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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In contrast to studies comparing the Israelite patriarchs with the pastoral nomads of Mari, Norman K. Gottwald has vigorously denied that the earliest Israelites were pastoral nomads. 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. 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.” The catalyst for the formation of Israel was the introduction of the ideology of monotheism. 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.”

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. Though he acknowledges his debt to Mendenhall’s work, 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,” which applies the model of Max We.


Mendenhall, *Tenth* 223.


Gottwald, *Tribes* 225 ff. and passim.

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. 

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) and *The Sociology of Religion* (published in 1922). Though Weber's formulation is still influential, it was of necessity dependent on the Biblical studies then current and is in need of revision. Among recent studies of the prophets in their social settings are works by M. Cohen, Robert R. Wilson and David L. Petersen.

Paul Hanson's important monograph, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 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. As the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded in reducing these socio-religious tensions, apocalypticism did not re-emerge until the Maccabean era.

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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).


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

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\(^{24}\)London, 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 demurrrer 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.”


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

the NT is German scholar Gerd Theissen. In addition to his writings in German, two major works have now been translated into English. The first is titled *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. 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*, 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. 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*. Following the writings of Peter Worsley on Melanesian cargo cults and Kenelm Burridge on millenarian movements, Gager also uses the concept of cognitive dissonance to explain the spread of Christianity.

Following the lead of Adolf Deissmann, Gager has stressed the view that most of the early Christians were drawn from the disinherited lower classes. 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.

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34 Theissen, *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).


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

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*, 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. Judge has been followed by Martin Hengel, Abraham J. Malherbe, Wayne Meeks and Gerd Theissen. 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.

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. John H. Schütz applied Weber’s model of a charismatic leader not to Paul but to his opponents at Corinth.

We now have a full-fledged sociological exegesis of 1 Peter in John H. Elliott’s *A Home for the Homeless*. 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. 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-

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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.  

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.

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.  

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.

Following the lead of W. Bauer, who suggested that heresy was as early an option as so-called "orthodoxy," Elaine Pagels in a widely acclaimed book, The Gnostic Gospels, has analyzed the differences between the Gnostics and the orthodox almost exclusively in terms of sociological and political rather than ideological factors. 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

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

It is quite clear that at least a part of Pagels’ interpretation is strongly influ-
enced 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 indi-
viduals,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 sci-
centific 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,”

67, 69.


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


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 anal-
ysis and causal attribution of individual actions, structures and personalities that have cultural signifi-
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. Thelissen, The Social Setting 121. On
the contrast between history and sociology and attempts toward integration see C. Tilly, “Clio and
Burke, Sociology and History (London, 1980); R. P. Swierenga, “Social Science History: A Critique and

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


64Gager, "Shall We Marry" 257.


67Cited by Desroche, Jacob and the Angel 39.


the Bible and of Judaism. Though Weber recognized that unlike the natural sciences the social sciences must also interpret as well as observe human behavior—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. 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.

In the 1950s the structuralist-functionalist model of society became the dominant theoretical perspective among sociologists under the leadership of Talcott Parsons. 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-

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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.76

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.77

By the 1960s only six of thirty eminent sociologists interviewed by M. Popovitch 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-

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. Popovitch, "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.’’ 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.\(^6\)

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.\(^6\)

(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."\(^6\) 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."\(^6\) Against such analyses Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade have protested that religion is irreducible inasmuch as the "numinous" and the "sacred" are unique categories.\(^6\) 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."\(^6\)

(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."\(^6\) 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


\(^{6}\) G. S. Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," British Journal of Sociology 27 (1976) 300.

\(^{6}\) Popovich, "Sociologists" 135.


\(^{6}\) Hill, A Sociology of Religion 16-17.


\(^{6}\) Friedrichs, "Sociological Research" 120.

principle—discarded these structures which make possible these very phenomena as well as our experience of them.”
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.”

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

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.

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.”

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 orienta-
tions. He refers frequently to structural/functional models (pp. 66-68, 608-611,

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88D. Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* 215.


whether this approach is of value depends entirely on whether it sheds light on the texts.”

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).

 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 anchonristic ring. 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.

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). 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 anthropomorphistic 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 de idolized.

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


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

98 Gottwald, 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.”


100 Gottwald, Tribes of Yahweh 708.

Long comments, for Gottwald "Biblical theology seems to have become a kind of liberation socio-theology."\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{104}

Despite his massive erudition, Gottwald reads into the OT his ideological biases in his imaginative reconstruction that disregards both the Biblical\textsuperscript{105} and the archaeological data.\textsuperscript{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 10.14ff)! Granted they fought against such visions of vengeance (Luke 9.51ff.), but this only confirmed their existence.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{102}Long, "Social World" 255.

\textsuperscript{103}Gottwald, "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."

\textsuperscript{104}For 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.


\textsuperscript{106}The 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,'" JSOT 7 (1978) 20-27.

\textsuperscript{107}Theissen, 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 acumen 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 theoretically 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

109Rodd, “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.”


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-NÁ “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.

112Ibid., p. 1527.
such a way that he and his followers believed that success was virtually guaranteed.  

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

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,

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111Ibid., p. 1538.
113Ibid., p. 158 n. 102.
115Cf. E. V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (Chico, 1982).
changes of cognition, and circumspect exposure to new information and new opinions.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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."\textsuperscript{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."\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{124}

The analogy sometimes cited of the disillusioned followers of Sabbatai Zvi,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{120}L. Festinger, \textit{A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance} (Stanford, 1957) 31.

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


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

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

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

Apropos 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. Chapinis and A. Chapinis, "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."


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.


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," but at the same time he laments that "Sociological Euhemerism persists and flourishes—everywhere, it seems, except in American sociology of religion."

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. 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. 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.

In his 1970 presentation, Bellah denounced 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." 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."

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

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


139Ibid.
temologies but even itself, 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." 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.

Bellah's contention that all sociological and psychological studies of religion as primarily epiphenomenal rather than as noumenal reality are destined to fail has struck fellow sociologists as anti-scientific and anti-intellectual. 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, 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. As he wrote in the Weberian tradition of a "value-free" observer when he published The Sacred Canopy, he admits that this work reads "like a treatise on atheism, at least in parts." 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.

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.

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

141 Bellah, "Confessions" 3.

142 Bellah, 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."

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


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

147 Garden City, 1967.

148 Berger, Rumor ix.

149 Berger, Sacred Canopy 180.

150 P. 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, 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.

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." 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)?

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.

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

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151 P. 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) 181-189.

152 Berger, *Rumor* 42.


155 Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 167; *Heretical Imperative* 101; *Sociology Reinterpreted* 11.
or demons do not exist. Berger points out furthermore that liberal reinterpretations of Christianity like Bultmann’s are self-defeating.

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.

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).

Moberg has deplored reductionist trends in the behavioral sciences that tend to explain spiritual phenomena in naturalistic terms and has underlined the opposition of Christianity to “sociologism that reduces the totality of religion to social forces.”

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.

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.

156 Berger, 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.”

157 In his 1969 publication, Sacred Canopy 202 n. 29, Berger had written: “Our understanding of the relationship of Christianity to the mythological cosmos on 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.

158 Berger, Rumor 21.

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


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

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, 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.


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.)