Social Sciences Studying Formative Christian Phenomena:
A Creative Movement[*]

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The last thirty years or so have seen the introduction of a wide variety of new methods in studies of the New Testament and early Christianity. Alongside the established methods of historical criticism, new approaches have been developed using theoretical traditions from other disciplines, such as literary criticism and the social sciences.[1] Social-scientific interpretation of early Christian phenomena, then, is part of a wider trend, reflecting increased diversity within the discipline of biblical studies and greater interdisciplinarity within the humanities and social sciences. Unlike some forms of literary criticism, the wide variety of social-scientific approaches to early Christian texts retain a close link with the aims of historical criticism (Barton 1995); the intention is that the use of the resources which the social sciences offer, alongside the other methods of textual and historical criticism, may enable a fuller and better appreciation of the biblical texts and communities within their historical, social, and cultural setting (cf. Elliott 1993: 7-8). John Elliott's recent definition of contemporary social-scientific criticism offers a clear summary of the approach as applied to biblical texts:

> Social-scientific criticism of the Bible is that phase of the exegetical task which analyzes the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences. As a component of the historical-critical method of

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[1] On the diversity of methods now practiced in New Testament studies see e.g. Anderson and Moore 1992; McKenzie and Haynes 1993; Green 1995; Porter 1997. On the use of the social sciences in studies of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, see e.g. Mayes 1989; Osiek 1989; Chalcraft 1997.

exegesis, social-scientific criticism investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate between composers and audiences (Elliott 1993: 7).

In the essay that follows, I shall set the modern development of social-scientific criticism in its historical context, summarise the different approaches currently represented in New Testament and early Christian studies, and explore the areas of contemporary debate and the prospects for future development.

1. The origins and revival of interest in the social world of early Christianity

Interest in social aspects of early Christianity is certainly nothing new.[2] In a recent study of the history of research in this area, Ralph Hochschild (1999) traces the beginnings of "socio-historical exegesis" (*sozialgeschichtliche Exegese*) to around the middle of the nineteenth century, with the contrasting work of Wilhelm Weitling and Friedrich Lückes.[3] Weitling's 1846 book presented a radical, human Jesus calling people to live in a community of equality and freedom, and depicted the early Church as a form of communism, practising the community of goods. Lückes, on the other hand, presented the early Church as a kind of free association (*freier Verein*). In each case, the social location and commitments of the author shaped their view of early Christianity, Weitling reacting against the "bourgeois society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) which Lückes regarded so positively. Although, as Hochschild notes, these early works have had virtually no impact on the subsequent literature, it is interesting to see the extent to which their different perspectives are paradigmatic for socio-historical analyses of the character of the earliest churches (Hochschild 1999: 45-63).

Hochschild goes on to trace the process by which socio-historical questions about early Christianity became established in scholarly discourse. There are a number of approaches and directions, both within and outside the theologians' guild, which are of significance. From among the theologians, Hochschild examines the works published around the 1880s by C.F. Georg Heinrici, Gerhard Uhlhorn and Heinrich Holtzmann (Hochschild 1999: 64-78). Also important are the works on early Christianity produced around the same time by members of the socialist movement, notably Friedrich Engels (1820-95) and Karl Kautsky, author of a large work published

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[2] This point is often made; see e.g. Scroggs 1980: 164; Theissen 1979: 3-6.

[3] For an outline of Hochschild's book, and some critical reflections, see Horrell forthcoming.

in 1908 on the origins of Christianity.[4] Around the turn of the century important contributions to our understanding of the social history of early Christianity were made by scholars such as Adolf Deissmann (1866-1937) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923). Deissmann paid particular attention to the recently discovered papyri and their implications for understanding the social world of the New Testament, especially of Paul (see Deissmann 1911; 1927). Troeltsch's monumental work on the social teaching of the Christian churches, published in 1912 (ET Troeltsch 1931), underpins Gerd Theissen's much more recent arguments about the "love-patriarchalism" which developed especially in the Pauline tradition.[5] And Troeltsch's analysis of the distinction between "church" and "sect" has been widely influential.[6]

Other important developments include the rise of form criticism, pioneered by the German Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) and applied to the New Testament especially by Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). Form criticism was concerned to relate different types of textual material to their particular *Sitz im Leben,* or setting in life; it aimed to recover the earliest form of a tradition by relating the development of textual traditions to their use in specific social settings. Hence in 1925 Oscar Cullmann insisted that form criticism would require the development of a "special branch of sociology devoted to the study of the laws which govern the growth of popular traditions".[7]

In America interest in the sociology of early Christianity was pursued especially in the work of the so-called Chicago School, whose most prominent members included Shirley Jackson Case and Shailer Mathews.[8] Case's book, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (1923), is among the best known examples of the School's work. In this book, Case argues for a "social-historical" approach to the New Testament, contrasting what he sees as the traditional concern for the "recovery of the distinctive teachings" or dogmas of early Christianity with his own focus on "the more comprehensive and fundamental matter of social experience as a key to the

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[4] See Marx and Engels 1957 for essays by Engels published in the 1880s; Kautsky 1908 (ET: 1925); see also Schottroff 1999; Hochschild 1999:79-96.

[5] See Troeltsch 1931: 69-89; Theissen 1982: 107-10, 138-40, 163-64. For critical discussion of Theissen's thesis see Horrell 1996a, esp. 126-98, 233-37; Schottroff 1999.

[6] See Troeltsch 1931: 331-43; MacDonald 1988; Gill 1996: 4, 56-68.

[7] Cullmann 1925, quoted from MacDonald 1988: 19; see also Maier 1991: 5; Esler 1987: 3.

[8] On the Chicago school, see further Keck 1974; Funk 1976; Scroggs 1980: 164-65; Hochschild 1999: 197-206.

understanding of the genesis and early history of the Christian movement" (1923: v-vi). His focus is less on the meaning of the New Testament texts than on the movement that the texts represent, understood within its social context. Case proceeds to sketch the development of the early Christian movement from its Jewish origins, through its transition to a Gentile environment, its success in meeting the religious needs of the time, and its consolidation and confrontation with rivals into the fourth century. At the close of the book something of Case's own theological agenda emerges: the recovery of New Testament doctrine, as was the aim of the Reformers, is hardly appropriate for an age in which historic doctrines are no longer accepted as authoritative. "Modern Christianity is becoming less and less doctrinally motivated and is directing its energies more and more toward the realization of effective action on the part of Christian individuals and groups as functioning factors in society" (1923: 251). For proponents of such a social gospel, inspiration comes not from the repetition of early Christian doctrines but from the dynamism with which early Christianity arose, grew, and adapted successfully to its environment.

Also among the members of the Chicago School, though less well-known now than Case and Mathews, was Donald Riddle, who, indebted to Case for the development of his approach, published a series of essays and books in the 1920s and 30s.[9] In his book on *The Martyrs* (1931), Riddle begins from an interest in the role of religion in social control and proceeds to study how the early Christian movement exercised control over its members such that they were willing to pay the price of martyrdom rather than conform to the demands of the Roman state. He considers such factors as the importance of group loyalty and belonging, the Christian view of rewards for faithful confession and punishments for apostasy, the support offered by Christians to those of their number imprisoned and tried, and especially the role of martyrologies and their precursors in the New Testament as a type of "control literature". The Markan passion narrative, in particular, is seen as "a primitive martyrology" (1931: 196).

But despite such energetic pursuit of social-historical understanding of the early Christian movement, from around the 1920s until the 1970s interest in the social dimensions of early Christianity declined.[10] There were a number of reasons for this.

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[9] For example, Riddle does not appear in the bibliography of works published before 1960 in Hochschild 1999: 246-51. For more of Riddle's publications see the bibliography to this volume. [*Ed.: are they listed there??]

[10] Theissen 1993: 1-29, divides his survey of the interest in the sociological interpretation of the New Testament into three phases: 1870-1920; 1920-1970; 1970s onwards. Theissen's

One was the failure of form criticism, particularly in the hands of its most prominent exponent, Rudolf Bultmann, to explore the social context in which the traditions were preserved and developed. It is often remarked that Cullmann's call for a sociological dimension to form criticism went virtually unheeded. In practice form criticism focused not on the wider social context, as might be implied in the term *Sitz im Leben*, but on the *Sitz im Glauben,* the setting in faith, or the setting in the life of the church (Theissen 1993: 9-10; also n.7 above). Also significant was the fact that Bultmann's interests developed in the direction of a hermeneutic of demythologisation and a concern to formulate the word of the Gospel in existentialist terms, as a challenge to the "I" to a radically new self-understanding (see Bultmann 1960; 1985). Thus in Bultmann's work the New Testament kerygma becomes essentially detached from its socio-historical context, just as does its contemporary reformulation (cf. Kee 1989: 4-5). Another important reason was the influence, indeed an influence on Bultmann, of Karl Barth's (1886-1968) dialectical theology, a break with the then established theological liberalism first announced in his Tambach lecture of 1919 and in the successive editions of his famous commentary on Romans (first edition 1918; second edition 1922; see further Scholder 1987: 40-45).[11] For Barth the revealed Word of God is radically "other" than all humanly and socially constructed patterns of religiosity. The Gospel stands as a radical challenge to all forms of human society and can never be identified with any particular social organisation. As Gerd Theissen points out, this aversion to a connection between theology and society was profoundly related to the specific social context in which Barth was located, and the struggles of the Confessing Church against National Socialism and the German Christians (Theissen 1993: 8-15; see further Scholder 1987). Hochschild (1999: 209) also suggests broader reasons for the turn away from socio-historical research, at least in West Germany: unlike in the previous decades there was neither the experience of massive social inequality nor problems concerning the societal position of the Church, so that central motivations for previous socially-orientated historical studies were no longer of social relevance.

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analysis, which focuses on German scholarship, perceptively relates the various approaches adopted by scholars to their social and political contexts. Hochschild's (1999) work, originally a thesis supervised by Theissen, now offers a more detailed study of the history of research.

[11] Hochschild (1999: 208) is cautious about explaining the decline of socio-historical investigation directly by the rise of dialectical theology, though he does note that the directions in theological discussion prominent in dialectical theology were unfavourable for the pursuit of socio-historical research into early Christianity.

The tide began to turn in the 1960s, and a revival of interest in the social aspects of early Christianity began. One landmark was the publication in 1960 of Edwin Judge's short book, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century,* which, in the following decade or two, played a significant role in encouraging this renewed interest.[12] Other notable works of social history were published, for example, by Martin Hengel (e.g. 1969; 1973; cf. Scroggs 1980: 168-71). However, in distinction from most of the work undertaken earlier in the century, what was new in the early 1970s was the creative and varied use of methods, models and theories from the social sciences in studies of early Christianity.

Why, then, the revival of interest in social aspects of early Christianity, and why the experimentation with new methods? Undoubtedly one major factor was dissatisfaction with the established methods of New Testament study. This dissatisfaction is perhaps best summarised in the oft-quoted words of Robin Scroggs:

> To some it has seemed that too often the discipline of the theology of the New Testament (the history of *ideas*) operates out of a methodological docetism, as if believers had minds and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate bodies. Interest in the sociology of early Christianity is no attempt to limit reductionistically the reality of Christianity to social dynamic; rather it should be seen as an effort to guard against a reductionism from the other extreme, a limitation of the reality of Christianity to an inner-spiritual, or objective-cognitive system. In short, sociology of early Christianity wants to put body and soul together again (Scroggs 1980: 165-66).

The new interest in the sociology of early Christianity must also be understood in the light of wider developments in society at the time. The dissatisfaction of which Scroggs speaks, for example, may perhaps be linked with the widespread protests of the "radical" 1960s (cf. Theissen 1993: 16). At least partly as a product of the communitarian and radical concerns of this period, there was something of a shift in the methods of doing history, away from a focus on the "great" figures and towards a concern with communities, with social relations, with popular movements and popular culture: in short, history not "from above" but "from below" (cf. Barton 1997: 278). The 1960s also witnessed an expansion in the disciplines of the social sciences and an

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[12] Judge 1960. Cf. Theissen 1993: 19 n.23: "This little book deserves a place of honor in the history of modern sociological exegesis." Judge was Professor of Ancient History at MacQuarrie University in Sydney, Australia, where since the 1960s interest in the social history of early Christianity has been energetically pursued.

increase in their influence and prominence in the Universities and in society (cf. Barton 1992: 401). All that happened in the 1970s, Theissen suggests, was that "exegesis caught up with what had already developed elsewhere" (Theissen 1993: 18). The interest in the use of social-scientific methods in biblical studies thus stems from a particular social context, which also gave rise to feminist and political/liberationist hermeneutics, for example, and more generally to a period of widespread and creative experimentation with a whole range of "new methods" in biblical studies.[13] Social-scientific approaches retain a much closer connection with the concerns of historical criticism than many of these other new methods, particularly some of the forms of literary criticism (Barton 1995).

2. Innovative studies of the 1970s

Two "events" of the early 1970s, one in the USA, the other in Germany, deserve particular notice in a review of social-scientific study of early Christianity. One is the formation in 1973 of a SBL[14] group devoted to the study of the social world of early Christianity (see Smith 1975). One of the group's founding members was Wayne Meeks, who had already (in 1972) published a ground-breaking essay on John's gospel, using perspectives from the sociology of knowledge to argue that the Christology of the fourth gospel reflects and legitimates the social situation of a sectarian community which is alienated and isolated from the world.[15] Another founder member was Jonathan Smith, who offered an outline of what he saw as the major tasks and opportunities in the field (Smith 1975). The group devoted a number of years to the study of early Christianity in a particular location, Antioch, seeking to give concrete and specific focus to their studies of the social context in which the early Christians lived (see Meeks and Wilken 1978).[16]

The second notable event (not strictly a single "event") was the publication of a series of articles between 1973 and 1975 by Gerd Theissen, then of the University of

[13] See further Barton 1992: 399-406, for a more extensive list of the influences on the renewed interest in the "communal dimension of earliest Christianity".

[14] SBL denotes the Society of Biblical Literature, the major US-based organisation for Biblical Studies. On the various SBL groups that have since been formed see Osiek 1989: 268-69.

[15] See esp. Meeks 1972: 70; further Scroggs 1980: 176-77; Holmberg 1990: 125-28; Barton 1993: 145-52.

[16] Gager's failure (in his 1975 book) to relate his social-scientific analyses to specific locations or communities elicited sharp criticism from Smith 1978.

Bonn, now at Heidelberg. These articles, which encompass both the Palestinian Jesus movement and the Pauline church at Corinth, remain among the most influential and ground-breaking contributions to the sociology of early Christianity.[17] They combine a detailed and careful use of historical evidence with a creative and eclectic use of sociological theory. Notably, the essays on the synoptic material demonstrate a close connection with the methods and concerns of form-criticism, while exploring the sociological questions about *Sitz im Leben* which form criticism evidently failed to do (see Theissen 1993: 10 n.11, 33-37). The detailed methodological and exegetical reflections in these essays (see Theissen 1979: 3-76) underpin the more popular presentation in Theissen's much discussed *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung,* translated into English as *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (USA) or *The First Followers of Jesus* (UK; see Theissen 1978).[18]

Other notable ground-breaking publications in this period include Robin Scroggs's essay of 1975, the first systematic attempt to apply the sociological model of the religious "sect" to early Christianity, and John Gager's book *Kingdom and Community* (1975). In this book Gager sketched the ways in which a number of different social-scientific theories might be applied to early Christianity. These include the models resulting from studies of millenarian movements and Melanesian cargo cults, undertaken by anthropologists in the 1950s and 60s; Max Weber's concept of charisma and its routinisation; the process of institutionalisation; and cognitive dissonance theory, developed by Leon Festinger and others in the 1950s through the study of groups that predicted the end of the world but which did not disappear when their prediction failed to come true. Although the brevity of Gager's studies left him open to criticism, notably by Smith (1978),[19] many of his suggested avenues have been explored in more detail in subsequent work. Bengt Holmberg (1978), for example, has applied Weber's notions of charisma and its routinisation to the structures of authority in the primitive church, and Margaret MacDonald (1988), influenced in part by Holmberg, has undertaken a detailed study of institutionalisation in the Pauline

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[17] Note the comments of Scroggs 1980: 174-75; Holmberg 1990: 44-54, 119-25; Elliott 1993: 21-23. Theissen's work was collected in book-form as Theissen 1979 (3rd edition 1988). The essays on Corinth are available in English in Theissen 1982; the essays on the Jesus movement and other more recent articles in Theissen 1993.

[18] Among the important critiques of this book see Stegemann 1984; Elliott 1986; Horsley 1989.

[19] See also Bartlett 1978; Tracy 1978 (all three review essays in the same issue of *Zygon*).

churches. Robert Jewett (1986) has applied the "millenarian model" to the Thessalonian churches. The theory of cognitive dissonance has also proved fruitful in further studies (see e.g. Gager 1981; Segal 1990; Taylor 1992; 1997a; 1997b).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s interest in the field continued to grow, and an increasing number of widely varied publications appeared.[20] Book-length introductions to the area were written by Derek Tidball (1983) and Carolyn Osiek (1984), both of which remain useful entrées into the subject.[21] More recently, as well as biblical scholars developing an interest in the social sciences, some sociologists have turned their attention to early Christianity. Notable examples include Tony Blasi's study of *Early Christianity as a Social Movement* (Blasi 1988) and Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* (Stark 1996), a book which has generated considerable discussion.[22]

A number of attempts have been made to classify this varied and ongoing work according to the method employed and the scope of the investigation. John Elliott (1993: 18-20), for example, distinguishes the following five categories: (i) "investigations of *social realia*... generally to illustrate some feature or features of ancient society but with no concern for analyzing, synthesizing, and explaining these social facts in social-scientific fashion"; (ii) studies which seek "to construct a *social history* of a particular period or movement or group" but with a predominantly historical conceptual framework and "an eschewing of social theory and models"; (iii) studies of "the social organisation of early Christianity", and of "the social forces leading to its emergence and its social institutions", which include "*the deliberate use of social theory and models*"; (iv) studies which focus on "*the social and cultural scripts* influencing and constraining social interaction" in the "cultural environment of the New Testament"; (v) studies which use "the research, theory, and models of the social sciences... in the *analysis of biblical texts*".[23] Hochschild (1999: 26, 243) offers a fourfold model, categorising approaches on two axes according to their methodological and hermeneutical stance. His four categories are (1) "social-

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[20] Useful surveys and assessments of this early period are provided by Scroggs 1980; Harrington 1980; Judge 1980; Best 1983; Edwards 1983; Richter 1984. Richter in particular offers extensive and classified bibliographical information. Elliott 1993: 17-35 also offers a comprehensive survey.

[21] Tidball's book was reissued in 1997; a second edition of Osiek's was published in 1992.

[22] See e.g. Klutz 1998, Hopkins 1998, Castelli 1998, with response from Stark 1998 (all articles in an issue of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*); also Malina 1997.

[23] Similar classifications are offered, e.g., by Smith 1975; Richter 1984.

descriptive" (*sozialdescriptiv*), (2) "social-proclamatory" (*sozialkerygmatisch*), (3) "social-scientific" (*sozialwissenschaftlich*) and (4) "materialist" (*materialistich*).[24] Categories (1) and (2) are described as methodologically conservative, eschewing the use of social-scientific models, whereas categories (3) and (4) are methodologically innovative, taking up various approaches from the social sciences. However, on the other axis, the hermeneutical stance, categories (2) and (4) stand close together in giving prominence to the significance of the texts for the contemporary world, whereas categories (1) and (3) tend to distance themselves from such explicit hermeneutical concerns.

Any categorisation can of course be questioned, since the boundaries between types of work are never neat or clear. In Hochschild's case, rather a lot is encompassed within category (3), despite some significant disagreements and differences of approach between scholars classified as belonging to that group (see further Horrell forthcoming) There are also relevant theoretical debates, for example, concerning the adequacy of any methodological distinction between history and social science (see Horrell 1996a: 26-31). However, in terms of the assessment of published work, there clearly is a significant distinction to be drawn between works of social history which explicitly eschew the use of social-scientific theories or models (e.g. Clarke 1993; Gooch 1993)[25] and those which employ them as tools in the task of historical investigation (e.g. Meeks 1983). Also significant is the distinction which has emerged between those who may be termed "social historians" (yet who use social-scientific methods) and the "social scientists" who have developed a rigorous and model-based approach (see §3 and §4 below; Martin 1993: 107).[26] What may be questioned, though, is the legitimacy of a claim to eschew the discussion of theory. Any approach to history is guided by the methods, presuppositions and convictions of the researcher, and the adoption of a merely empirical interest in the data must be seen as a concealment of (implicit) theory, which theoretically-conscious works aim to render perspicuous and therefore open to critical scrutiny (cf. Horrell 1996a: 27-28, in criticism of Clarke

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[24] For category (1) Hochschild refers to work such as that by Martin Hengel; for category (3) Wayne Meeks, Gerd Theissen, Bruce Malina, Jerome Neyrey *et al.* are key examplars. For category (2) Hochschild's key example is the work of Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (1978/1986) and for (4) Fernando Bélo (1974/1981). On these latter two categories see §5 below.

[25] Note also the comments of Garrett 1992: 94, on Malherbe 1977.

[26] Both of these categories are encompassed within Hochschild's "social-scientific" category.

1993). Indeed, the desire to be open and explicit about methods and models has been a motivation in much social-scientific exegesis (cf. Esler 1987: 15; Elliott 1993: 36-59).

In the following sections (§3-§5), rather than attempt again to survey and classify the existing body of relevant work, I shall focus on three types of approach which have emerged as significant in the 1980s and 90s and between which there are important differences. This will prepare the ground for a brief overview of areas of criticism, current debate and prospects for future development (§6).

3. Cultural anthropology and the Context Group

In 1981 Bruce Malina published his ground-breaking book *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology,* in which he outlined a series of models derived from the work of various anthropologists for understanding the pivotal values of Mediterranean culture — the social world inhabited by the first Christians. Malina's concern was to enable his readers to appreciate the strangeness and difference of that cultural context from that of twentieth-century USA. In order to displace the implicit ethnocentric and anachronistic assumption that people then were pretty much like modern Americans, Malina sought to provide models of a culture that operated in very different ways. The central features and values of that culture, he proposed, were honour and shame, dyadic rather than individual personality,[27] the perception of limited good,[28] distinctive norms of kinship and marriage, and a set of purity rules to distinguish clean and unclean (Malina 1981).

In 1986 Malina published another book of models, drawn from the work of various anthropologists, notably Mary Douglas, and intended to provide further resources for study of the social and cultural world of the New Testament (Malina 1986). Also in 1986 the "Context Group" was formed, with Bruce Malina as a prominent and founding member. This group, formally organised in 1989, comprises an international (though largely American) group of scholars who meet "annually to plan, mutually discuss, and evaluate their individual and collaborative work in social-scientific exegesis" (Elliott 1993: 29). In the words of the announcement for their 1997

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[27] That is, where persons form their notion of self-identity in terms of what others perceive and relate to them: "A dyadic personality is one who simply needs another continually in order to know who he or she really is" (Malina 1981: 55). For Malina, this stands in contrast with modern (US) individualism.

[28] That is, where all goods are deemed to be finite and thus where "an individual, alone or with his family, can improve his social position only at the expense of others" (Malina 1981: 75).

conference, "the Context Group is dedicated to understanding and interpreting the Biblical text within the context of the social and cultural world of traditional Mediterranean society". The pivotal values of Mediterranean society as outlined in Malina's 1981 book have remained foundational to the Context Group's work (see e.g. Neyrey 1991; Esler 1994: 19-36; Rohrbaugh 1996) and a basic motivation for their work remains the avoidance of ethnocentric and anachronistic readings of biblical texts (see e.g. Elliott 1993: 11). Drawing on studies of the Mediterranean, both ancient and modern, and using models developed by anthropologists, they have consistently developed and applied a range of reading strategies to illuminate the foreign world of the early Christians. Contrasts between Mediterranean and American society are often explicitly detailed or tabulated (e.g. Malina and Neyrey 1988: 145-51; Malina 1993: 56-58, 82-86; Malina and Neyrey 1996: 227-31)

Another early and influential member of the group is Jerome Neyrey, whose many publications since the mid-1980s have also pursued this approach to the New Testament, often in collaboration with Malina and other members of the Context Group.[29] Others whose interest in social-scientific methods began independently but who have since become closely involved with the group's work include John Elliott, who in 1981 published a pioneering study of 1 Peter using what he then termed "sociological exegesis",[30] and Philip Esler.[31] Recent products of the group's collaborative efforts include the collection of essays on Luke-Acts, edited by Neyrey (1991), Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh's *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (1992), the *Festschrift* for Bruce Malina edited by John Pilch (2001), and an accessible presentation of the Context Group's models edited by Rohrbaugh (1996), which provides perhaps the best place to begin an encounter with their approach. Their individual and collaborative output has been impressive and extensive, and can hardly be summarised here.[32]

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[29] See e.g. Neyrey 1990; 1994; 1998. In collaboration with Malina: Malina and Neyrey 1988; 1991a; 1991b; 1996 etc.

[30] See Elliott 1981: 7-11; 1986: 1. For more recent reflections and approach see Elliott 1986; 1993; 1995a; 1995b.

[31] Esler 1987; compare more recently Esler 1994 esp. 19-36; 1995a and b. In his most recent work, Esler has combined the basic approach to Mediterranean culture derived from Malina with the tools of Social Identity Theory, as developed especially by social psychologist Henri Tajfel (see Esler 1996; 1998b; 2000b).

The main achievements of their approach encompass both method and results. First, by elucidating a clear and explicit set of models they have set out openly the basis for their studies, thus enabling readers both to appraise the results and to employ the models experimentally for themselves, should they so wish (cf. Elliott 1993: 48). Second, the results of their studies have served to illuminate the strikingly different social dynamics at work in the biblical texts and thus to guard against any hermeneutic which elides the distinction between ancient and modern contexts. Yet there are also critical questions to be raised, some of which will be considered below (see §6.3.).

4. Historical sociology/social history

All proponents of the use of the social sciences in studies of early Christianity acknowledge that such work stands in close connection with historical-critical study. The social-sciences provide a further (and, many would argue, essential) component of historical study, enabling the social context, dynamics and impact of the texts to be better understood (cf. e.g. Elliott 1993: 7-16; Esler 1994: 2-3). However, in contrast to the Context Group, who have developed a particular set of social-scientific models and applied them consistently, others have adopted social-scientific methods in a more eclectic and piecemeal way, regarding themselves primarily as social historians, or have used social theory to develop a theoretical or research framework, but have rejected a specifically model-based approach.[33] The work of Gerd Theissen, for example, already mentioned above (§2), may appropriately be described in this way. Certainly Theissen is acutely theoretically conscious (see 1979: 3-76; 1993: 231-87), yet his use of sociological (and psychological — see 1987) theory is eclectic and experimental, and often linked closely with other historical studies. Particular mention should also be made of the magisterial study by Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (1983). In this wide-ranging study of the Pauline churches, Meeks explicitly declares his identity as "social historian", and states that he adopts his social-scientific theory — both sociological and anthropological — "piecemeal, as needed, where it fits" (1983: 6). Meeks is concerned to appreciate the particularities of the early

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[32] See further Elliott 1993: 29-30; bibliographical information at http://www.serv.net/~oakmande/bibliog/context.htm. Among Malina's recent books are Malina 1996a; 2000.

[33] Cf. Osiek 1989: 268-74; Martin 1993: 107-10; both of whom refer to the different groups now constituted under the auspices of SBL and representing the differences of approach between the "social historians" and the "social scientists".

Christian communities, something he sees as essentially a historian's concern, which he contrasts with the social-scientist's search for law-like generalisations (1982: 266; cf. 1983: 1-7). However, in my view, the contrasts between a search for what is distinctive or for what is typical, between open-ended theoretical frameworks or cross-cultural models, may be related to two sides of a debate *within* the social sciences about the nature of social science, rather than to a supposed contrast between history and social science (see Garrett 1992; Horrell 1996a: 9-32). Furthermore, it is not surprising that this debate is played out also in New Testament studies (see further §6.2. below) and corresponds with a significant division among scholars who use the social sciences in their studies of early Christianity: Elliott (1985) and Malina (1985b), for example, have criticised Meeks's book for its lack of consistent theoretical foundation, while Theissen declared himself "deeply impressed" (1985: 113).

Other studies which use social-scientific theory yet remain closely connected with historical scholarship and concerns include those of Howard Kee (1980), Francis Watson (1986), Philip Esler (1987), Margaret MacDonald (1988), and, more recently, John Barclay (1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). Barclay has employed the social sciences to provide fruitful and heuristic lines of questioning and enquiry, new ways of seeing and conceptualising old issues, yet is concerned primarily to be a historian, and so to wrestle with the scanty and often ambiguous evidence from the period and to appreciate the distinctiveness and variety in patterns of social interaction and practice. Historical studies of early Christianity after the New Testament period have also turned to the social sciences for theoretical and conceptual tools. For example, James Jeffers (1991) draws on Max Weber's types of legitimate authority and the sociology of sects (especially following Bryan Wilson) in his analysis of the contrasts in Roman Christianity exemplified by *1 Clement* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Harry Maier (1991) employs the theoretical work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) in his study of the development of patterns of ministry in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *1 Clement,* and the letters of Ignatius. While there clearly is a difference between such approaches and the work of those social historians who reject the use of contemporary social theory, and while there clearly have been differences in approach between historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, I follow those who argue that there is no sustainable methodological distinction between history and social science and therefore maintain that the distinction between historical sociology and social history is, or should become, meaningless.[34] Historical studies which avoid any discussion of

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[34] E.g. Anthony Giddens, Philip Abrams, Peter Burke etc.; see Horrell 1996a: 29-30.

theory or any use of social-scientific insights, as I suggested above, merely impoverish their analyses, or conceal the implicit theoretical presuppositions of their approach.

Nonetheless, despite a common acceptance of the value of using the social sciences, there remain significant differences of approach between those who follow the approach pioneered by Malina, and those who follow the kind of method adopted by Theissen and Meeks. Members of the Context Group adopt a model-based approach that draws primarily upon anthropology and stresses the cultural gap between the early Christian world and the present one, whereas those sometimes labelled "social historians" have tended to draw their theoretical resources more from sociology (e.g. the sociology of sects, the sociology of knowledge, etc.) and to use their social-scientific resources more as a way of constructing a framework for understanding and of sensitising the researcher to previously ignored questions and issues.

5. Radical social history and emancipatory theologies

Just as Marxist scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were among those who demonstrated an interest in the social dimensions of early Christianity (see §1 above), so in recent years a number of scholars have developed a variety of what may be termed "radical" socio-political perspectives on early Christianity, often allied to the concerns of some form of emancipatory or liberation theology.[35] In these types of work, as Hochschild points out (1999: 242-43), the hermeneutical interests are more explicit: the exploration of the social history of earliest Christianity is undertaken with an interest in the significance of the texts for the contemporary world. Not all radical approaches to the New Testament are in any sense social-scientific, but a good number are. Some derive theoretical resources from Marxist traditions of sociology, and thus develop a "materialist" reading of the New Testament (e.g. Bélo 1974). Also indebted at least indirectly to Marxism, as well as to other versions of critical social theory, are approaches which employ a critical conception of "ideology" and thus attempt to unmask the ways in which language/texts are used to legitimate and sustain relations of power and domination (see further §6.4. below).

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[35] A concern with human emancipation, or liberation, is shared by a range of perspectives, including those of feminism and liberation theology. For examples in New Testament studies see Schottroff and Stegemann 1978; Schottroff and Stegemann 1984; Gottwald and Horsley 1993; Myers 1988; Rowland and Corner 1990; Elliott 1994; Schottroff 1999.

One prominent achievement is the development of feminist social-historical perspectives on the New Testament. Feminist studies represent one form of ideology-critique, in that they seek to expose patriarchal structures of domination in both past and present and to call them into question. A landmark publication in this regard is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983/1995). Although Fiorenza does not explicitly adopt social-scientific methods,[36] her work does represent a creative attempt to recover the social history of the early Christian movement, and especially of women within that movement, from behind the veil of androcentric texts and the tradition of androcentric interpretation. She argues that an early "discipleship of equals" was gradually marginalised by a process of patriarchalisation within the first-century churches. Among the many and varied contributions that might also be mentioned, the writings of Luise Schottroff represent notable studies in feminist social history (see Schottroff 1993; 1995). Schottroff's feminist commitment is closely allied to a commitment to the cause of liberation theology, the emancipation of the poor from structures of oppression (see e.g. Schottroff 1985/1999).

While these varied radical approaches make clear their socio-political commitments, it is perhaps misleading to refer to them as "committed" readings, at least if that is taken as an implicit contrast with supposedly "uncommitted" readings. As Schottroff (1999: 285) briefly notes, the claim to objectivity in much New Testament scholarship is a claim which conceals the interests and commitments which actually underpin the perspective which is adopted. One may perhaps feel that some of the radical readings present a "history" which is an idealised reflection of contemporary commitments more than of historical reality — such as the utopian ideal of the discipleship of equals, or the egalitarian church of the poor in which the rich abandoned their social privileges. Nevertheless, they represent an important challenge to "bourgeois" interpreters to consider the possibility of other perspectives on the history of early Christianity, perspectives which may perhaps sit less comfortably with the presuppositions of their socio-economic location and commitments. Moreover, they challenge interpreters to confront the unacknowledged commitments which

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[36] For this reason there is little justification for Fiorenza's claim, based on the omission of mention of her book in recent overviews of social-scientific approaches by Kee 1985 and Martin 1993, that: "According to such 'scientific' historical records of the discipline, feminist historical and social-scientific work still does not exist" (1995: xxxv n.2).

inevitably mean that evidence is seen from a particular perspective — or sometimes overlooked altogether — because of the interpreter's own context.

6. Significant areas of current debate and prospects for future development

In such a rich and diverse field of scholarship there are numerous differences and disagreements that could be highlighted. In what follows I focus on certain important points of contemporary debate and on what seem to me the main areas for future development in social-scientific study of early Christianity.

6.1. Critical questions

Those who promote the use of the social sciences in studies of early Christianity maintain that the fruit of a variety of social-scientific research offers new ways of framing questions, new perspectives, critical theoretical resources, and alerts the researcher to previously unexplored aspects of social behaviour. The question then, as posed by Philip Esler, is "not 'Do we need the social sciences?' but rather 'How can we get along without them?'" (Esler 1994: 18). Nevertheless objections to the enterprise have been raised.[37] Cyril Rodd (1981), for example, has questioned whether the ancient sources yield adequate data of a kind suitable for sociological analysis (compared with the contemporary opportunities for interviews, observation etc.). He highlights the danger that a theory or model may be used to fill in the gaps and assume things for which evidence is lacking. Edwin Judge (1980) similarly expresses the concern that sociological models or theories may be imposed upon the ancient evidence, without the painstaking study of that evidence necessary to ascertain the "social facts of life characteristic of the world to which the New Testament belongs" (Judge 1980: 210). Philip Esler rightly questions Judge's apparently empiricist presuppositions; namely the idea that one can simply search for social facts, for uninterpreted data, innocent of the need for theoretical discussion or reflection on the presuppositions of particular approaches to history (Esler 1987: 13-16; also MacDonald 1988: 25-27). For Esler, social-scientific models should not predetermine the results of an enquiry, but rather serve as heuristic tools, suggesting new perspectives and illuminating comparisons. Nevertheless, there is a significant debate — a debate within the social sciences and within New Testament studies — about the appropriate methods for social-scientific research and about the philosophical and epistemological assumptions which underpin

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[37] Cf. the summary in Osiek 1989: 275-77.

different types of approach. While an untheoretical empiricism of the kind Judge seems to advocate is to be rejected, there are still important questions to be asked about the ways in which particular methods and approaches shape the way in which the evidence is interpreted (see §6.2. below).

A second criticism often mentioned is that of reductionism, that is, the idea that social-scientific theories will "explain" religious phenomena purely in terms of social or economic forces.[38] Certainly some traditions of social theory — some forms of Durkheimian or Marxist sociology, for example — are more crudely reductionist and deterministic than others. Yet even if such traditions are avoided, the reductionist criticism cannot be dismissed quite as easily as some suppose.[39] The social sciences prioritise certain aspects of human experience and interaction — the "social" — and regard human knowledge and culture as essentially "socially-constructed" (see Berger 1967). Hence their stance is one of what Peter Berger calls "methodological atheism" (Berger 1967: 180).[40] A more profound and extended version of this critique has been articulated by John Milbank (1990), who argues that the creation of a secular polity — a novel modern achievement — was based on certain "theological" decisions and that this in turn facilitated the rise of "secular" disciplines such as economics, sociology and anthropology, disciplines which have anti-theological assumptions at their heart. The social sciences serve theoretically to marginalise and privatise religion, naming the public sphere as a secular space to be comprehended by secular reason. Milbank rejects the practice whereby theologians draw on the social sciences to understand and explain as far as they can, or borrow from the social sciences their fundamental account of reality, and then see whether there are any theologically significant "bits" left (1990: 380). He argues that social science and theology offer fundamentally different and competing narratives about human society and that it is the business of theologians to articulate the Christian narrative, rather than to cede priority to the narrative of social science. Milbank's aim, bluntly expressed, is "to 'end' the dialogue between theology and sociology" (1990: 4).

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[38] See e.g. Scroggs 1980: 166-67; Malina 1982: 237-38; Meeks 1983: 2-4; Esler 1987: 12-13; Holmberg 1990: 149-50; Theissen 1979: 58-60; 1993: 187-88; Horrell 1996a: 18-22.

[39] E.g. Malina 1982: 237-38; Esler 1987: 12: "There is little to be said for the reductionist criticism".

[40] Berger has offered his own theological response to the issue of this atheistic stance in Berger 1969.

I am not convinced that the theoretical narratives of theology and social science are so fundamentally incommensurable, nor as monolithic, as Milbank seems to suggest. Nevertheless, there are important theoretical presuppositions underpinning various forms of social theory which should be carefully and critically appraised. While there is more variety within the traditions and contemporary formulations of social theory than Milbank acknowledges, there is, it seems to me, an important truth in Milbank's argument that sociology and theology offer "narratives" about human society with fundamentally different priorities and assumptions at their heart, and that *some* forms of social science offer explanations of early Christianity which stand in tension with "theological" perspectives. Of course, whether that tension or opposition is an attraction or a problem for the scholar of early Christianity will depend upon personal commitments and beliefs, but what should certainly be avoided is the naïve belief that any form of social science can be used to study the early church without any serious theoretical conflict between that perspective and more theological understandings.[41]

These various criticisms should not therefore be too lightly dismissed. But neither do they require the abandonment of the enterprise. Those who practice social-scientific criticism, in whatever form, themselves often stress the need for ongoing methodological reflection and critical discussion. Important theoretical issues need to be debated and clarified, but in the context of ongoing and creative attempts to use social-scientific resources in studies of early Christianity. The social sciences offer tools for exploring the social context within which the "theology" of early Christianity was forged, and resources for investigating the ways in which early Christian writings formed and shaped patterns of interaction within the congregations. They bring new and different questions onto the agenda for the study of early Christianity, without that in any way implying or requiring the abandonment of more traditional, theological modes of inquiry. For example, a social scientist may ask about the ways in which particular aspects of early Christian belief and practice constructed a distinct sense of group identity and formed boundaries around the membership of the early Christian communities. This enables comparison with the ways in which other groups, then and now, construct and maintain their identity and boundaries, but it does not negate or undermine attempts to understand and articulate the particular ideas and practices

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[41] See further the range of critical reactions to Milbank's book presented in Gill 1996: 429-70, especially that by sociologist Kieran Flanagan. Gill's articles are extracts from fuller presentations in *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992).

which constitute that specifically Christian identity. In some cases, of course, a social-scientific explanation of some aspect of the rise of Christianity will conflict with a Christian theological understanding of that process: in such cases Milbank's notion of competing narratives seeking to "out-narrate" one another may well be apposite. But the academy is surely the place where even such deeply opposed forms of description and explanation can and should be articulated, considered, and tested by critical scrutiny.

6.2. Theory, methods and models

Many of those who have written about the use of social-scientific methods in New Testament studies have stressed the importance of ongoing methodological reflection (e.g. Stowers 1985; Elliott 1986). Susan Garrett, for example, writing on the sociology of early Christianity, insists: "It is... increasingly urgent that scholars of Christian origins engage in sustained reflection on the philosophical implications of the perspectives and models they choose to employ." (Garrett 1992: 93) In Garrett's article a contrast is drawn between "a rigorous model-testing approach" — characteristic, as we have seen, of the work of the Context Group — and the more "interpretive" approach adopted by "ethnographic" anthropologists (i.e. those who seek to immerse themselves in the culture of the people they are studying and then to offer a "thick description"; see Garrett 1992: 92). Garrett sees Meeks's book (1983) as a fine example of the latter approach, which she favours (Garrett 1992: 95-96).

This, then, is an important point of contemporary debate and disagreement (cf. Martin 1993: 107-10). On the one hand there are those who insist that a social-scientific approach should involve the employment and testing of models which have been formulated on the basis of cross-cultural research. Malina, a prominent practitioner of this approach, defines a model as "an abstract, simplified representation of some real world object, event or interaction" (1982: 231). Equipped with an appropriate set of social-scientific models the researcher can approach the evidence and test whether the data fit. Those who advocate a model-based approach insist that their use of models is heuristic and not prescriptive, and that only if the data fit the model will its use be justified (Esler 1994: 12-13; 1995a: 4). But any particular model *shapes* the way in which evidence is selected and interpreted; theoretical questions

about the nature of a model or research framework are therefore as crucial as the pragmatic question as to how well the data fit.

Others have doubts about this "scientific" approach to the study of human societies, and consider that a model-based approach can result in the evidence being fitted into a particular mould which insufficiently allows for variations across space and change over time. They argue instead for an approach which, while theoretically informed, uses theory as a "sensitising" tool and seeks to explore the particularities of each specific socio-cultural context (cf. Garrett 1992; Horrell 1996a: 9-18; 2000; Barclay 1995a: 118).

A comparable division among classicists influenced by anthropology is noted by Paul Cartledge (1994):

> On the one hand, there are those who believe it is possible and fruitful to generalize across all modern Greece (and sometimes, more broadly still, to "the Mediterranean world," for example) and to use such generalized comparative data to supplement as well as interpret the lacunose primary data of antiquity... On the other hand, there are those who... believe... that such comparison should be used chiefly to highlight fundamental cultural difference rather than homogenize heterogenous cultures, or fill gaps in the extant primary sources (Cartledge 1994: 5).

This debate reflects a similar one within the social sciences themselves, where some (e.g. Turner 1987: 156-94) advocate an approach which seeks to generalise and explain human behaviour in laws and precise models, while others argue for a more interpretive, or hermeneutically-informed, version of social science, which emphasises rather the uniqueness of particular contexts and seeks explanations in those particularities rather than in generalisations (e.g. Giddens 1984: xiii-xxxvii, 1-40; see further Horrell 1996a: 9-32). In the current "postmodern" climate there has certainly been a move away from grand theory and model-building. Some contemporary anthropologists, for example, have specifically criticised "generalisations" about supposed cultural zones, such as "the Mediterranean", calling instead for "ethnographic particularism" (Herzfeld 1980: 349; cf. Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992: 5-6; n.44 below).

Such philosophical and theoretical issues are an important area of current debate, with implications for the way in which a historical approach informed by the social sciences should be developed. It is hardly to be expected, nor necessarily to be

desired, that the current diversity of method and practice will disappear. But it is important to explore and debate the theoretical issues which underpin the variety of approaches, in order to clarify what is basically in dispute and to refine and reformulate new directions for research.[42]

6.3. *Anthropology and the understanding of the ancient Mediterranean context*

As outlined in §3 above, members of the Context Group have developed and applied a consistent set of models based on the work of various anthropologists, which, they propose, enable the interpreter to avoid the perils of anachronism and ethnocentrism and to appreciate the cultural dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean. The group's work has done much to draw attention to the social and cultural dynamics of the early Christian world and to highlight the differences between that world and the twentieth-century West. However, critical questions may also be raised. First, there seems to be an over-dependence on the basic set of models outlined in Malina's work of 1981, which in any case lack the reference to extra-biblical ancient sources necessary to demonstrate the models' validity as a representation of ancient Mediterranean culture (cf. Gager 1983: 195-96).[43] Some of these models, notably that of honour and shame, and the idea that contests for honour are played out in public encounters of challenge-riposte, have been repeatedly cited and applied (e.g. Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992; Malina and Neyrey 1991a; Neyrey 1994). Certainly these studies have helped to show the extent to which such social values are visible in the biblical texts, but the illumination is not necessarily increased with frequent repetition. It may also be suggested that the models have sometimes become somewhat inflexible tools, which lead to a rather "homogenised" view of "Mediterranean culture" and give too little opportunity for the subtleties and variations of local contexts to emerge (cf. Garrett 1988; 1992; Chance 1994: 146-49; Meggitt 1998a). This is especially to be noted since recent anthropological studies stress the variety of ways in which honour or shame (and not necessarily both) may be instantiated in particular contexts, and encourage the

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[42] Cf. Osiek 1989: 269-74, 277; Martin 1993: 107-110. For the two sides of the ongoing debate see Garrett 1992 with response in Esler 1995a: 4-8; Horrell 1996a: 9-32, with critique and response in Esler 1998a, taken up again most recently in Horrell 2000 and Esler 2000a. For a model-based approach see e.g. Malina 1981; 1986; Elliott 1986; Neyrey 1991; Rohrbaugh 1996.

[43] Note, however, the detailed use of ancient sources in e.g. Neyrey 1994; Elliott 1995b; Malina and Neyrey 1996.

researcher to be open to the rich diversity of local cultures, rather than adopt or assume a single model.[44] Moreover, a number of the anthropological studies employed by Malina *et al.* are of the modern Mediterranean, and the implicit assumption that modern and ancient Mediterranean cultures are broadly continuous and similar may be sharply questioned (Meggitt 1998a). To some extent the underlying issue and point of debate is a methodological one: Should a social-scientific approach involve the testing of generalised cross-cultural models or a more inductive, interpretive, particularist approach (see §6.2 above)?[45]

A fundamental achievement of the work of Malina and others has been to bring the insights, methods and models of the discipline of anthropology into fruitful engagement with the study of early Christianity. Whatever the precise method used to employ these resources, there is surely much to be gained from continued critical engagement with recent anthropological work on societies which bear closer comparison with the early Christian communities than do the industrialised market economies of the contemporary developed world. Indeed, Dale Martin suggests that "most scholars engaged in social approaches to the New Testament claim to find sociology less and less helpful and anthropology and ethnography more and more interesting" (Martin 1993: 115). Martin's recent book (1995) represents an interesting and important study, not using a model-based approach, but employing cross-cultural studies and drawing briefly on theories of ideology, which illustrates how ancient sources may be used to reconstruct the diverse and contrasting ancient views of the social and individual body, and of disease in the body, thereby also stressing the gap between that social world and our own.[46] In other work too, the anthropologically

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[44] See esp. Herzfeld 1980; Chance 1994; Gilmore 1987; Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992. Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (1992: 6) for example, referring to the use of the term "Mediterranean Society" in the subtitle of their earlier work (Peristiany 1965) state that this "led sometimes to the misunderstanding that we were proposing to establish the Mediterranean as a 'culture area'. This was not the case... In fact we were as much interested in the differences of culture as in the similarities among the peoples surrounding the Mediterranean." I am also indebted here to Louise Lawrence's research on honour and shame in anthropology and biblical studies. See now also the debate between Horrell 2000 and Esler 2000a.

[45] Cf. also the critical comments of Sanders 1993: 100-14, relating particularly to the use of Mary Douglas's theory by Malina and Neyrey 1988.

[46] See further the review in Horrell 1996b. For another recent book using cultural anthropology see Gordon 1997.

informed appreciation of cultural dynamics which Malina *et al.* have done so much to promote is drawn in alongside other kinds of historical and social-scientific evidence, thus indicating ways in which distinctions in contemporary approaches to research, outlined in §3-4 above, might be broken down (see e.g. Witherington 1998b; Osiek and Balch 1997). Other directions in anthropological research might also prove fruitful for studies of early Christian texts: the use of literary texts as sources for ethnography, for example, has more obvious parallels to the kind of study which is possible with early Christian sources than the more traditional anthropological method of participant observation.[47]

6.4. Radical or conservative? Early Christianity, its interpreters, and the critique of ideology

The work of feminists, liberation theologians, and other radical scholars (see §5 above) has helped to focus attention on particular socio-political questions about the history of early Christianity and the character of the New Testament texts: To what extent and in what sense was the early church egalitarian? To what extent, if at all, did the early Christian communities reject or subvert the dominant social and patriarchal hierarchy of their society? Does the teaching of Jesus, or Paul, or other early Christian voices, challenge that patriarchal hierarchy and promote equality and liberation, or does it reinforce established patterns of domination and subordination? Although the presuppositions and commitments of each interpreter undoubtedly affect the ways in which these questions are posed and the style of the answer, a particular perspective by no means necessarily follows from a specific interpretative commitment. Feminist scholars, for example, disagree as to whether the New Testament offers some evidence of, and resources to support, the liberation and equality of women (e.g. Fiorenza 1983; Schottroff 1993) or whether the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition is so irredeemably patriarchal that it must be abandoned altogether (e.g. Daly 1986; Hampson 1996). Radical and Marxist scholars of the New Testament and of ancient history disagree as to whether early Christianity's message challenged the social order of the day, or whether it merely helped to sustain it.[48] What is important is that these critical

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[47] For examples of such work among anthropologists see Schapera 1977; Hill 1995; Whitehead 1995. I am indebted here to my research student Louise Lawrence, who is using such resources to write a "literary ethnography" of Matthew's gospel.

[48] See for example the positive view of a "liberating" Paul in Elliott 1994 (review in Horrell 1997); the "love-hate" relationship with the New Testament — essentially positive about

sociological questions have been placed prominently onto the agenda of early Christian studies, and it is to be hoped that further debate will seek to clarify not only the range of possible answers to such questions, but also the ways in which theoretical resources from the traditions of Marxism and critical social theory might be used to develop historically plausible radical perspectives on the early church.[49] The question of historical plausibility is important, since some attempts to "rediscover" a radical, liberating Jesus, Paul or whomever, seem to end up pressing the more awkward texts into an implausible mould in order to construct the kind of ideal figure who is a reflection of the author's own commitments.[50]

Among the wide variety of recent and postmodern approaches to biblical criticism are developments in ideological criticism, where interpreters inquire into the interests which underpin particular textual formulations, and how those texts function in a discourse of power, to sustain hierarchies, to marginalise and exclude, and to conceal or naturalise relations of domination.[51] These critical questions clearly connect with the concerns of feminist and liberation theologies, which seek to unmask the

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Jesus, negative about Paul — expressed by Mayer 1983; and the negative comments on the impact of early Christianity in de Ste Croix 1975; 1981: 103-11, 416-41.

[49] See for example the careful discussion of method in Meggitt 1998b, concerning the approach to doing history "from below" and the use of élite sources to reconstruct popular culture.

[50] See for example the comments of Mitchell (1996: 547) on Elliott 1994: "E. blithely and swiftly dismisses all the evidence for Paul as a social conservative… The constructive argument depends upon a pileup of questionable assumptions… One should not… accept unquestioningly the rigid dichotomy which controls E.'s work (that Paul was either oppressor or liberator) but should press for more complex, mixed, and nuanced portraits of one who offers no simple social legacy." Similarly Horrell 1997. The famous comments of Albert Schweitzer on those whose reconstructions of the historical Jesus in fact bear the image of their own reflection remain apposite (Schweitzer 2000: 6 [orig. 1913]). Now, of course, we are more aware of the extent to which every historical reconstruction reflects the context and interests of the interpreter. Nevertheless, unless we abandon the idea that history can be written at all, then it remains the case that historical reconstructions can be more or less plausible in their treatment of the available evidence.

[51] For a brief introduction to ideological criticism see Pippin 1997; also, linked with the wider concerns of postmodern biblical criticism, Adam 1995; Bible and Culture Collective 1995. I have sought to apply a critical conception of ideology in the context of a social-scientific approach in a number of publications: Horrell 1993; 1995; 1996a; 1999b.

strategies by which men legitimate or conceal their domination of women, or by which the rich maintain and conceal their oppression of the poor. But these questions about (concealed) interests are now being addressed not only to the ancient texts but also to their contemporary interpreters, whose interests and commitments are equally bound up with the perspectives they adopt and promote. Thus a whole series of critical (and sometimes disturbing) questions are beginning to be raised and there is the potential for further development of an interesting coalescence of concerns: from ideology-critique, critical social theory, emancipatory theologies, and radical or materialist approaches to history.

6.5. Links with literary and rhetorical approaches

Another major new direction in biblical studies of the last quarter-century or so is the development of a wide variety of literary approaches, ranging from narrative and rhetorical studies to reader-response, post-structuralism and deconstruction (see n. 1 above for surveys). Some of these methods have virtually nothing in common with social-scientific approaches, as they consciously eschew any interest in the social world in which the text was originally produced. However, since the study of early Christian texts, whatever else it may be, is certainly the study of literature, tools for literary analysis and criticism can hardly but be important to socio-historical investigations. Any responsible historical or social-scientific study must take account of the literary character of the texts which comprise the primary evidence, and must consider carefully how historical evidence can be drawn from texts that are written to exhort and persuade, often with a polemical and argumentative thrust. In recent years some scholars have sought to develop methods which incorporate both literary and social-scientific approaches to interpretation. Norman Petersen's (1985) study of Paul's letter to Philemon is a good example. Vernon Robbins has given considerable attention to the task of developing an integrated approach to New Testament interpretation which encompasses both literary-rhetorical and social-scientific methods, and has coined the term "socio-rhetorical criticism" (see Robbins 1996a; 1996b). In three recent "socio-rhetorical" commentaries, on the Corinthian letters (1995), Acts (1998a), and the Gospel of Mark (2001), Ben Witherington has independently[52] also sought to combine the insights of social-scientific and rhetorical approaches in a historical

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[52] Witherington (1995: xii n.8) does acknowledge: "It appears that the term 'socio-rhetorical' was first used by Vernon K. Robbins."

analysis of these texts. Such attempts to integrate social-scientific and literary methods are important and timely, and point the way to an important direction for continuing research.

6.6. *The continued revitalisation of the study of early Christian history, ethics and theology*

Since the 1970s "sociological" perspectives have become increasingly widely infused into New Testament and early Christian studies. It is now, for example, commonplace to hear about the sectarian character of the Johannine community, or the social function of the Jewish law in debates about understanding Paul. Such perspectives have undoubtedly helped to root the discussion of early Christian texts much more concretely in the social situations of human communities and in an appreciation of the social dynamics of human interaction and conflict. In terms of Scroggs's critique of much New Testament study up to the 1970s (cited above, p.00) it seems that the introduction of social-scientific perspectives has indeed helped "to put body and soul together again" and has led to the "revitalising of historical criticism" (Barton 1997: 286; cf. 1995). The continued creative and careful use of a variety of social-scientific approaches — some no doubt yet to be discovered by biblical or patristic scholars or applied to early Christianity by social scientists — should enable this revitalisation to progress further.

At the close of a recent essay introducing social-scientific criticism Stephen Barton suggests that the introduction of social-scientific perspectives may perhaps also bear fruit in revitalising the study of New Testament theology and ethics (Barton 1997: 286: "it remains to be seen..."). Barton mentions the work of William Countryman (1989) and Wayne Meeks (1993) as "promising beginnings". There is an obvious overlap of concern between the study of ethics — if ethics is conceived of as reflection on the ways in which human beings should behave in relation to one another and their environment — and the social-scientific study of patterns of social interaction in communities and of the ways in which texts both arise from and shape their social context. If the social sciences do influence the study of early Christian ethics then they will surely direct the focus away from the individual and her/his decisions of right and wrong on specific moral questions, and towards the ways in which the early Christian texts shape social relationships in particular community contexts (cf. Barton 1992). Hence Meeks prefers to speak of the New Testament texts as instruments of "moral

formation" (1996: 317). The questions raised by social scientists also have a direct bearing on the critical study of Christian ethics: Who is urging what particular course or pattern of behaviour, and whose interests does that exhortation reflect? How is power used to manipulate or coerce? There would seem then to be the scope for the fruitful enrichment of the study of early Christian ethics with perspectives and questions from the social sciences.

If "theology" is seen not as the elucidation of abstract and unchanging truths but as "a contingent historical construct emerging from, and reacting back upon, particular social practices conjoined with particular semiotic and figural codings" (Milbank 1990: 2), then, *pace* Milbank, the study of theology is surely closely linked with the concerns of social science. In terms of the study of early Christian theology (or theologies) the social sciences offer tools to enrich the historical study of the social context within which such theology was formed, and provide theoretical tools to analyse the ways in which the theology (expressed in texts) acted back upon — i.e. shaped — social interaction in the early Christian communities. In this field of study too, then, the social sciences have an important role to play.

7. Conclusion

The use of the social sciences in studies of early Christianity is now widespread and firmly established. Whether in the study of the social context in which a text was written, the ideology and impact of a text itself, the character and expansion of the early Christian communities, or indeed of the social location and interests of contemporary interpreters, the social sciences have shown that they offer rich resources to complement both the already established and the newly developing methods of biblical criticism. In the last thirty years or so, the development of social-scientific approaches has indeed been a creative movement in the study of early Christian phenomena. The sheer diversity of approach, and the increasingly widespread impact of social-scientific study, make the field ever more difficult to survey and assess. With links established to both historical criticism and literary methods, the social sciences have made their presence and their value very widely felt. Yet even though social-scientific methods and findings are now widely institutionalised into the mainstream of early Christian studies, this does not mean that new and creative approaches are no longer likely to be developed. All the signs indicate that in a wide variety of directions,

some perhaps new and unexpected, the social sciences will continue to enrich and inform the study of early Christianity.[53]

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[53] Extensive bibliographical information can be found in the classified bibliography in this volume. For other bibliographical sources see Harrington 1988; Theissen 1988, 331-70; May 1991; Barton 1992; Elliott 1993; Hochschild 1999. Useful book-length introductions to the social sciences and New Testament interpretation are Tidball 1983; Osiek 1984 (2nd edition 1992); Holmberg 1990; Elliott 1993. Shorter introductions and assessments of the field may be found in the dictionary articles by Kee 1985; Garrett 1992; and the articles by Osiek 1989; Barton 1992; 1995; 1997; and Martin 1993.

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