

Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect

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Introduction

A collection of essays on 'New Directions for Biblical Studies' would be incomplete without some attempt to address and evaluate the wave of studies which, over the past two decades, have used models and methods from the social sciences to interpret the biblical literature.¹ This is a very large field already, so we need to narrow our focus. Even if we confine ourselves to the New Testament alone, the mass of secondary literature is very considerable, as several bibliographical essays show;² and there exist already a number of competent, book-length introductions to the field, such as those by Bruce Malina (1981), Derek Tidball (1983), Howard Clark Kee (1989), and most recently, Bengt Holmberg (1990).³

As a way through, therefore, I have chosen to focus on one particular issue in the social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament – namely, the appropriateness or otherwise of describing early Christianity as a 'sect'. Several factors explain – even if they do not justify – my choice. First, as will become clear, the application of the sociological model of the sect to various aspects of early Christianity is a commonplace now. Whether the text under examination is a gospel or an epistle or an apocalypse, its social setting invariably attracts the label, 'sectarian'. Perhaps this is an opportune time to test this remarkably widely-held consensus to see whether or not its foundations are secure.⁴

Second, the sect model has a distinguished pedigree, both in the

social sciences and in the historiography of early Christianity. So this is no hermeneutical 'fly-by-night' to which we are giving our attention. On the contrary, the sociology of sects is a century old at least, and boasts names like Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Simmel, H. Richard Niebuhr, and more recently, Werner Stark and Bryan Wilson.⁵ The discussion has a history, therefore; and it will be important to see whether or not an awareness of that history informs accounts given by New Testament scholars of early Christianity as sectarian.

Third, to label early Christianity as a sect is to employ a category which is not native to the first Christians themselves. A twentieth-century Western, social science category is being applied to a phenomenon of the first-century Mediterranean world. This is not objectionable in itself. On the contrary, we do this all the time as a way of making greater sense of the past or of cultures other than our own in terms which are intelligible to us. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that such categories – *etic* (outsider) rather than *emic* (insider), to use the anthropological jargon – are likely to be distorting of what they describe, as well as illuminating, depending on where resides the final court of appeal.⁶ In a nutshell, interpretations of early Christianity as a sect are likely to tell us as much about ourselves as interpreters as about the first Christians and their literary deposit. So the present paper is a case-study in interpretation which may be of interest not only to students of early Christianity and its social forms, but also to students of the art of interpretation itself. To put the matter pointedly: Do interpreters of early Christianity as a sect find what they are looking for already?

Early Christianity as a Sect?

Perhaps the best way to proceed is to look critically at specific accounts of early Christianity as sectarian. This will give some indication of how strong is the present consensus that the first Christians did constitute a sectarian movement. It will provide also a basis for judging some of the promise and pitfalls of this kind of sociological analysis.⁷

1. Robin Scroggs on the Jesus movement

A good place to begin is Robin Scroggs' wide-ranging essay of 1975, 'The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement'.⁸ Here

Scroggs claims that the sect model has never previously been applied in detail to the emergence of Christianity, and states his thesis thus:

It is my conviction that the community called into existence by Jesus fulfills the essential characteristics of the religious sect, as defined by recent sociological analyses. Should this prove so, then the sect model provides us with a new perspective from which to view our material, one which will help gestalt the fragmentary data, and which will illumine the cares and concerns of the people who were attracted to Jesus and who formed the nucleus of the Christian communities. It will help us understand the quality of the experience in these communities.⁹

Scroggs then identifies seven characteristics of the sect as an ideal type before going on to show how the early Christian communities in fact exhibited these traits. The traits are that the sect (a) originates in protest against economic and societal repression, (b) rejects the values and ideology of the establishment, (c) adopts a counter-cultural, egalitarian ethos according to which status distinctions in 'the world' are left behind, (d) offers adherents love and acceptance not found outside, (e) exists as a voluntary association to which members belong by conviction and conversion rather than by birth, (f) demands total commitment maintained by group discipline, and (g) is often adventist or apocalyptic in its orientation on history.¹⁰

Setting aside the Acts of the Apostles as 'late, tendentious, and offer[ing] few traditions that can be sociologically evaluated',¹¹ and disregarding Paul's letters as well, Scroggs focusses on the gospel traditions, and finds in them evidence of the seven characteristics of the sect he has just elaborated. Jesus was the leader of a protest movement of the predominantly socially and economically dispossessed; the movement he inaugurated rejected and was in turn rejected by society-at-large and by the official establishment; within the movement, communal life was organized on strongly egalitarian, anti-hierarchical lines, and members found love and mutual acceptance; membership was voluntary and totally demanding; and so on.¹² So Scroggs concludes:

[T]he earliest church meets all the essential characteristics of the religious sect... The use I have made of Synoptic pericopae in this paper illustrates how the gestalt changes the way the material is viewed. The church becomes from this perspective not a theo-

logical seminary but a group of people who have experienced the hurt of the world and the healing of communal acceptance. The perspective... helps us to see that the church in its own way dealt with the problems individuals faced in repressive social circumstances.¹³

What are we to make of this early stab at a sociological analysis of early Christianity in terms of the sect model? Its strength lies in its bold attempt to wrest the New Testament documents from what Scroggs sees as the narrow concerns of dogmatic theology or the romanticizing tendencies of Christian piety, and to show that these documents bear testimony to the often harrowing real-life situations of communities of believers trying to protest against or come to terms with the harsh political, economic and religious realities of life in the world of their time. Interpreting the early church in sectarian terms allows us to recapture the innovative, counter-cultural, protest dimension at the very core of the Christian heritage; and this may function as a corrective or rebuke to conservative religious establishments today. Says Scroggs: 'Traditional Christianity, full of support for law and order... has lost all feeling for the sectarian protest of the earliest church. From the standpoint of sectarian reality, however, the death of Jesus offers a powerful symbolism for the outcast and alienated...'¹⁴

But there are weaknesses to this kind of approach as well. Above all, it is quite clear from the article that Scroggs' sociological analysis is wedded to his own theological and ideological agenda. There is no sense in which Scroggs hides his light under a bushel on this score. In the second sentence of his essay, for example, he refers to 'the poison of over-theologizing which has been characteristic of so much New Testament scholarship during the neo-orthodox era'.¹⁵ It is by no means coincidental that he finds the sect model so apposite for interpreting early Christianity, for his own ecclesiology is one of the church as a protest movement from below standing over against the conservative values of the establishment. Is it the case, then, that Scroggs has chosen a model to produce a result which he has arrived at already on other grounds? Do we not have here a classic example of the problem of the hermeneutical circle, and, if we are predisposed not to accept Scroggs' own theological and ecclesiological presuppositions, shall we not want to say that the hermeneutical circle is a vicious one? Will not those who suspect that sociological analysis

generally is little more than an ideological tool of the political Left or Right have their suspicions confirmed? What claims to be explanatory turns out in practice to be a not-so-subtle ideological rhetoric.

Even if we accept that the sect model may throw new light on Christian origins, there are other weaknesses in Scroggs' analysis. Briefly, they are as follows. First, there is the problem of gross oversimplification. On the one hand, the idea of the sect itself is described in a very general and monolithic way, so that it is hardly surprising that the early church can be described as sectarian, especially when one begins to suspect that the characteristics of the ideal type have been taken from early Christianity in the first place! On the other hand, early Christianity is described also in a general and monolithic way as a peasant protest movement reacting against oppression and marginalization from an equally undifferentiated body called 'the establishment'. There is little sense in what Scroggs says of either the diversity of identity in early Christianity, or of the diversity – often of a quite sectarian kind, perhaps – within Judaism. So, as a tool of analysis, the sect model as used by Scroggs, seems to be a very blunt one indeed.

Second, if the sect as an ideal type is used to 'help gestalt the fragmentary data',¹⁶ it functions also to block other data out. So general are the characteristics of the sect, so loaded are they with evaluative terms – like 'protest', 'counter-culture', 'egalitarian', 'love and acceptance', 'voluntary' and 'commitment' – that a powerful rhetoric may blind us to other data and other possibilities of interpretation. So, for example, Scroggs can do little with evidence that the socio-economic status and socio-ecological location of the early Christians was variable,¹⁷ since his model assumes agrarian impoverishment and protest from below. His omission of the evidence of Acts is significant in this regard. Likewise, evidence that the early Christians shared the values, practices and prejudices of the society-at-large passes unmentioned. The admonition in Matt. 17.24–27 to continue to pay the temple tax does not sit easily with the anti-establishment sect model. Nor, in the same gospel, does the role diversity and status differentiation implied in what is said about Peter (cf. Matt. 16.17–19) or in what is said about the 'prophet' and 'scribe' (cf. Matt. 10.41; 13.52) fit well with the idea of the sect as egalitarian.

Third, early Christian beliefs and doctrines assume an epi-

phenomenal status in Scroggs' analysis. What 'really' matters are social and economic relations and the formation of communities of protest. In short, in reacting against what he sees as a kind of theological reductionism, Scroggs leaves little place for an early Christian theological consciousness at all. No one is likely to dispute Scroggs' claim that the early church was not a theological seminary, but it is highly questionable to imply that matters of doctrine, scriptural interpretation, spiritual discernment and (what we would call) ethics were not a constant focus of attention. Well before Scroggs' article, at least one ancient historian saw fit to write a major essay depicting the early Christians as a 'scholastic community'.¹⁸ It is arguable that the designation 'scholastic community' does more justice to certain aspects, at least, of the evidence about early Christianity than does the designation 'sect'.

2. Wayne Meeks on the Fourth Gospel

We turn, next, from social scientific criticism of the Synoptic traditions to work done on the Fourth Gospel. Roughly contemporary with Robin Scroggs' work is an important and influential essay by Wayne Meeks, entitled, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', published in 1972.¹⁹ Here Meeks argues that a major clue to the distinctiveness of this gospel – and of its discourses in particular – lies, not so much in *religionsgeschichtlich* factors to do with John's indebtedness or otherwise to gnosticism or heterodox Judaism, but in sociological factors to do with the kind of community to which the gospel is addressed. The distinctiveness of the discourses is to be sought, not so much in the history of ideas, as in the social function of the gospel's persistently riddling, repetitive, opaque, symbolic and mythological language. To outsiders – even sympathetic ones like Nicodemus – what Jesus says is a cause of misunderstanding and offence: to insiders it is divine revelation. Just as the Jesus of John is a stranger to the world and even to his own people, so too is the Johannine community. Meeks sums up his thesis thus:

The book functions for its readers in precisely the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions within its narratives and dialogues.... In telling the story of the Son of Man who came

down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God. It could hardly be regarded as a missionary tract, for we may imagine that only a very rare outsider would get past the barrier of its closed metaphorical system. It is a book for insiders.²⁰

Meeks is not alone in his view that the Fourth Gospel betrays a sectarian, in-group consciousness. Amongst others who take this view we may cite J. Louis Martyn, Raymond Brown, Fernando Segovia and, most recently, David Rensberger.²¹ D. Moody Smith reflects a widely held consensus when he says: 'it can probably be agreed that on any reading of the Gospel and Epistles there appears a sectarian consciousness, a sense of exclusiveness, a sharp delineation of the community from the world ... Comparisons with community consciousness in Qumran, which is likewise related to a fundamental dualism, are entirely apposite and to the point.'²²

Interpreting the Johannine literature in sectarian terms has much to commend it. It helps to explain the vilification of 'the Jews' and the strong sense of mutual hostility between them and believers in Jesus. The hostility is so sharp and the possibility of accommodation so meagre because, like an argument in the family, each side knows the other only too well and the psycho-social stakes are too high. It helps also to make sense of the uncompromising exclusiveness of Johannine christology and soteriology. Now, Jesus exclusively is the way to the Father, not Torah. Now, true worship takes place neither on Mount Gerizim nor on Mount Zion, but 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4.19ff.). Now, the only temple where God is to be encountered is the temple of Jesus' own body. In fact, almost every major symbol of belonging as a Jew to the people of God – temple, Torah, festival calendar, sabbath observance, the land, the scriptures and the patriarchs – is displaced in a quite counter-cultural way by the Jesus of John. At the same time, the sect model makes intelligible the hints we are given of the ethos of the Johannine community, in spite of the absence of any explicit ecclesiology. I have in mind, for example, the strongly centripetal character of the love commandment; the emphasis on humility and equality in inter-personal relations dramatized in the episode of the footwashing (John 13.1–20); the

predominant orientation of the Johannine symbols on nurture, sustenance, abiding and unity; the charismatic emphasis on the availability of the Spirit-Paraclete to the members of the group; and the overwhelmingly pessimistic outlook on relations with 'the world' and its institutional manifestations, whether Jewish or Roman.

What distinguishes Meeks' use of social science categories from that of Scroggs? Primarily the fact that, in Meeks' hands the social science tools are used in a much more refined way, such that explanation of the data is not confused with political and religious advocacy. Instead of imposing a rather undifferentiated sect model on a similarly undifferentiated range of gospel textual data, Meeks begins with a widely-recognized literary and hermeneutical puzzle in Johannine studies (i.e., how to explain the 'special patterns of language' of the Johannine Christ, including the motif of the ascending and descending redeemer), demonstrates the inadequacy of previous, *religionsgeschichtlich* attempts to solve the puzzle, and then draws in perspectives from the structuralist anthropology of Edmund Leach in order to suggest that a solution to the puzzle can be found if the model of interpretation shifts from the theological and historical to the sociological, to how mythological language functions in the communities who use it. Meeks says: 'It is only, therefore, by paying attention to the underlying structure of the components in a system of myths that an interpreter can "hear" what the myths are "saying" or, to put it another way, can discover the function which the myths have within the group in which they are at home. It is astonishing that attempts to solve the Johannine puzzle have almost totally ignored the question of what *social* function the myth may have had.'²³ So Meeks uses a very specific social scientific tool of analysis to help resolve a very specific problem of interpretation. And he chooses a tool of analysis which has, arguably, a natural congruence or compatibility with the literary puzzle he is working to solve. Unlike Scroggs, he resists the temptation to claim too much for his model or to try to do too much with it. The sociological dimension helpfully supplements the theological and historical dimensions without being in such danger of reducing them to the epiphenomenal.²⁴

Nevertheless, having seen how strong is the sect model in relation to John, how suggestive it is for the attempt of the historical and sociological imagination to relate Johannine christology to Johannine community, it is important also to highlight some of the

weaknesses, problems or unanswered questions. There is, for example, the persistent problem, not at all unique to the interpretation of John, of drawing sociological inferences from a very small literary deposit, even if we include the Johannine epistles as well. Meeks' claim, extended to an extreme degree by Raymond Brown in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, that the story of the Johannine Jesus is, in effect, a cypher for the history and sociology of the Johannine community is creative and imaginative, certainly. But it must be questioned whether or not interpreting the gospel narrative as a kind of allegory of the Johannine community runs too great a risk of finding what is not there or what, by the nature of the evidence, cannot be found.

Certainly, the evidence is ambiguous, and that alone should give us reason for caution. Meeks makes a lot, for example, of the sectarian, 'us-versus-them', consciousness which can be read off the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, in John 3.²⁵ But it may be questioned whether Nicodemus is cast in the outsider role which Meeks attributes to him; whether also he plays the role of an uncomprehending fool – any more, say, than a Samaritan woman or a Thomas or a Peter; and whether what is being conveyed in the dialogue is only that Jesus is incomprehensible, as Meeks claims. A more sympathetic reading is certainly possible, and if it is, then a crack begins to appear in Meeks' sectarian edifice. Notably, Raymond Brown, who is at most points sympathetic to Meeks' approach, says of Nicodemus that '[his] role is not to illustrate or personify the attitudes of a contemporary group in the Johannine experience, but to show how some who were attracted to Jesus did not immediately understand him.'²⁶

Doubt may also be cast on Meeks' claim that the Fourth Gospel shows all the signs of being a 'book for insiders', since 'only a very rare outsider would get past the barrier of its closed metaphorical system.'²⁷ This strikes me as a *tour de force*. On this view, it is a wonder that anyone made it into the Johannine community at all! Are metaphors like *logos*, light, bread, living water, good shepherd, true vine, Son of God, and so on – each of them with deep roots in the biblical and Jewish traditions and not without a certain currency in the wider Hellenistic milieu, either – as opaque as Meeks makes them out to be? If they are not, and if we recall in addition the strong, universalizing missionary thrust of John, then a further crack appears in Meeks' sociological interpretation.

An important caution is constituted also by Martin Hengel's recent book, *The Johannine Question*.²⁸ Whereas Meeks insists in his essay that 'the Johannine literature is the product not of a lone genius but of a community or group of communities that evidently persisted with some consistent identity over a considerable span of time',²⁹ Hengel argues that a single theological genius does indeed lie behind the Johannine corpus and that claims that the Fourth Gospel is somehow a community product are spurious. Hengel does not deny that the gospel and epistles took shape in a communal context. For Hengel, however, this context is best understood as a school of disciples over which John the elder presided for many years. It is not some anonymous sectarian consciousness that explains the distinctiveness of the Johannine material, therefore, but the creative theological activity of John. Says Hengel:

Here, then, was a towering creative teacher who ventured with reference to the activity of the Spirit Paraclete to paint a quite different picture of the activity and proclamation of Jesus from that which we can see in the Synoptic tradition, and who introduced the post-Easter pre-existence and exaltation christology quite massively into his description of the Galilean master. We must assume that such a 'theologian', who was the opposite of a mere tradent did not fix the dialectical positions that he expressed at one stage once and for all as inviolable principles. In a specific situation of crisis he ventured to take up new focal points and even in some circumstances to correct himself – dialectically ... That such a teacher possessing the highest authority and with rich experience going back over two generations could react sharply and clearly to a controversy with a group of pupils who were adapting themselves to 'the spirit of the time' is not surprising. In his view these former pupils of his (and their seducers coming from outside) threatened the existence of his school and all the Christian communities in Asia.³⁰

Significantly, Hengel makes no mention of Meeks' prior essay; and, as with our evaluation of Robin Scroggs' position, we are left wondering whether an alternative social model, more firmly grounded historically – that of the school – is not more convincing than that of the religious sect. Be that as it may, Hengel's study is a powerful reminder that Meeks' basically functionalist sociological interpretation shows a tendency towards determinism in its account

of the relation between text and community and that it may be in danger of leaving insufficient room for the role of the creative individual, the evangelist himself.³¹

Interestingly, C.K. Barrett, in the second edition of his massive commentary on John (published in 1978), does not refer to Meeks' essay either (even though he does make wide use of Meeks' 1967 monograph, *The Prophet-King*). I do not know why this is so. Perhaps it has something to do with a reticence in British biblical scholarship – at least in the 1970s – to consider seriously the possibilities for interpretation opened up by the social sciences. Perhaps it is explained by the likelihood that Barrett holds to a different view of the purpose of John, where the emphasis lies not on the influence of sociological factors so much as on the primacy of theological considerations, especially the evangelist's concern to present a universalizing articulation of the Christian message. As Barrett says in a recent article on 'St John: Social Historian': 'Undoubtedly it is true that we must look to John for theology rather than sociology' – even though he immediately qualifies this by adding, 'But this is not quite all. Few works of theology are generated within an exclusively theological environment, and the great works of theology have owed a good deal to their social environment.'³² That Barrett's position seems to be shifting is reflected in his essay of 1989 for the Eduard Lohse *Festschrift*, where he argues that we are likely to misunderstand the nature of Christian community (both then and now) unless we take seriously the fact that in its origins it had characteristics both of the school and of the conventicle or sect.³³ But this is still a long way – and with good reason, perhaps? – from a systematic attempt to interpret the Johannine corpus in terms of the sociology of sectarianism. Barrett appears to share with Hengel an overriding commitment to historical-contextual and tradition-historical method in a form which is exclusive of sociological analysis, even though, confusingly, both writers are prepared at times to use sociological terminology.³⁴

A quite different kind of problem, not just with Meeks' interpretation but with sociological and social science interpretations generally, is whether or not interpreting John in the light of the sociology of the sect is a *distraction* in the reading of the text. This can be put in a number of ways. But in general terms, the point is that whether or not a method or model of interpretation is valid depends upon who is doing the reading and for what purpose.

Thus, from the viewpoint of certain forms of literary criticism, meaning lies within the narrative world of the text and is generated by the interaction of the reader and the autonomous text.³⁵ It is what happens on *this* side of the text which is important, not the pre-history of the text or claims about communities or whatever lying *behind* the text, claims which in any case have no way of being substantiated. On this view, Meeks' attempt to establish a correlation between distinctive and disturbing features of the gospel and a distinctive, sectarian community lying behind the gospel are futile and ill-conceived. Rather, the meaning of the text is literary and aesthetic. It does not depend on referentiality outside the text. The *aporiae* of the text are not an invitation to hypothesize about the social function of the language: they are a provocation to the imagination and aesthetic sensibilities of the reader.

Another way this objection can be put comes from the perspective of canonical criticism. According to this approach, what is of central validity for interpretation is the meaning of John's gospel as part of the canon of scripture and as the fourth of the four gospels. Here, what is important is to hear the written words in the way in which they have been heard traditionally in the life and worship of the church – as scripture and as gospel, the Word of God. Historical exegetical methodology may contribute to the reader's appreciation of what the text meant to its original readers and listeners, and sociological analysis may help to explain the social and communal dialectic of which the text is somehow a product, but valid interpretation in terms of canonical criticism will accord these approaches subordinate status only and will acknowledge only an indirect relationship between canonical interpretation and historical or sociological interpretations. For what is important above all is hearing the text itself as scripture, addressed to every successive generation. Thus, Brevard Childs, in discussing John 9, a text which J.L. Martyn had made the centre of his very valuable attempt to reconstruct the history of the Johannine community 'behind' the text, says:

There is a wide consensus that Martyn has greatly illuminated the text by seeing it in relation to the expulsion from the synagogue... Yet the crucial hermeneutical issue remains whether Martyn has correctly assessed the canonical function of this material within the final shape of the text ... I would argue that to take the

canonical shape of the Gospel seriously is to recognize that the text's authoritative, kerygmatic witness is not identical with its historical development, but must be discerned from the literary form of the text itself.³⁶

Now, it is unfair of course to judge Meeks' work and the work of others in the same line according to the criteria of models of interpretation which they do not employ. However, the more modest point is worth making: that what you see depends upon where you stand. As we have seen, from at least one literary critical point of view, the social function of a text in its original historical context is not relevant to the art of interpretation. And from the point of view of canonical criticism, the claim that the gospel of John betrays a sectarian consciousness is a distraction.

3. Philip Esler on Luke-Acts

Up until recently, Luke-Acts has been read either as a source for reconstructing the history of the early church or as a theological narrative designed to convey the evangelist's response to the doctrinal and existential dilemmas of his readers in the last decades of the first century. Attempts to give a sociological interpretation of Luke's two volumes have been almost entirely lacking. Philip Esler's book, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, published in 1987,³⁷ is an important attempt to fill this gap, and heavy use is made of the sociology of sectarianism.

In company with redaction critics, Esler does not see Luke as a disinterested recorder of the story of Jesus and the early church. Nor, however, is Luke to be seen as some kind of armchair theologian 'who ponders over purely religious questions before issuing forth from his scriptorium to enlighten his fellow-Christians as to the correct attitude which they and their community should adopt to their social and political environment.'³⁸ Rather, as the book's subtitle suggests, Luke's is applied theology from the start, motivated by strong social and political interests, and written for a specific historical community whose needs are as much material as spiritual.

Using a method he calls 'socio-redaction criticism', Esler argues

that Luke-Acts is best interpreted as written to provide legitimization for a Christian community whose relations with both the synagogue community and the wider Gentile society are fraught with the inevitable tensions and pressures arising from the Christian group's sectarian status.³⁹ Luke's theological narrative is given a strongly functionalist orientation: it legitimates and justifies the beliefs and practices of his group over against those of alternative social worlds which have been left behind at conversion. To quote Esler:

One obvious way to provide the necessary reassurance, to legitimate the sectarian status of his *ekklesia*, was for Luke to write a history of the beginnings of Christianity which pinned the blame for the subsequent split firmly on the Jews, especially their leaders, and which explained and justified early developments, such as Jewish-Gentile table-fellowship, which were still of significance to his Christian contemporaries. From this viewpoint, history is important for Luke not, as Conzelmann suggests, as a replacement for the imminent expectation of the early church, but as a way of accounting for the present situation of his community. In other words, the key to Lucan historiography is not eschatology but etiology.⁴⁰

The picture of Luke's community which emerges is a fascinating one. Contrary to the widely-held view that Luke's audience is Gentile, Esler argues that many in Luke's group are converts from Judaism or Gentile God-fearers. The reason for Luke's interest in table fellowship is to legitimate Jew-Gentile commensality in his community and to maintain Jew-Gentile cohesion in the face of strong opposition from synagogue Jews and Jewish Christians who see the practice as a threat to the identity of the Jewish *ethnos*. An essential 'sectarian strategy' adopted by Luke is to defend the practice by appealing to, and re-writing, history. The great apostles, Peter and James, together with the Jerusalem church, are portrayed now by Luke as giving their backing to Jew-Gentile table fellowship.

A similar interpretation is placed upon other major themes of Luke-Acts – the status of the Jewish law, the place of the temple, attitudes to poverty and wealth, and attitudes to Roman authority. In each case, Esler argues that Luke's writing betrays strong political and social concerns which reflect both the socially and religiously mixed character of his community and its vulnerability as a sect to pressures from outside, above all from Judaism. In the chapter

entitled, 'The Poor and the Rich', for instance, Esler argues that Luke developed a specific theology of poverty in order to address the problems of social stratification and economic disparity which threatened the fellowship; and Esler is sharp in his criticism of 'spiritualizing' and 'individualizing' interpretations. He says: 'That the Lucan Gospel imposes on the rich an indispensable requirement, quite at odds with the social values of their own society, to provide the destitute with food and other necessities of life in this world sounds the death-knell over all such interpretations of his theology as, affected by middle-class bias, present salvation as a reality reserved for the individual in the after-life.'⁴¹

Esler certainly gives the lie to Scroggs' curious claim, noted earlier, that Luke's writings, especially the Acts, offer few traditions that can be sociologically evaluated. The sect typology of Bryan Wilson and the model of sect development opened up by H. Richard Niebuhr are used to powerful explanatory effect in Esler's study to bring to our attention plausible social and political interests which lie behind and shape Luke-Acts.

However, once again, several critical questions need to be asked. First, there is the fundamental question of the purpose of Luke-Acts. Esler's interpretative method appears analogous to a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' approach to the text. Luke-Acts is not really an account of the past in order that his benefactor, Theophilus, may know the truth, as the author claims (cf. Luke 1.1-4). Rather, it is a coded address to a sectarian community, providing legitimization and justification for its alternative identity and lifestyle over against its parent body in Judaism. History is not history, but propaganda. Theology is not theology, but the ideology of an oppressed group. This may be putting the point too sharply. But the issue is an important one. It is the question of whether a social science model intended for purposes of sociological explanation is being used illegitimately to describe things from the native's point of view. Luke thought he was doing one thing: but in fact he was doing another.

Second, there is the related question, raised earlier, of the legitimacy of interpreting the text as a mirror of the (in this case) Lucan community. This question has been asked explicitly by another Lucan scholar who has worked also on a theme of interest to Esler – namely, the subject of the poor and the rich.⁴² In his essay, 'On Finding the Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Tale', published in 1979,⁴³ Luke Johnson makes a number of useful observa-

tions. First, not even in the interpretation of Paul's letters, occasional as they are and written to specific communities about identifiable problems, has there been unqualified success in drawing inferences from the letters about the social situation of the addressees. The Letter to the Romans is a particular case in point. Johnson puts it this way:

The study of Paul's letters reminds us that even in documents of a genuinely occasional nature, not every element in the document is determined by the place, the people, or the occasion. Some things are there because of the demands of genre, the impetus of tradition, the logic of argumentation, the inertia of scriptural citations, and the idiosyncratic perceptions of the author. Responsible exegesis takes these factors into account *before* using passages as a mirror to community problems.⁴⁴

Turning from Paul to mirror readings of the gospels, Johnson questions the common assumption that the pastoral and theological concerns of an evangelist are determined by a situation of crisis among his readers: 'Reading everything in the Gospel narratives as immediately addressed to a contemporary crisis reduces them to the level of cryptograms, and the evangelists to the level of tractarians.'⁴⁵ In regard to Luke-Acts in particular, he argues that the difficulties of mirror-reading are even more acute: the author's identity is unknown; the addressee is an individual not a church; due weight has to be given to the influence of the tradition and to Luke's professed intention to write an historical account; due weight has to be given also to differences between Luke's two volumes, differences which must complicate attempts to 'read off' the community from the text; and there is clear evidence of literary artifice in Luke's writing. Above all – and Johnson has applied this principle in his own study of the motif of possessions – it is the literary function of a theme or motif in the text which has to be taken most seriously: 'Given a fairly intricate and intelligible literary structure which, taken as a whole, conveys a coherent message, our *first* assumption with regard to individual parts within that structure should not be that they point to a specific community problem, but that they are in service to the larger literary goal of the author.'⁴⁶

One or two final observations are worth making before we leave this particular case-study. Although Esler's work is much more sophisticated than the essay of Scroggs, it may not avoid completely

some of the same pitfalls. Is the sect-church typology so wedded to the problems of modernity that it lacks a necessary affinity with the subject-matter to which it is being applied? It may be significant that the very recent collection of thirteen American essays on *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* makes no use at all of the sect model, preferring instead models primarily from the discipline of social anthropology.⁴⁷ Does the sect-church typology contain an implicit anti-Judaism, by casting Judaism as the monolithic, static, unreformed 'church' from which the Christian 'reform movement' separated and became a sect? Does it help the explanatory task to categorize the putative Lucan community as, not a thaumaturgic sect (although Luke-Acts arguably contains a stronger thaumaturgic interest than any other New Testament text), nor a revolutionary sect (although an imminent-end eschatology is not suppressed completely in Luke-Acts), but a conversionist sect where personal repentance and acceptance of the gospel accompanied (mostly) by baptism is at the heart of things? Do not such types – general and approximate as they are – generate as many difficulties as they solve? And does their application to Luke-Acts not obscure the fact that the Greek word closest to what we mean by sect – namely, *hairesis* – is the word that Luke apparently chooses *not* to apply to Christianity, although well aware of its currency?⁴⁸ For Luke, the word *hodos* ('way') more aptly captures the identity and self-understanding of the new movement,⁴⁹ and *ekklesia* is the word he uses both for the local Christian community (e.g. Acts 5.11; 8.1, 3) and for all the local groups treated as a single whole (e.g. Acts 9.31; 20.28). Of course, it is inappropriate to accuse Esler of using categories for explanation which are not native and which a native would not recognize. The trouble with the category 'sect', however, is that, because of its roots in the Christian tradition, it hovers uneasily between being a native (emic) category, on the one hand, and a scientific (etic) category, on the other, so that it is difficult to be sure that it is being used in the value-neutral, scientific way claimed.

Conclusion

I have attempted in the foregoing case-studies, to give a critical assessment of three major essays which use the sociology of sects and sectarianism as a heuristic device for explaining the social dynamics of earliest Christianity. Other examples could have been chosen if for

no other reason than to demonstrate how strong is the current consensus that the sect model throws important light on Christian origins.

On Matthew, there is J. Andrew Overman's recent book, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism*, which argues that this gospel represents the uncompromising response of a minority messianic sect to the growing dominance of what he calls 'formative Judaism' in the post-70 period, and that the whole period in Judaism between 165 BCE and 100 CE can be characterized as sectarian and factional.⁵⁰ On Mark, there is Howard Kee's monograph, *Community of the New Age*, which argues that Mark's audience is a missionary sect whose world-view is indebted to Jewish apocalyptic, and whose voluntaristic, inclusive and charismatic ethos is markedly at odds with dominant social mores.⁵¹ On Paul, the work of Wayne Meeks is to the fore again, first in a stimulating essay on 'Group Boundaries in Pauline Christianity',⁵² and most substantially in his book, *The First Urban Christians*⁵³ – although it is noteworthy that both works eschew systematic application of any one social science model out of preference for a more eclectic, pragmatic approach.⁵⁴ Much more systematic in applying the sect model to Paul is Francis Watson's *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, published in 1986.⁵⁵ Taking the application of the sect model further, from the Pauline into the post-Pauline literature and setting, is Margaret MacDonald's, *The Pauline Churches*.⁵⁶ This study uses the sociology of the sect to analyse and explain the churches' attitude to the world, and, like Esler on the Lucan community, sees the churches of Paul as a conversionist sect. According to MacDonald, the Pastoral Epistles represent the development, along Troeltschian sect-church lines, of a church-type community. Finally, but by no means exhaustively, there is J.H. Elliott's study of I Peter, which has been influential in sociological interpretations of the New Testament, not least in the works of Esler and MacDonald.⁵⁷ In *A Home for the Homeless*, Elliott argues that the addressees of I Peter are marginalized, 'resident aliens' (*paroikoi*) of Asia Minor whose conversion has increased the antagonism of the native residents towards them. They constitute, therefore, a conversionist sect in tension with the society-at-large. The strategy of the letter is to confirm the believers in their social and religious separation from outsiders and to emphasize their incorporation into an alternative family, the *oikos tou theou* ('household of God': cf. I Peter 2.5; 4.17).⁵⁸

The overwhelming benefit of these studies is that they draw explicit attention to the kinds of social dynamics, factors and forces likely to have been influential in shaping the identity, self-understanding, thought-forms and behaviour of the earliest Christians. The sect model helps to explain why the New Testament texts show such persistent interest in defining and maintaining group boundaries, why priority is given to mission and conversion, why opponents are vilified, why ties of natural kinship are deprecated in favour of ties of spiritual kinship,⁵⁹ why exclusive claims are made for Jesus as 'messiah' and 'lord', why persecution and ostracism are the Christian believer's common experience, why an inner reform movement of Judaism very soon took on a separate identity, and so on.

However, while the consensus may be impressive, there are also grounds for caution. I mention two, by way of reiteration and conclusion. First, if it is possible to conclude that early Christianity of just about every hue was sectarian – Matthean as well as Marcan and Lucan, Johannine as well as Pauline and Petrine – we are forced to conclude that the category 'sect' has only relatively weak explanatory power.⁶⁰ Even with the kinds of refinements of the typology introduced by Bryan Wilson, it does not make possible the discrimination between the Christian groups – or within them – which is necessary to do justice to the evidence. Nor, it should be added, does it do justice to the wide variety of splinter groups and movements in first-century Judaism, let alone 'the complexities of religious life in the larger Roman Empire'.⁶¹

Second, the sect-church typology is prone to being made captive to ideological interests of one kind or another. This is due in part to the binary structure of the typology, which makes possible an implicit or explicit opposition between a kind of group or society which is viewed positively and another which is viewed negatively. An anti-establishment, left-wing ideology is likely to use 'sect' as a term of approbation. On the other hand, an establishment ideology is likely to use the term as a way of both identifying and marginalizing the enemy. In between, others may claim that they are using 'sect' in an objective, value-neutral way. But such interpreters, in all likelihood, are supporters of a clearly identifiable liberal ideological agenda and are the heirs of Enlightenment rationality. If there is any truth in the point I am making here, then the limitations, as well as the strengths, of the sect model are even more manifest. To put it another way, use

of this model confronts us more clearly than is usually the case with the inevitably political nature of the act of interpretation.⁶²

Notes

1. I am grateful to Joel B. Green of New College, Berkeley, for his helpful comments on this paper; and to Leslie Houlden and Francis Watson for the invitation to write and present it.
2. E.g. D.J. Harrington, 'Second Testament Exegesis and the Social Sciences: A Bibliography', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 18 (1988), 77–85; G. Theissen, *Auswahlbibliographie zur Sozialgeschichte des Urchristentums*, in his *Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums*, Tübingen: J.B. Mohr 1989, 331–370; and S.C. Barton, 'The Communal Dimension of Earliest Christianity: A Critical Survey of the Field', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 43 (1992), 399–427.
3. See B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Atlanta: John Knox and London: SCM Press 1981; D. Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament*, Exeter: Paternoster Press 1983; H.C. Kee, *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach to New Testament Interpretation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1989; and B. Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1990.
4. See, most recently, the helpful essay by L. Michael White, 'Shifting Sectarian Boundaries in Early Christianity', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 70 (1988), 7–24.
5. For a useful survey of the sociological debate, see M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion*, London: Heinemann 1973, 47–70. On the work of Wilson in particular, see D.E. Miller, 'Sectarianism and Secularization: The Work of Bryan Wilson', *Religious Studies Review*, 5/3 (1979), 161–174.
6. This point is made well in Mark Brett's recent book, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 18.
7. On the wider front, see T.F. Best, 'The Sociological Study of the New Testament: Promise and Peril of a New Discipline', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 36 (1983), 181–194; also, S.K. Stowers, 'The Social Sciences and the Study of Early Christianity', in W.S. Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, Vol. V, Chico: Scholars Press 1985, 149–181.
8. R. Scroggs, 'The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement', in J. Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, Part Two, Leiden: Brill 1975, 1–23.
9. Scroggs, 'Communities', 2–3.
10. *Ibid.*, 3–7.
11. *Ibid.*, 8, n. 26.

12. Ibid., 19–21.

13. Ibid., 21.

14. Ibid., 22.

15. Ibid., 1.

16. Ibid., 3.

17. On which see, for example, A.J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983, 29–59.

18. See E.A. Judge, 'The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community', *Journal of Religious History*, 1 (1960–61), 4–15, 125–137.

19. W.A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91 (1972), 44–72. My references are to the reprinted version in J. Ashton, (ed.), *The Interpretation of John*, London: SPCK and Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1986, 141–173.

20. Meeks, 'Sectarianism', 162–163 (author's emphasis).

21. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1968, 1979; R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, New York: Paulist Press and London: Chapman 1979; F.F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition*, Chico: Scholars Press 1982; D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1988 (= *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John*, London: SPCK 1989).

22. D.M. Smith, 'Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on its Character and Delineation', *New Testament Studies*, 21 (1975), 224–248, at 223–224.

23. Meeks, 'Sectarianism', 144–145 (author's emphasis).

24. Since writing this, I notice that Mark Stibbe also finds Meeks' approach a persuasive and important advance in Johannine interpretation, in *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992, esp. 61–63.

25. Meeks, 'Sectarianism', 147–152.

26. Brown, *Community*, 72, n. 128.

27. Meeks, 'Sectarianism', 163.

28. M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, London: SCM Press and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International 1990.

29. Meeks, 'Sectarianism', 145.

30. Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 104–105.

31. For an important critique of Meeks' functionalist sociology, see Stowers, 'Social Sciences', passim.

32. C.K. Barrett, 'St John: Social Historian', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*, 10 (1986), 26–39, at 26.

33. C.K. Barrett, 'School, Conventicle, and Church in the New Testament', in K. Aland and S. Meurer (eds), *Wissenschaft und Kirche. Festschrift für E. Lohse*, Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag 1989, 96–110.

34. One thinks, for example of Hengel's monograph, *Nachfolge und Charisma*, Berlin: Publisher 1968, translated into English by J.-C. G. Greig as, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1981.

35. For a recent authoritative account, see Stephen Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1989.

36. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*, London: SCM Press and Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984, 133.

37. P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987.

38. Esler, *Community*, 1.

39. See esp. Esler, *Community*, ch. 3.

40. Ibid., 67.

41. Ibid., 199.

42. See L.T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, Missoula: Scholars Press 1977, and compare Esler, *Community*, ch. 7.

43. L.T. Johnson, 'On Finding the Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Tale', in P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *SBL 1979 Seminar Papers Volume 1*, Missoula: Scholars Press 1979, 87–100.

44. Johnson, 'Tale', 89 (author's emphasis).

45. Johnson, 'Tale', 90.

46. Johnson, 'Tale', 92 (author's emphasis).

47. See J.H. Neyrey ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson 1991.

48. Cf. Acts 5.17; 15.5; 26.5 for uses in relation to Judaism, and Acts 24.5, 14; 28.22 for its application by outsiders to Christianity. According to Barrett, 'School', 104, 'It is clear from these passages that Luke is familiar with the application of *hairesis* to the Jewish groups of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, and that he does not himself choose to apply it to Christianity, though he knows that others did so.'

49. Note Acts 9.2; 19.9, 23, 22.4; 24.14, 22; and cf. 2.28; 13.10; 16.17; 18.25, 26 – cited in Barrett, 'School', 103.

50. J.A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1990. Diverse perspectives on Matthew as sectarian are taken in the essays by Gundry and White in the important volume edited by D.L. Balch, *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991. Cf. also Graham Stanton's essay on 'Matthew's Gospel and the Damascus Document', in his *A Gospel for a New People*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1992, arguing that both texts are written for sectarian communities in sharp conflict with parent bodies from which they have separated recently.

51. H.C. Kee, *Community of the New Age*, London: SCM Press and Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1977.
52. W.A. Meeks, "Since then you would need to go out of the world": Group Boundaries in Pauline Christianity, in T.J. Ryan (ed.), *Critical History and Biblical Faith: New Testament Perspectives*, Billanova, Pa., Publisher 1979, 1-23.
53. W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1983.
54. Cf. also Meeks' book, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1986; London: SPCK 1987, 98-108.
55. F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986.
56. M.Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988.
57. J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press and London: SCM Press 1981.
58. For a different analysis of I Peter, which was published in the same year as Elliott's book, but which interprets the Petrine household code as intended to promote greater integration into Graco-Roman society, see D.L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in I Peter*, Chico: Scholars Press 1981.
59. I have explored this aspect further in *Discipleship and Family Ties According to Mark and Matthew*, PhD Thesis, King's College, University of London 1991.
60. So, too, Holmberg, *Sociology*, 112-113.
61. White, 'Boundaries', 14.
62. See further, S. Hauerwas and S. Long, 'Interpreting the Bible as a Political Act', *Religion and Intellectual Life*, VI (1989), 134-142. Note also the perceptive comment of White, 'Boundaries', 9: 'All too often the picture has been based on simplistic, idealized, or theologically tendentious reading of the New Testament documents, as in traditional Marxist historiography of early Christianity. It is no less in evidence elsewhere, as in the characteristic equation in Protestant historiography: first-century Judaism is seen by analogy with the medieval Catholic church, against which Jesus and the Reformers were parallel sectarian responses.'

A Future for the Commentary?*

Richard Coggins

Introduction

The ambiguous position of the teacher of biblical studies in a university is well known. She or he is likely to be regarded by academic colleagues as having another allegiance: to a church or religious group, an allegiance which must hamper that proper objectivity and detachment which traditionally have been demanded by academic study. But the academic study of the Bible is often regarded with the gravest suspicion in church circles, as tending to weaken the basis of faith by raising awkward questions about the Bible and its reliability.

If an ambiguity of this kind is characteristic of much academic study of the Bible, problems arise in particularly acute form in respect of the commentary. It has become axiomatic in serious biblical study that the proper companion to the detailed study of a biblical text is a commentary. Such a volume may concern itself with ensuring that the details of the original Hebrew or Greek text have been accurately transmitted; it may supply historical or geographical background information to enable the Bible to be read in the appropriate context; it may offer theological or moral or devotional reflections arising from the text to be studied. For the last century at least a whole variety of commentary series has striven to carry out

* The paper which follows was written for oral delivery at the conference on 'New Directions for Biblical Studies', and no attempt has been made to hide that origin. This must excuse the lack of scholarly footnotes and the over-frequent use of the first-person singular pronoun.