

Sociology and Exegesis

FERGUS KERR O.P.

Theology is a deeply conservative discipline, which is why the panic that breaks out immediately at the threat of new questions must always seem so exaggerated to people trained in other fields of study. Any new approach is usually rejected at first on the grounds that there is no evidence for it. As soon as the exponent of the new approach has shown that there is indeed evidence for his interpretation he is at once accused of reducing all the evidence to fit his thesis, and of wanting to reinterpret the whole of Christianity in function of his new insight. Finally, when he shows that he has no such intention, he is told that what he has found out has been well known all along. The new approach is first rejected because it is impossible, then because it is illegitimate, and finally because it is old hat.

Gerd Theissen¹ has undertaken a sociological analysis of the earliest phase of Christianity, which he defines as “the renewal movement within Judaism brought into being through Jesus and existing in the area of Syria and Palestine between about AD 30 and AD 70” (p. 1). Far from enjoying august and exalted status as Professor of New Testament in the University of Bonn, as the blurb proclaims him to be, he is (at the time of writing) still fully employed as a school-teacher. He gives lectures as a *Privatdozent*, for which of course he receives no salary. He thus has neither the leisure nor the technical apparatus to armour his research with the impenetrable shield of erudition and argument behind which most theological work is conducted. In fact, as he writes in the Preface, “the work came into being while I was involved in teaching religion and German, and is addressed to readers who are also involved in practical work of this kind”. In about nine articles, scattered in various German theological journals since 1973, Gerd Theissen has backed and extended the arguments of his book with reflections on some of the theoretical implications of his sociological exegesis as well as with more detailed demonstration of his findings. His example must certainly encourage all those—especially school-teachers!—who have to make time to read and write theology in the midst of a hectic life outside the groves of Academe. The trib-

1 *THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS: a sociological analysis of the earliest Christianity*. SCM, 1978, pp 131 £2.50

ute he pays to Christa Theissen, his wife, is surely no conventional salute.

To attempt a sociological analysis of the earliest phase of Christianity is something new. Of course, as the bibliographical note indicates (p. 120), much work on the New Testament evidence has been done within a broadly sociological perspective, from Marxists such as Karl Kautsky to books like F.C. Grant's *The Economic Background of the Gospels*. Gerd Theissen makes special mention of "two basic works which have contributed to the introduction of sociological perspectives", namely: *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, by Joachim Jeremias, and *Judaism and Hellenism*, by Martin Hengel. Nobody who is interested in such elementary questions as (for instance) who the "poor" were, and what the Temple stood for, could fail to be enlightened by such books. It is common enough to hear people insisting that Christianity is a "historical" religion, as opposed to a religion based on "myth". This usually means little more than insisting that the Incarnation is a historical event. But a great deal of information is handily available about the beginnings of Christianity, and a serious faith would surely always seek to know as much as possible about the historical factors at work in the emergence of Christianity—which must include, then, sociological as well as religious, cultural, and other factors. It is astonishing that so little serious investigation of turning-points in Christian history has been attempted from a sociological point of view. Proper study of the sociological factors at work in the production of the theology that culminated at Chalcedon, or in the development of medieval scholasticism, or of the Reformation, and so on, would greatly illuminate the history of Christian doctrine, which is, after all, still in the grip of scholars with idealist presuppositions. A great deal of evidence is available; it requires to be re-examined in a different perspective, and putting fresh questions would no doubt lead to uncovering new evidence and to reassembling familiar evidence in new ways.

It is a matter of learning to read between the lines. This is much easier to do when a whole mass of fresh material becomes available which enables us to read hitherto invisible things between the lines of the New Testament. This is what has happened in the case of the epoch-making book by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (reviewed in *New Blackfriars*, February 1978). The picture of Judaism in the time of Jesus as a religion of legalistic works-righteousness is shown to be false, which means that a great deal of traditional Christian exegesis and preaching becomes suspect. If Paul's critique of the Law has been as radically misunderstood as Sanders shows, the self-understanding of many Christians, developed in opposition to this false picture of Judaism, becomes questionable. The famous distinction between Law and Gospel, for instance, becomes questionable. If "justification by

faith" is not after all the centre of Pauline theology, and if Pauline theology is not the grid through which the rest of the New Testament is read, then a great deal of very influential exegesis of broadly Lutheran provenance becomes redundant. Hans Conzelmann confines to republish his *Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* without ever mentioning the existence of *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, the classic study which W. D. Davies brought out originally in 1948, far less ever attempting to come to terms with it. He lists *Judaism*, the three-volume work published by George Foot Moore (Oxford, 1927-30), but there is no sign that he has ever read it. But this is symptomatic of the ignorance of Judaism which is widely prevalent among Christians of all traditions. So long as Christianity is perceived as a breakaway from Judaism—but from a false picture of Judaism—Christianity itself is inevitably distorted and misunderstood.

Gerd Theissen has no new evidence from outside the New Testament to bring to bear on it, and alter our understanding of it in the way that the study of contemporary Jewish sources is beginning to do. He comes rather with new *questions*: sociological questions. That is to say, he reads the New Testament, in particular the writings of Mark, Matthew and Luke, with a view to bringing out the ecclesiological and therefore sociological data implicit in various ways in the texts. He draws a good deal for comparison upon the Dead Sea Scrolls and upon the Jewish historian Josephus, two sources contemporary with the New Testament evidence with which he is concerned. But from the outset he allows that "much must remain conjectural" (p. 3). He also meets in advance "deep and dark suspicions" which may be entertained about the legitimacy of a sociological approach at all. In particular, he insists that "the validity of an idea is quite independent of whatever causes may have given rise to it in the first place" (p. 5), which enables him to reject any causal derivation of religious phenomena from social data and needs. This is, of course, an important proviso. The leading sociologist of religion in England seems to attribute the rise of the ecumenical movement to social factors, so that fears of sociological reductionism, and therefore of misunderstanding of the religious phenomena themselves, are by no means unreal.

Re-examining the New Testament evidence, then, with sociological questions in mind, Gerd Theissen shows that the earliest phase of Christianity in Palestine and Syria was marked by the interaction between wandering charismatics and their sympathizers in local communities. From the beginning there seem to have been households, still wholly within the framework of Judaism (a much more flexible and manifold framework than we have usually supposed), but sympathetic to the itinerant preachers of the renewal movement which Jesus inaugurated. He was himself apparently able to count on a welcome at the homes of sympathizers—

in Peter's house (Matt 8:14), in the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3), and in a village where "a woman named Martha received him into her house" (Luke 10:38). The support of women was obviously crucial: Jesus was "provided for" by "many" women, "out of their means" (Luke 8:3), which may have been quite substantial, since they included Joanna, the wife of Chuza, who had been some kind of manager or procurator (*epitropos*) in the service of Herod Antipas. The expenses of Jesus's work were thus met, partly at least, by relatively well-to-do women. Preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God involved travelling through the cities and villages (Luke 8:1): in other words, evangelizing involved travelling, the original gospel-preacher was an itinerant. That was not possible but for a network of hospitable and sympathetic households and groups.

The evidence indicates that some communities at least remained very close to Judaism. A reading of Matthew in particular suggests how torn some of the earliest followers of Jesus must have been between the gospel and the Judaism with which they were familiar. It was remembered, for example, that Jesus came not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it, down to the last detail (Matt 5:17-19); but at the same time his followers had to be reminded that their righteousness was different from that of the Pharisees (Matt 5:20). They remembered that Jesus himself had instructed people to practise and observe whatever the Pharisees preached (Matt 23:3), but to criticize their practice (Matt 23:13). The memorable admonition to "first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt 5:24) presupposes that it is all right to go into the Temple and to offer sacrifice through its priests. Time and again, once one is alerted to notice, the text affords a glimpse of the tensions that existed as the earliest Christian communities gradually separated from Judaism. It was a long and complicated process, which became final perhaps only about AD 85 - 90 when a petition was inserted in the synagogue liturgy specifically designed to exclude Christians. The Fourth Gospel, which Gerd Theissen leaves aside, would corroborate his analysis. As the new commentary by Boismard and Lamouille of the Ecole Biblique shows, the Fourth Gospel is (among other things) a palimpsest that records the history of the half century which it took for Christianity to emerge as a distinctive movement. It does so consistently in terms of the expulsion by the disciples of Moses of the disciples of Jesus, as if the latter always went with reluctance.

The pace was set by the itinerant preachers. Far from being a marginal phenomenon they were the ones in whom the Christian movement most quickly found its distinctive shape and outlook. They were the ones who broke the various ties and obligations that entangled them in Judaism. They left hearth and home to follow Jesus, and thus substituted a life-style marked by mendicancy

and wandering for the domestic virtues. The break with domesticity went so far as being instructed not to stay for one's father's funeral (Matt 8:22). The sons of Zebedee apparently abandoned their father at work (Mark 1:20). Jesus is quoted as saying that a man must hate his family: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Such utterances are usually watered down: they betray Semitic hyperbole, when Jesus said "hate" he meant that his disciple should not love his family too much, and so forth. What Gerd Theissen invites us to do, however, is to read such utterances quite literally, to take them absolutely seriously, and then to visualize what kind of disciples could live up to them. Of course the concept of family was reinterpreted, so that those who listened to his preaching became kith and kin of Jesus more than his mother (Luke 11:28). But there is evidence that the strains between the disciple and his abandoned family were considerable. It is not surprising that the prophet received little honour among the people whom he had forsaken (Mark 6:4), or that the family of Jesus sought to seize Jesus, because people were saying that he had gone mad (Mark 3:21). Nor is it at all surprising that the disciples should recall the injunction not to be "anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on" (Matt 6:25). This is not a saying addressed to a comfortably-off middle-class congregation in Western Europe, encouraging them to practise spiritual poverty and detachment. It is a saying that reflects the cruelly precarious life of a wandering preacher, homeless, jobless, entirely dependent on sympathetic response from his audience but more often, no doubt, faced with hostility and rejection. No wonder that such disciples remembered the advice to "let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day".

The earliest Christian preachers thus practised a radical detachment from ordinary life. Their odd behaviour and eccentric lifestyle show that they lived as those who expected the end of the world. Their vivid eschatological expectations were apparently shared by others who remembered that Jesus had predicted an apocalyptic catastrophe (Mark 13), but who would themselves be caught, when it came, on their own housetops or working in the fields (Mark 13: 15-16), two in one bed or grinding corn (Luke 17:34-35), thus presumably people who, while leading a life of comparatively settled domesticity, remained open to the possibility of suddenly becoming homeless fugitives. This uncertainty about the future of social stability fits into a much wider pattern of rootlessness, alienation and disintegration. The crisis in Jewish Palestinian society at the time of Jesus had deep-seated economic causes and clear political and cultural dimensions. From what we can make out, the first followers of Jesus were drawn not from

the poor but from relatively well-off people—as J. Massyngberde Ford pointed out in an important article (*New Blackfriars*, June 1976), “they were probably middle-class businessmen doing well on the fish and salt trade”. When Peter began to remonstrate with Jesus, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you”, we may safely suppose that they had left a good deal (Mark 10:28). Jesus is represented as promising them houses and lands as well as family, “in the age to come”. As Gerd Theissen points out (p. 39), it is among relatively well-off people that social unrest and revolutionary attitudes first appear: “only those who know or can expect better living standards react sensitively to poverty and wretchedness”. The real poor continue to put up with the intolerable, as they have done for centuries. It is not surprising, for example, that the Dead Sea Scrolls community seems to have been composed of priestly aristocrats who had been forced out of power. Massyngberde Ford suggests that, since Joseph would not have been taxed if he had no property, Jesus’s family must have been relatively rich. She also suggests that we may take literally the reference to Jesus’s once being “rich” (2 Cor 8:9), since there is no clamant need to spiritualize or allegorize that text: after all, a man who had given up wealth for the cause would be all that much more credible when he asked others to do so.

The tension between Jerusalem and the hinterlands, and particularly the far north (Galilee), is well documented. The Temple was the main source of employment in Jerusalem, keeping about 18,000 clergy in work, together with thousands of people in ancillary trades and occupations. It is natural enough that opposition to that system came from the country. The tension between city and country, however, was complicated by tension between alien Roman and native Jewish structures of government, and complicated further by tension within Judaism itself between Hellenistic and Jewish culture. Many factors combined to create the deep social crisis, and the concomitant loss of confidence and of bearings, which called forth many “renewal movements”, from the world-fleeing monasticism of the Dead Sea community to the guerilla operations of the Zealots. The disciples of Jesus had gathered originally as one more response to this crisis of orientation in society. The message of Jesus was neither vague nor transcendental. It was an answer, among others, to people who wanted to know how to cope with an almost unendurable social and political mess. In particular, people needed to know how to cope with *aggression*. Social tensions mean forms of mutual aggression—in the case of Roman Palestine in the time of Jesus, mutual aggression that certainly included a kind of permanent “war” between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, but which was plainly much more complicated, brutal and irrational, than any simple theory of class conflict could subsume. In the final section of his book, Gerd Theissen

argues that the earliest phase of Christianity in Palestine is best interpreted as a contribution towards containing and overcoming aggression (p. 99).

The web of mutual aggression that characterized the society of the time might be eluded by retiring to the Dead Sea community, or exploded by joining the Zealots—with one's sympathies if not (for most people) in practice. No doubt, as today, the majority simply bore with the tensions, hardly aware of their extent or origin. The Law of Israel instructed them (Leviticus 19:18) not to take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of their own people, but to love their neighbour as themselves. That is hard enough. Jesus, however, made this more radical by requiring of his followers that they should love their enemies, including people who were actually harassing them (Matt 5:44). He evidently succeeded in integrating members of socially divisive groups into the circle of his most intimate disciples: a tax collector who represented all that was most odious in Jewish collaboration with the Roman occupying forces (Mark 2:14), and a Zealot, the most nationalist kind of Jewish "terrorist" (Luke 6:15). As Gerd Theissen reads the evidence, the powerful drives that once served the mutual aggression have thus been turned to work in the opposite direction. Far from being a group made up of passive characters with diminished aggressive impulses, the violent energies once devoted to sharpening social conflict were now diverted into what, by everyday standards, must seem a quite irrational love of one's enemies. When Simon Peter asks how often the response to injury is to be forgiveness, in order presumably to discover the limits of the commandment, Jesus replies in effect that there are *no* limits to it (Matt 18:21-22). If Cain was avenged sevenfold, Lamech was avenged seventy-sevenfold (Genesis 4:24). The energy that once went into vengeance is now to go into forgiveness.

The disciples were not left to transform their original aggressive impulses into endlessly reconciling energies without some practical means of relief. They were able, for example, to transfer their anger by deferring retribution to the Last Day. When the wandering preacher received neither hearing nor hospitality, and managed to pass on elsewhere, merely shaking off the dust of the place from his feet (itself a ritualization of rage), he could reflect that "it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town" (Matt 10:14-15). He could contain his sense of hurt and rejection here and now with the help of this belief in eschatological compensation. He could, so to speak, delegate his revenge to God.

Social tensions always lead to a search for scapegoats. Jesus ostentatiously incorporated some of the traditional scapegoats into his own immediate circle: tax collectors and prostitutes, the symbols of alien power and of failed love, of political and erotic

frustration. When a group chooses some one or some group as a scapegoat it attributes to him or them qualities which allow it to forget that in reality it is the victim of its own tensions and contradictions. The Son of man gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45); from the very earliest stage it was understood that he died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3). But far from sending him away, like the original scapegoat (Leviticus 16:10), or like the Jews in Nazi Germany, or apparently like “New Commonwealth immigrants” if Mrs Thatcher gets her way, the movement that Jesus founded continued to identify itself with its “scapegoat”. The despised and rejected one became the origin and centre of the community; the crucified prophet was identified as the One who is to come into the world (John 11:27). The various ways of dealing with aggression, as Gerd Theissen concludes, must finally be traced to the reality which issues from the figure of Jesus—“for it is beyond question that Jesus had powers beyond that of a normal man” (pp. 110-111).

Gerd Theissen ends with a brief account of why it was that the Jesus movement was such a failure in Palestine, and only flowered in Hellenistic society. This goes beyond the scope of his book, but he is able to sketch out the transition from the earliest form of Palestinian Christianity (the ethical radicalism and eschatological asceticism of the Sermon on the Mount) to the communities reflected in Paul’s letters and then in the Pastoral Epistles, where what he calls a “patriarchalism of love” begins to emerge, with discussion of the problems of family life, how to treat slaves, and so on. Paradoxically enough, “the vision of love and reconciliation may have been born in a society rent by crises”, but “the new vision was more in accord with the less tense world of the Hellenistic cities” (p. 118). His analysis is thus that, while intense social contradictions form the matrix from which the Christian movement arose, and the historical background without which it cannot properly be understood as a historical religion, the fact is that the radicalism of reconciliation proved unworkable and soon gave way to *Liebepatriarchalismus*.

This picture corresponds exactly with Massyngberde Ford’s (“Social Consciousness in the New Testament: Jesus and Paul, a Contrast”, *New Blackfriars*, June 1976, pp. 244-254). She is a good deal bolder in her conclusions, however. The last sentence of Gerd Theissen’s last footnote runs, wistfully or ruefully: “Anyone who writes about the radicalism of the early Christian wandering charismatics and finds it difficult to deny his sympathies for them is still some way from being a radical” (p. 125). Massyngberde Ford regards Paul as “socially, politically, economically, and philosophically ... somewhat conservative”. As she goes on to say: “It is to be noted that most reactionary groups within the Church rely heavily—sometimes exclusively—on Pauline writings, and overlook

the teaching of the Gospels". While we look forward to the book on the subject which she is preparing, we hope also that Gerd Theissen will be able to follow up his investigations. The ethical radicalism of Jesus will perhaps come into its own when Lutheran exegesis breaks out of its Pauline straightjacket—or when Catholics take the Gospels literally.

A Nigerian Theologian at Work

ADRIAN EDWARDS C.S.Sp.

My justification for writing about an unpublished thesis is simply that people ought to know about the work of the Reverend Dr E. A. Adeolu Adegbola, and that publishing being what it is, the thesis is most unlikely to be published as a whole. Hence, an article like this could help in the circulation of ideas.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola is a Methodist pastor from the great Yoruba people of western Nigeria. After considerable pastoral experience, he completed his thesis, *"Ifa and Christianity among the Yoruba"*, at Bristol in 1976, and is, at present, Director of the Institute of Church and Society at Ibadan, western Nigeria, which aims both at keeping Christians thinking, and thoughtful people, who either never were Christians or who have drifted away from the churches, aware that there is at least the possibility of a Christian response to the pressing cultural and social questions of contemporary Nigeria. In this article, I shall outline and comment on his thesis, and indicate some of the new ground it seems to open up. One further word of explanation, as to what "ifa" is. *Ifa* is the Yoruba system of divination. Unlike many other African systems of divination, there is in *Ifa* no element of spirit possession, nor does the client have to tell the diviner what his problem is. The diviner (in Yoruba *babalawo*, father of secrets) may throw down a rope or chain, on which are eight similar objects, capable of giving a heads-and-tails arrangement, or he may hold sixteen palm-nuts in his left hand. He then tries to take them with his right hand, noting how many remain in his right hand, but has to do this eight times, whereas one throw of the divining chain will give him a sufficient number of signs to select the appropriate figure, or *odu*, which is then marked on the divining board. There are sixteen principal *odu*, and two hundred and forty secondary ones, these being called "the children of the *Odu*". Each of these two hundred and fifty six signs has many associated verses. The diviner recites