate the findings. As a result, one can only say that the evidence adduced for cognitive dissonance theory is inconclusive."

¹²⁹A. G. Greenwald and D. L. Ronis, "Twenty Years of Cognitive Dissonance: Case Study of the Evolution of a Theory," *Psychological Review* 85 (1978) 53-57.

¹³⁰Rodd, "On Applying," maintains that direct applications of sociological theory are meaningful only if the compared cultures are sufficiently similar: "Even more remote from the first Christians are the Lake City group who spent the last evening as they waited for the coming of the flying saucer to deliver them from the threatened flood cutting all the metal fastenings from their clothes because they have been told that metal will in some way be harmful to the space ship." Similar criticisms were made of the pioneer anthropological comparisons of W. Robertson Smith at the end of the nineteenth century by the orientalist T. Nöldeke as observed by Rogerson, *Anthropology* 33: "Nöldeke pointed out that if one was going to reconstruct history on the basis of comparisons of social data from various parts of the world, then the method was impossible to control scientifically. Further, he was unconvinced by Robertson Smith's use of data from North America and Australia, and its application to ancient Arabia." In general see T. F. Carney, *The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity* (Lawrence, 1975), 34-38.

¹³¹Judge, "Social Identity" 210.

¹³²Rodd, "On Applying" 104. Rodd's objection is that there is "a world of difference" between sociology applied to contemporary society where theories can be tested and as applied to fragmentary records of the past where such theories cannot be tested. See also his "Max Weber" 469.

IV. PROSPECTS

It is an irony that while Biblical scholars in the 1970s were discovering new tools of sociological analysis, which often function to explain away religious phenomena in a reductionist manner, many of the leaders in the sociology of religion have at the same time been advocating a "realist" approach to religion—that is, one that respects the reality of religion instead of reducing it to nonreligious components. Cavanaugh rejoices that "Sociological Euhemerism is also alive and well in the historical-critical study of Biblical and related religions,"¹³³ but at the same time he laments that "Sociological Euhemerism persists and flourishes—everywhere, it seems, except in American sociology of religion."¹³⁴

One of the most dramatic expressions that acknowledged the inadequacies of purely empirical approaches to religion were the startling "Confessions of a Former Establishment Fundamentalist" by the distinguished sociologist of religion, Robert N. Bellah, in 1970.¹³⁵ As recounted in an autobiographical essay, Bellah had moved from a conservative Christian background to Marxism as a student at Harvard and then, inspired by Paul Tillich, back to a liberal Christianity.¹³⁶ He had viewed religion as evolving through five stages, the last and most progressive being the kind of "modern religion" informed by theologians like Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer.¹³⁷

In his 1970 presentation, Bellah renounced what he denounced as "enlightenment fundamentalism": "This is the view that science and historical scholarship have effectively disposed of fallacious religious beliefs. If the study of religion has any place in the university at all, which is doubtful to enlightenment fundamentalists, it is to disclose the true reasons why religious believers have been so misguided."¹³⁸ He admitted that a common attitude among sociologists was this: "Those poor benighted religious people down there are sort of blindly going through their religious practices but we social scientists with our conceptual frameworks and our functional analyses really know what is going on."¹³⁹

But inasmuch as sociology can relativize not only other institutions and epis-

¹³³Cavanaugh, "Pagan and Christian" 124.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 123, but see Stark and Bainbridge, "Towards a Theory." According to M. S. Reed, "The Sociology of the Sociology of Religion," *Review of Religious Research* 15 (1974) 157-167, prior to 1970 the sociology of religion was not a prestigious field of research, and openly committed Christian sociologists were relatively rare. The Christian Sociological Society was formed in 1979.

¹³⁵For an appraisal of Bellah's "conversion" see Friedrichs, "Sociological Research" 121.

¹³⁶R. N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York, 1970) xi-xv.

¹³⁷Bellah, "Religious Evolution" 370-371.

¹³⁸R. N. Bellah, "Confessions of a Former Establishment Fundamentalist," *BCSR* 1 (1970) 3.

¹³⁹Ibid.

temologies but even itself,¹⁴⁰ Bellah came to recognize that it was a conceit to hold "that my own allegedly scientific concepts had a higher ontological status than the religious realm I was studying."¹⁴¹ Rather he now admitted what critics of the sociology of religion had advanced before—that even "neutral" or "atheist" sociologists held certain implicitly religious presuppositions.¹⁴²

Bellah's contention that all sociological and psychological studies of religion as primarily epiphenomenal rather than as noumenal reality¹⁴³ are destined to fail has struck fellow sociologists as anti-scientific and anti-intellectual.¹⁴⁴ In fact a majority of the permanent members of Princeton's famed Institute for Advanced Studies objected to the selection of Bellah.

Peter Berger, who is noted for his special contributions to the sociology of knowledge,¹⁴⁵ has also made important contributions to the sociology of religion. Berger notes that sociology, inasmuch as it relativizes religious beliefs, is the debunking science par excellence.¹⁴⁶ As he wrote in the Weberian tradition of a "value-free" observer when he published *The Sacred Canopy*,¹⁴⁷ he admits that this work reads "like a treatise on atheism, at least in parts."¹⁴⁸ In his view "sociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection," though it cannot assert that it is *only* a human projection.¹⁴⁹

At the same time Berger stresses the importance of religion as establishing a cosmos or sacred canopy, without which social existence is not possible. Moreover, sociology *qua* sociology cannot determine or deny the truth of any given religious belief.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁰According to Gouldner, "Sociologist as Partisan" 103: "Sociology begins by disenchanting the world, and it proceeds by disenchanting itself. Having insisted upon the non-rationality of those whom it studies, sociology comes, at length, to confess its own captivity."

¹⁴¹Bellah, "Confessions" 3.

¹⁴²Bellah, *Beyond Belief* 256: "As a sociologist I am by no means prepared to abandon the work of the great consequential and symbolic reductionists. They have pointed out valid implications of religious life that were not previously understood. But I am prepared to reject their assumption that they spoke from a higher level of truth than the religious systems they studied. I would point out instead their own implicit religious positions."

¹⁴³Bellah has been influenced by M. Eliade and N. O. Brown.

¹⁴⁴Cavanaugh, "Pagan and Christian" 121; Nelson, "Is the Sociology of Religion Possible?" 107.

¹⁴⁵P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, 1966).

¹⁴⁶P. L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, 1970) 32, 38; *Invitation to Sociology* 124.

¹⁴⁷Garden City, 1967.

¹⁴⁸Berger, *Rumor* ix.

¹⁴⁹Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 180.

¹⁵⁰P. L. Berger and H. Kellner, *Sociology Reinterpreted* (Garden City, 1981) 12: "Most importantly, science can never provide moral guidelines for action . . . If science cannot provide a morality, even less can it provide a doctrine of salvation."

Though evangelicals will not be attracted to Berger's own espousal of an inductive Schleiermacherian quest for religious truth in encounters not only with Christian experience but with oriental mysticism,¹⁵¹ they can profit from his incisive criticism of the critics of Christianity. As Berger states in his provocative little book, *A Rumor of Angels*:

One (perhaps literally) redeeming feature of sociological perspective is that relativizing analysis, in being pushed to its final consequence, bends back upon itself. The relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked—indeed, relativization itself is somehow liquidated.¹⁵²

Berger, using insights from the sociology of knowledge, points out that contemporary theologians and Biblical critics are conditioned by modern secularism to "demythologize" the supernatural elements of Scripture. This attitude is epitomized in Rudolf Bultmann's famous dictum: "One cannot use electric light and radio, call upon modern medicine in case of illness, and at the same time believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament."¹⁵³ Berger criticizes the tacit assumption that the modern anti-supernaturalist view is superior to that of the supernaturalist:

Even if it is conceded (which ought not to be conceded) that, the moment one starts using an electric toothbrush or watching the CBS news, the world of the gods recedes into implausibility, is this necessarily an advance over the author of the Gospel of John (not to mention Socrates, Aeschylus, and the Buddha)?¹⁵⁴

Berger points out that it is a fallacy to believe that "what is" is necessarily "what ought to be"—a view that seems to be encouraged by a facile reading of sociology.

The neo-liberal "translation" enterprise, however, uses sociology in a peculiar manner. It converts the sociological data from cognitive to normative statements—that is, it proceeds from the empirical constatation that certain states of consciousness in fact prevail in modern society to the epistemological assertion that these states of consciousness should serve as criteria of validity for the theologian.¹⁵⁵

That is, the fact that people in the western world are conditioned so that they are not conscious of angels or demons does not thereby demonstrate that angels

¹⁵¹P. L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, 1979) 198 n. 28, indicates his own religious orientation: "It seems appropriate to say here that neo-orthodoxy (in a Lutheran rather than Barthian version) was the theology of my youth, still evident in my first two books. I gradually abandoned this position and by the early 1960s understood myself as a theological liberal. I continue to so understand myself." For an evangelical critique of Berger's positions see S. Gaede, "On Missing Persons and Unfulfilled Geese," *JSSR* 20/2 (1981) 181-185.

¹⁵²Berger, *Rumor* 42.

¹⁵³R. Bultmann, *Kerygma und Mythos* (ed. H.-W. Bartsch; Hamburg: 1948), 1. 18.

¹⁵⁴Berger, *Heretical Imperative* 109; cf. *Rumor* 41.

¹⁵⁵Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 167; *Heretical Imperative* 101; *Sociology Reinterpreted* 11.

or demons do not exist.¹⁵⁶ Berger points out furthermore that liberal reinterpretations of Christianity like Bultmann's are self-defeating.¹⁵⁷

In other words, the theological surrender to the alleged demise of the supernatural defeats itself in precisely the measure of its success. Ultimately, it represents the self-liquidation of theology and of the institutions in which the theological tradition is embodied.¹⁵⁸

David O. Moberg, a distinguished evangelical sociologist, has remarkably served not only as the chair of the department of sociology at a Jesuit institution, Marquette University, but also as president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (formerly the American Catholic Sociological Society).¹⁵⁹

Moberg has decried reductionist trends in the behavioral sciences that tend to explain spiritual phenomena in naturalistic terms¹⁶⁰ and has underlined the opposition of Christianity to "sociologism that reduces the totality of religion to social forces."¹⁶¹

If, however, it be assumed that positivism requires a belief that only that which can be operationally defined, objectively measured, inductively analyzed and empirically observed is real, true, ontological, or factual, then positivistic science must be rejected by the Christian as being inconsistent with both the revelation upon which his faith is based and with his own subjective transcendental experiences with God.¹⁶²

In numerous writings and addresses Moberg has urged sociologists to consider in addition to the five dimensions isolated by Charles Glock—(1) ritualistic, (2) ideological, (3) intellectual, (4) experiential, and (5) consequential—a sixth dimension, the "spiritual," which is after all the very essence of the religious life.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶Berger, *Rumor* 42; *Heretical Imperative* 9-10. The typical view of the modern Biblical scholar is expressed by R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York, 1965) 120: "Of course, we no longer believe in demons . . . But we are bound to believe in what the demons of the New Testament signify . . . The old mythology may still be used, but it must be understood as a symbolic expression of the realities of human experience."

¹⁵⁷In his 1969 publication, *Sacred Canopy* 202 n. 29, Berger had written: "Our understanding of the relationship of Christianity to the mythological cosmos on the one hand and to Judaism on the other has been strongly influenced by Rudolf Bultmann." About a dozen years later Berger wrote a searching criticism of Bultmann's program in *Heretical Imperative* 93-107.

¹⁵⁸Berger, *Rumor* 21.

¹⁵⁹Professor Moberg has also served as president of the Religious Research Association and of the Wisconsin Sociological Association.

¹⁶⁰D. O. Moberg, "Some Trends in the Sociology of Religion in the U.S.A.," *Social Compass* 13 (1966) 242.

¹⁶¹D. O. Moberg, "Science and the Spiritual Nature of Man," *JASA* 19/1 (1967) 12.

¹⁶²D. O. Moberg, "Empirical Social Science and Christian Faith," *JASA* 16/1 (1964) 22.

¹⁶³D. O. Moberg, "The Encounter of Scientific and Religious Values Pertinent to Man's Spiritual Nature," *Sociological Analysis* 28 (1967) 22-23; "Virtues for Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 39 (1978) 1-18; "The Development of Social Indicators for Quality of Life Research," *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979) 11-26; ed., *Spiritual Well-Being: Sociological Perspectives* (Washington, 1979); C. Flynn, "Christianity, Sociology, and the Moral Order," *JASA* 35/3 (1983) 152-155.

With the participation of more Christian sociologists like Moberg, we may hope for helpful insights into both the past and the present¹⁶⁴ from an alliance—if not a complete integration—of Christian presuppositions and sociological perspectives.¹⁶⁵

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. Sociological analyses based on structural/functionalist or other “positivistic” models can at best reveal some general patterns but can at worst eliminate all that is unique or supernatural.

2. Recent trends in the sociology of religion promise a greater recognition of the supernatural/spiritual dimensions of religion.

3. Attention to sociological data,¹⁶⁶ if recognized as but one important way of looking at the phenomena, can be of considerable value to the exegete. As I. Howard Marshall concludes:

The scholar who studies religious history from a sociological point of view may well believe that sociological considerations are largely sufficient to explain it. He may be wrong in adopting such an absolute standpoint—a Christian believer would certainly want to claim this—but nevertheless the adoption of his standpoint will probably bring to light historical facts and explanations which would have eluded the historian who ignored the insights of sociology.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴D. O. Moberg, *Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in 20th Century America* (Grand Rapids, 1965).

¹⁶⁵D. O. Moberg, “Is There a ‘Christian Sociology?’” (paper presented to the Xth World Congress of Sociology, August 20, 1982). For other discussions on the integration of Christianity and sociology see Poloma, “Toward a Christian”; Barger, “Christian Sociology”; Lyon, *Christians*; R. Heddendorf, “Some Presuppositions of A Christian Sociology,” *JASA* 24/3 (1972) 110-117; A. Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (Leicester, 1979); C. P. DeSanto et al., ed., *A Reader in Sociology: Christian Perspectives* (Scottsdale, 1980); R. J. Burwell et al., “Sleeping with an Elephant: The Uneasy Alliance between Christian Faith and Sociology,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 10 (1981) 195-217; R. D. Knudsen, *Sociology: The Encounter of Christianity with Secular Science* (Memphis, 1981).

¹⁶⁶For example, the insights of the social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York, 1966), are quite significant. See S. R. Isenberg and D. E. Owen, “Bodies, Natural and Contrived: The Work of Mary Douglas,” *Religious Studies Review* 3 (1977) 1-17. They have been used to help us better understand the OT concepts of purity and impurity, according to G. J. Wenham, “The Theology of Unclean Food,” *EvQ* 53 (1981) 6-15. Sociological comparisons of Paul with Cynic philosophers may help us better appreciate his situation in society. Cf. E. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community,” *JRH* 1 (1960) 4-19; R. F. Hock, “Paul’s Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class,” *JBL* 97 (1978) 55-64; *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1980).

¹⁶⁷I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, 1971) 28. (I am indebted for suggestions and criticisms to three distinguished sociologists in the American Scientific Affiliation: David Moberg of Marquette University, Russell Heddendorf of Covenant College, and Charles Flynn of Miami University. Helpful suggestions were also given by Aida and William Spencer of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.)