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Cultural Interaction in the New Testament

*Dedicated to Prof. Dr. Bo Reicke
on his retirement 1984*

In recent years there has been a revived interest in the social aspect of earliest Christianity. This interest is reflected in a growing body of literature and a number of research projects in different parts of the world. The interest is not new insofar as the attempt to understand the social dimension of earliest Christianity was a major starting point in the work of Ernst Troeltsch at the beginning of this century. A certain amount of work has been done by ancient historians which touches on earliest Christianity and some of the more recent studies on this question have drawn heavily on the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. One of the questions which has not so far been to the fore in this discussion is the relationship between such a social analysis and the theological character of Christianity which is being thus analysed. In sociology this is discussed under the heading of the sociology of knowledge and while that is also a matter of more recent interest in that discipline, it has, of course, a considerable history. One may put the question in two complementary ways. To what extent did the social environment to which the early Christians belonged influence the way in which they thought and consequently the way in which they came to understand and to express their Christian faith? On the other hand, one may put it from the point of view of the interpreter. To what extent and in what way does the sociological analysis of earliest Christianity lead to a broader and better understanding of the thought world and the inner character of the religion of the early Christians?

Two important articles, both associated with Basel, written in the post-war period touched on these questions. The first article is one which was published in this Journal by Rudolf Bultmann in 1946 entitled *Points of Contact and Points of Conflict* and the second was published in 1951 by Oscar Cullman, then a Professor in Basel. Bultmann's article was concerned fundamentally with the theological question and sought to pursue that with an eye to the social or cultural situation of the New Testament writers. Cullmann's article

was concerned much more directly with the social and cultural character of earliest Christianity.

In his article Bultmann was concerned to deal with the question of how there can be points of contact or connection between the utterances of preachers and the expressions of Christian truth with the culture in which those utterances are made. The article, in a certain sense, begins in the context of missionary attitudes and policies. If Christianity is thought to be a religion in a human sense then contact between Christianity and other religions can be thought of in terms of continuity and the question of contact is more easily conceived. If, however, Christianity is not thought of in that way but rather that Christian faith is about a particular divine revelation then the connection is not so simple and may more properly be thought of in terms of a conflict. It is also undoubtedly the case that the debate on natural theology, so sharply and vigorously expressed in the exchange between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth in the middle 1930's, provides a point of reference for Bultmann's article. Bultmann's answer to the dilemma of contact or conflict is twofold. In the first place, he says, "God's action with man through His word naturally has no point of contact in man or in human intellectual life, to which God must accommodate himself."¹ In this sense, therefore, God's action in the first place brings to man a conflict, a judgement. But the paradox is that this very conflict reveals a point of contact. It is an old point that Bultmann makes here, familiar to ancient philosophers such as Plato, that conflict between two parties or entities requires some point of connection for that conflict to have any substance or reality. In Bultmann's case he says that it is man's sin which provides for God's contradicting word of grace a point of contact.

The second aspect of Bultmann's answer is that God's conflict with man is not always necessarily in the form of a contradiction. This is because "all preaching is in the last analysis, human speech!"² This is a very important point to Bultmann because unless the preaching is in the actual concrete terms in which the preacher exists and in which his hearers exist then the conflict of divine grace with man's sin may not properly be understood as a conflict and a judgement. The two answers are, of course, important in Bultmann's whole enterprise in interpreting the New Testament and they appear again in his essay on Demythologising in *Kerygma and Myth*.³ How-

¹ Points of Contact and Conflict originally published in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 2 (1946) 401–418. Quotations are here taken from the English as published in: R. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, London 1955, 135.

² *Op. cit.* 137.

³ *New Testament and Mythology*, in: *Kerygma and Myth*, London 1964 (E. T. of German edition of 1948).

ever, in this article he goes on from the general theological points to illustrate what he means by reference to the New Testament. "A glance at the New Testament may be instructive in regard to how that can be achieved."⁴ In other words, Bultmann is interested in the theological question, sets out the issues as he understands them and then seeks to show how the New Testament writers handled that precise question.

He takes three examples from the New Testament. First he looks at contact with popular Hellenistic philosophy, particularly the natural theology of Stoicism, the Hellenistic mystery religions and finally Gnosticism. Each of these he looks at in turn and tries to show how the New Testament writers are involved with the basic theological question which he had outlined in the opening section of his article. In discussing these illustrations, Bultmann is concerned to show how there is an interaction or engagement with these three contemporary religious-philosophical ways of speaking and understanding on the part of the New Testament writers.

This is an altogether interesting and important article but it is noteworthy that Bultmann's examples are all of a religious or theological character. One is bound to ask about the social patterns that the early Christians were involved with in the societies in which they lived, and the implicit attitudes which those social patterns carried. One is also bound to wonder how far the Barth-Brunner debate and the vigorous theological argument about natural theology at the time slanted the question that Bultmann addressed to his New Testament sources rather more than we might at this distance be disposed to allow.

Oscar Cullmann's article was published in 1951 as a chapter in a book which was concerned with Christianity and Culture. The social and cultural questions are therefore much to the fore. The article is, in fact, entitled *Early Christianity and Civilisation*.⁵ In this article Cullmann lays down certain principles by which one could seek an understanding of the attitude of earliest Christianity to its culture. He draws attention to the considerable difference in the evidence available to us in the form of Christian literature between the first century and the second. In the first century there is very little that directly bears on the question of the interaction of Christians with the culture of their day, whereas in the second century there is a considerable amount of wide ranging material upon the point. Cullmann thought that there were a number of social factors which contributed to this, not least the "humble station" in

⁴ Op. cit. 138.

⁵ The French original was published in: *Het Oudste Christendom en de antieke Cultuur*, Haarlam 1951. The English version from which quotations are here taken was published in: O. Cullmann, *The Early Church* (Ed. By A. J. B. Higgins), London 1956.

society of the first Christians, a factor which changed in the second century with the spread of Christianity through all ranks of society.

However, the real clue to the understanding of the first century situation according to Cullmann is to be found not in such social factors because the social attitudes of the early Christians flowed from their theological convictions. First in importance in this respect was their belief that the world was soon to come to an end, and that therefore its institutions and culture could not have any ultimate value; the important thing was to preach the gospel in the given environment. This attitude was held to, according to Cullmann, even when it had become clear that the world was not going to end soon, because they believed that God had set them in the world. Their faith in Christ as Lord of the universe contained "a more positive germ of appreciation"⁶ of the institutions and culture of the world, though this notion is applied only to the state in the New Testament itself. Cullmann thus presents a developmental analysis of the attitude of the early Christians to their cultural environment and has a starting point which places the theological convictions prior to and as controlling the way in which attitudes towards that culture were developed and expressed. The article is of considerable value, however, from the point of view of any present analysis because it draws together in a clear and concise form a way of handling the question which is representative of a great deal of literature. The identification of a certain disinterest in the world, the importance of the imminent *parousia*, the attempt at a formulation which sees a common approach to these questions and the idea that theological convictions precede and determine social attitudes, are all common parlance in the discussion of this subject. This is true even though recent studies might take a different view of the social distribution of the early Christians⁷ or the precise significance of the *parousia*⁸.

Both these articles point from different angles to an important question in the analysis and interpretation of New Testament documents. To what extent and in what way did the early Christians interact with the culture of which they were a part in the formation and expression of their newly found Christian convictions? This is a question which requires attention because of the renewed interest in the analysis of the social character of early Christianity and it is a question which is pointed to, albeit from different angles, by the articles of Bultmann and Cullmann. In an attempt to avoid begging too many

⁶ Op. cit. 198.

⁷ For recent discussion of the social character of early Christianity see for example H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective*, Philadelphia 1980, and A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Baton Rouge 1977.

⁸ See for example, A. L. Moore, *Parousia in the New Testament*, Leiden 1966.

questions about the nature of culture and its description,⁹ I shall concentrate on two broad questions, and look at a number of particular examples within these two questions. On the one hand there is the question of how the New Testament writers related to their society and its images, and on the other the question of how far they developed their own group self-consciousness. In both cases I shall try to look at the inter-relationship between social images and the formulation of theological convictions.

In using the term “interaction” I do not wish to imply that Christianity as reflected in the New Testament, was an entity over and against and separate from society. On the contrary I take it as clear that these people were members of their society and always had been. The question could as well be put in terms of the use they make of their culture in the formulation and expression of their faith. This terminology would be more in keeping with sociological analyses of other groups but, within the framework of traditional theological discourse, might be taken to imply that these people had a theology and simply took up elements in their culture and used these in an instrumental way to express already arrived at convictions. I hope to make it clear that the “given” is not given as an entity before or prior to the utilization of cultural images, but that these christians discerned and discovered the given in and through their culture.

A. Interaction with the Host Cultures

Of the various examples that could be taken in this question I shall briefly look at here the areas of family relationships, slavery, adoption and inheritance in Paul and Paul’s attitude towards and practice of boasting.

I. Household Relationships

It is apparent to any reader of the New Testament that on a number of occasions the early christians had to come to terms with the family institution. The passages which contain exhortations on these matters in a number of the letters in the New Testament have some striking similarities. This has prompted many to describe them as “household codes”, and their relationship to both Jewish and Hellenistic models has been widely researched. E. G.

⁹ See A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Cambridge, Mass. 1952, A. L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture*, Chicago and London 1952. There is, of course, a considerable fluidity of meaning for the term culture simply because of the framework within which it is used. Just as it is possible to speak of European culture in general and also of German culture as a discrete entity within that, so it is possible to speak of the culture of the Roman Empire of the first century A. D. in general and also of specific particular cultures within that generality.

Selwyn studied these codes at some length and concluded that the codes reflected a primitive christian paraenetical tradition which was well known to the first readers, and which was being developed by each writer in his own way.¹⁰ This analysis does not in itself indicate the original source of such an underlying code, and although Selwyn draws attention to Jewish and Hellenistic elements, he thinks the original can be “most easily explained as due to the synthetic genius of the early Christian Mission.”¹¹ This has been questioned recently by E. Schweizer on the grounds that the codes “appear only in the writings of the Pauline school.”¹² If, however, we ask a slightly different question, we may cast some light on our fundamental concern here. Instead of asking where the codes came from,¹³ but rather to what end are they used in the letters, we will be able to focus on the way in which the particular writer is responding to his particular situation.

In I Peter the code comes in 2,13–3,7, though the section of which the code is a part actually begins at 2,11. The first two verses are a general introduction to the more particular exhortations which follow and it is striking how the tone and language in these verses changes from that used in the first ten verses of the chapter. In 2,1–10 the subject is the character of the Christian group and there are a number of phrases and terms which are used to develop a group consciousness. They are living stones which are being built into a “spiritual house”. They are a holy priesthood, an idea that is elaborated by reference to Is 28,16, where the context has to do with relations between groups, and Ps 118,22. The terms are then laid one upon another in 2,9, race, kingdom, nation and people. These terms are qualified throughout by adjectives which clearly indicate that the Christians being addressed are to regard themselves as an accepted and established group. In 2,11, however, there is an important change. No longer accepted and established, they are addressed in the vocative as strangers and refugees. Clearly the frame of reference has changed, since the same people are being addressed. Whereas in 2,1–10 the Christian community is being addressed in its own terms with a view to developing as well as expressing a group sense of belonging, 2,11f. is concerned with these same people thought of as not belonging to the larger community and social structure in which they are located.¹⁴ The “code” in its setting in the letter is

¹⁰ *The First Epistle of Peter*, London 1964, 435.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 438.

¹² *Traditional Ethical Patterns in the Pauline and post-Pauline letters and their development (lists of vices and house-tables)*, in E. Best, and R. McL. Wilson, *Text and Interpretation*, Cambridge 1979.

¹³ See J. E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel*, Göttingen 1972.

¹⁴ A small exception to this may be the reference to ἀδελφότης in IPet 2,17 and 3,8 and 5,9.

thus not part of the development of a Christian society or culture itself, but rather it is advice to those located in, but not truly belonging to, an existing society.¹⁵ This picture is confirmed by some of the actual exhortations within the “code”: 2,12 maintain good conduct among the gentiles and 2,18 servants are to submit to overbearing masters. The reasons given for the exhortation to wives (to win their unbelieving husbands) and the example of Christ applied to the situation of the slave of an obviously difficult master (2,20 ff.) point in the same direction. The advice of husbands hardly has the same tone; but the husband would very likely be master in his own house, certainly he would be master of his own wife. IPet 3,8 marks a return, albeit brief, to a Christian group framework. The intention of this group of exhortations is thus to encourage and advise Christians who find themselves within an existing society and in these particular relationships as set by the structures of that society.

It is important to notice the effect of the change in terminology, the change in framework. It has the clear and emphatic effect of continuing to reinforce the group awareness of the readers. Within the framework of their own group they are the nation, the people and so on. Within the wider framework they are distinct and separate; part of the people, but more importantly a people apart. They are pilgrims, aliens and strangers. Both ways of speaking have the effect of emphasising that the readers are a discrete entity within society.

When we turn to the code in Col 3,18–4,1 a different picture emerges. The first two chapters of the letter are mainly concerned with doctrinal and confessional matters, and in ch. 3 a more hortatory style begins. There are warnings about the kind of behaviour to avoid (Col 3,5–11) and then positive exhortations introduced by a description of the readers as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”. These exhortations clearly refer to relations amongst the Colossian Christians in the first instance, and a number of them have the decided effect of heightening the sense of Christian group consciousness. Col 3,16 refers to their relations with each other, and 3,17, though more general in form, has the same frame of reference. At the end of the code the theme of Christian behaviour is continued within the same frame of reference. Only at 4,5 is this changed, with the exhortation to wise conduct towards outsiders. Col as a whole is generally more concerned with what we might call domestic or internal Christian community questions, but the code is more precisely located in a section of exhortations to do with relations within the Christian group.

¹⁵ See B. N. Kaye, *Church and Politics. Some Guidelines from the New Testament*, *Churchman* 93 (1979) 222 f.

Within the code itself the hints that a wider frame of reference is in mind in the exhortations to slaves in Col 3,22 ff. are matched by similar remarks to Christian masters in 4,1. Whatever the intention of the code before it was incorporated into this letter,¹⁶ the actual context in the letter refers the code to the Christian community. What we have here, then, is something that is much more like a code for relations within a Christian household, rather than advice to Christians who find themselves in domestic relationships with unbelievers in a larger and hostile social structure. It may well be that the code is included at this point in response to the problems at Colossae with which the letter as a whole was intended to deal.¹⁷

The code in Eph moves even more in the direction indicated in Col. The preceding section is concerned with exhortations to do with the Christian group, and this context continues in the material after the code. The code itself is introduced by an exhortation to mutual submission within the Christian group, and the hostility with which the readers are to contend comes from spiritual forces and refers to sin and temptation in the life of the Christian. This is true also of the opposition in Eph 6,12, which, insofar as there is some parallelism between Col and Eph, is different from the social hostility of Col 4,5. Furthermore, within the code, the actual exhortations fit this context of a Christian household. The exhortation to children refers to the commandment given to redeemed Israel, and there is no reference to an obviously difficult master in the exhortations to slaves. Indeed, the addition of the adjective “earthly” has the effect of qualifying and delimiting the relationship; a relationship which in the last analysis, but not at the present, is of no significance. Most significant of all, however, in this code is the way in which the discussion of the relationship between husband and wife is entwined with comments on the nature of the church and particularly the relationship between Christ and the church. We have here the emergence of a new humanity.

This analysis of the intention and context of the household codes does not at all mean that a chronological relationship can be identified; that IPet is the earliest form and Eph the latest. Such a decision would be dependent on a number of other factors in deciding the date of the various letters. Nor is it appropriate to assume that there is a sequential development in early Christianity from a less to a more theological position. Nonetheless, it is clear that the different letters with their codes show quite different aspects of the interaction between the early Christians and their social environment. In IPet we

¹⁶ See Crouch *op. cit.* 14 ff.

¹⁷ Crouch *op. cit.* 151.

see Christians being advised to conform as much as possible to the terms of the social order of which they were a part, while at the same time clear efforts are made to develop a sense of belonging to a Christian society, which, while not withdrawing them from their social involvements, nonetheless does mark the beginnings of a sub-culture within society. The use of the example of Christ in his sufferings for the slave is particularly interesting in this respect in that it shows how a central piece of the Christian tradition about Jesus is thought to relate directly to the problems of Christian involvement in society. This is not just an event of doctrinal significance, but it speaks to the pattern of social relationships of Christians. It is also interesting in that it is expressed in the terms of the Old Testament, and not anything that can be seen to be directly drawn from the gospel tradition about what Jesus actually did. Already, then, the ethical material about social behaviour is worked out on the basis of an interpretation of the historical events being appealed to as an example according to the prophetic figure of the servant of the Lord.¹⁸

A similar integration of the contemporary and the traditional in the expression of theological convictions about the Christian gospel can be seen in Eph. There the inter-twining of the picture of husband and wife with that of Christ and the church is significant not only for the understanding of Christian marriage, but also for the understanding of the church and the work of Christ. Indeed, this particular image has had a profound impact on subsequent Christian thinking about the church.¹⁹ Markus Barth is surely right in saying that both topics of marriage and the relationship between Christ and the church are central, and “both are ontologically and noetically so closely tied together that they cannot be unstrung...”²⁰ This, together with the way in which various sources such as Christian tradition, contemporary common sense and a particular way of interpreting the Old Testament²¹ are fused together alerts us to the striking fact that a central theological theme is here developed within the context of the interaction between this Christian writer and his social environment. This has importance not only for the understanding of marriage but also for the understanding of ecclesiology and christology.

¹⁸ IPet 2, 22 cf. Isa 53, 9; IPet 2, 24a cf. Isa 53, 4, 12; IPet 2, 24b of Isa 53, 5; IPet 2, 25 cf. of Isa 53, 6.

¹⁹ For example, Methodius, *Conv.* III, i, and the list of references in *Biblia Patristica*, Paris 1975, vol. I. One might also note the marriage service of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England.

²⁰ M. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, The Anchor Bible, New York 1974, 655.

²¹ See Barth, *op. cit.* 720 ff.

II. Slavery

The relationship of the early Christians to the institution of slavery has recently been the subject of considerable discussion,²² and it is not possible here to survey even the material from the first century sources, let alone the scholarly debate. I have argued elsewhere that the habit of using the contemporary social institution of slavery as a means of understanding the religious position of Christians probably goes back to Jesus himself.²³ I would like here, however, to draw attention to one point, which is related to that made above in relation to the household codes. The social institution of slavery provided an important way of developing not only the understanding of the Christian's relationship to Christ, or God, but it also provided a powerful mode of discourse for understanding the relationship that should exist between Christians. Not only was the Christian the bondslave of Christ, but he was also the servant of his fellow Christians. This understanding of the way in which the Christians were to relate to each other is often based on the example of Christ;²⁴ the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Here the image is clearly being used in a variety of ways, not all of which are naturally compatible. Sometimes Christ is the master, sometimes the slave. Sometimes the emphasis is on the Christian as free, sometimes as slave. The image is powerful and, given a context in which freedom was increasingly desired, the emphasis on the Christian as slave is the more striking. However, the power of the imagery derives from the presence of the institution. It requires some experience of what the institution actually was like to appreciate fully the force of the Christian use in the New Testament. Of course, from the perspective of the twentieth century the correct reconstruction of that first century social pattern is a prerequisite to the correct appreciation of the force that the New Testament statements would have had for the authors and readers in the first place.²⁵ Because the imagery is used so significantly of relations within the Christian group this point becomes the more important in any attempt to identify the developing group self-understanding of the early Christians.

²² See for example S. Scott Bartchy, *Mallon Chresai. First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7.21*, Missoula (Mont.) 1973.

²³ *The Argument of Romans*, Austin (Texas), 1979, 120 ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 123 ff.

²⁵ See Bartchy *op. cit.* (n.22).

III. Adoption and Inheritance

The motifs of adoption and inheritance are both used by Paul to speak about the relationship between God and man, and they are brought together in his discussion. This, in one sense, ought not to surprise us, and should hardly call for comment in the present context were it not for the fact that the antecedents of these two ideas appear to come from quite different sources. In the Old Testament there are no laws of adoption, though there is provision for the transferring of rights from one member of a family to another. There were adoption laws in Semitic cultures, but there were very few examples even of adoptions in Israel, and these mainly involve foreigners. However, Israel is very clearly regarded as God's son, his first born, by God's own choice. Furthermore, God adopts the king as his son, especially the kings of the Davidic line. On the other hand there are clear and developed laws about adoption in the Roman tradition. By a set of interweaving legal acts an adoption could be effected, and this was often done in order to secure an heir, and thus the maintenance of the family inheritance. Apart from the reference to the blessings of Israel in Rom 9,4 the two main passages where the imagery of adoption is used are Rom 8 and Gal 3-4.

The case of the antecedents of the inheritance imagery is quite different. The idea that the land promised to the patriarchs was by inheritance the promised land of Israel, and that it therefore belonged to them by divine provision is widespread in the Old Testament material. The idea is sometimes used of Israel itself as Jahwe's heritage among the nations. In later Judaism, as one would expect, there was some adjustment to this in the direction of a more spiritual and sometimes a more transcendent notion. However, it is a clear and definite tradition from the Old Testament that the land was Israel's inheritance from God. Paul himself refers to this in Gal 3, where he argues that the true inheritor of the promises given to Abraham is Christ. Similarly in Rom 4 he argues, in relation to the promises to Abraham, that his heirs are those who believe, be they circumcised or not. In Rom 8 Paul argues that the heirs of God are those who are fellow-heirs with Christ. These are known by the fact that they are led by the spirit. They are thus sons of God, and they have the spirit of sonship whereby they cry Abba.

Clearly the idea that the land is the inheritance has been superseded in Paul, but the whole pattern of ideas is as clearly developed from the Old Testament background. What is striking is the way in which the logic of the contemporary Roman understanding of adoption has been brought to bear on this Old Testament material, and to have actually controlled the direction and effect of that material in the arguments. Other considerations have, of

course, helped to transform Paul's understanding of inheritance, not least his idea of justification and its universalising effect, his sense of the immediacy of the Spirit and the application of these things to individual believers. However, given all that, we still have here an interlocking of a set of imagery drawn from the Old Testament with a pattern of thinking drawn from the contemporary legal conceptions of society. That is to say, we have here an example of an interaction of Jewish tradition and contemporary culture for the purposes of building up a mode of discourse about the most central thing in Paul's religion, the relationship between the individual and God.

IV. Boasting – Self-Advertisement

The terminology of boasting is hardly used in the New Testament outside the Pauline corpus, while within that corpus it is extensively and importantly used. The negative stance taken by Paul to boasting is often remarked on, and the strategic assertion in Rom 3,27 that boasting is excluded sharply expressed his opposition. It is also noted that Paul has earlier in Romans identified the Jew as one who boasts in his religious position, and the framework of the discussion in Romans seems to point to the conclusion that boasting is incompatible with the doctrine of justification by faith. In Rom 4 the example of Abraham suggests the same thing. However, in Rom 5 Paul once again uses the boasting terminology, but this time with approval, and probably he should be understood as exhorting his readers to boast.

This positive attitude to boasting on Paul's part is less well observed by commentators. This is also true of the presence in the first century of a well established and precise pattern of self advertisement.²⁶ This is especially true in the Roman tradition, where boasting performs important functions of social differentiation. The art of self advertisement was also important for sophist-type teachers whose peripatetic activities were not dissimilar to Paul's own, and from whom Paul seems to have been obliged to take the trouble to distinguish himself.²⁷ In both Jewish and Hellenistic traditions boasting was intended to establish for oneself a position superior to others. In II Cor Paul engages in some very refined boasting activity, while at the same time, in the best tradition of the art, claiming that he is not skilled so to do. Paul is no amateur in this matter. Yet his boasting is distinct from that of his

²⁶ But see E. A. Judge, Paul's Boasting in relation to Contemporary Professional Practice, *ABR* 16 (1968) 37–50.

²⁷ E. A. Judge, The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community, *JRH* 1 (1960/1961) 4–15, 125–137.

opponents. For him it is not a matter of self advertisement but divine advertisement. His boast is “in the Lord”. That is to say, he is not trying to establish a position for himself, but rather he is trying to extol the activity of God in Christ who has given him his position by grace. The basis and motivation of Paul’s boasting could not be more different from that of his opponents, even though the form and practice were so much the same.

The significance of this for our question is that we have here an example of a first century Christian using an important element in the culture of his society, not so much to express or develop his religious convictions, but to persuade his hearers by means that were familiar to them.

In taking the foregoing examples I should like to suggest that the New Testament writers not only did not turn their backs on the culture of their day, but that they were involved in it and used it extensively and importantly. Extensively, in that they established working relationships with social institutions such as slavery and the household unit on the one hand, and on the other hand they entered into the conceptual and emotional significance of the imageries associated with those institutions. They also used styles of argument and expression drawn from the rhetorical and legal tradition of that society. Importantly, in that they not only turned the institutions to their advantage for the purposes of their mission, as in the case of the household, but also because they used the images to develop and express the most central and fundamental tenets of their beliefs and their ethics.

B. The Development of a Group Awareness

It is not easy to reconstruct the way in which the early christians developed a sense of their own group identity, not least because of the paucity of evidence. However, we can gain some insight into this process by looking at the way in which a sense of having a past emerged, and the significance that this had for the New Testament writers, and also by seeing how this related to their awareness of the immediate presence of God in the form of the Spirit. There are also some hints of a start being made in the development of a group rule and discipline.

It is noteworthy that while Jesus launched some of his more vitriolic attacks on the Jewish authorities of his day for their attachment to their traditions at the expense of the real meaning of the law, the early christians soon developed a notion of tradition themselves. Paul tells the Corinthians that the gospel which he preached was what he had received from others, and

that he was handing it over to them. "Receiving" and "handing over" constitute the process of forming and maintaining a tradition. Paul also brings to bear on the problem of a disorderly fellowship meal in Corinth the tradition of what had happened at the last supper of Jesus and his disciples. He also appeals to the common tradition of baptism in writing to the Romans. Not only does Paul pass on tradition, he creates his own, and expects his churches to follow it and in turn to pass it on. He has his "ways" and his reliable lieutenants know them.

On a broader canvass there are a number of hymns and credal elements embedded in the New Testament literature which point to the development of a traditional form of expression of the Christian faith, and the presence of a paraenetic tradition in the New Testament has been identified by some scholars, but the most notable thing is the development of the gospel tradition. However, the fluidity of the gospel tradition points to another aspect of the emerging self-awareness of the early Christian communities, namely that they were guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit and while they had past commitments, as illustrated in the retention and development of traditions, they also had a sense of contemporary guidance. This tension between past and present already emerges in the New Testament period, and it means for our purposes here that the early Christian communities had a heightened sense of their own position rather than less. The emergence of a group awareness is not the same thing as the emergence of a community with a sense of having a past. When that community has a sense of its own significance in the present then we have a quite important social phenomenon to deal with. We have here in the New Testament a group (or groups) which not only has a sense of a past through its traditions, but also has a consciousness of the importance of its own present existence. There is thus a sense in which the awareness of being guided by the Spirit, or the risen Christ, magnifies the group's self-consciousness. When Paul, writing to the Corinthians, touches on the problem of litigations in the public courts between Christians and advises them to settle such disputes privately within the confines of the Christians group, he thereby reinforces the self awareness of the group. His advice does not undermine the ordinary requirements of the civil law; there was provision for private arbitration. However, the advice itself, and the arguments which he uses to support it, very firmly give to the Christian group in Corinth a significance for themselves which they did not have before.

The same effect is achieved when the Christian group is encouraged to deal with individuals within the group. This is true when it is a matter of discipline for immoral conduct, such as happened in Corinth, or for idleness and disorderliness as in Thessalonica. Where the discipline takes the form of

ostracism from the group, then the group is using a punishment which not only derives from a sense of group identity, but also, by the very exercising of this punishment, contributes to the heightening of that group sense. Another aspect of group treatment of individuals can be seen in the way in which welfare support is provided for the needy. This emerges early in the life of the Jerusalem church; it becomes an important inter-group activity for the Pauline churches in relation to the poor in Jerusalem, it is implied in II Thess, and is explicit in the Pastoral Epistles.

Group awareness is also focussed and heightened by a sense of mission. Whether this is seen in the support given to a missionary individual as by the Philippians in regard to Paul or by each individual believer being ready to give an answer for their faith as in I Pet the effect in terms of group awareness is clear. A good example of group sense being expressed in mission is the way in which the church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas out on a missionary journey and then receives them, with an account of the mission, at the end of their journey.

In order to develop these various things a group does not have to become an alternative society, nor is it necessary to think of communities developing in this way as thereby withdrawing from the host society. However, it is necessary to think of such communities as actively interacting with the host society, and doing so on the basis of a not inconsiderable group self-consciousness. It is important to notice, however, that this group self-consciousness does not develop in isolation. On the contrary it develops in interaction with the host society as well as by the inner development of its own sense of a past and a tradition and of a present significance because of the presence in the group of the Spirit of God and a common sense of mission.

Conclusions

It is important to notice that the method of this article does not allow all embracing conclusions on the whole of the New Testament material. The examples that have been taken enable us to make some remarks, and to suggest some possible implications which might have relevance for today. It is not open to us to say exactly what the New Testament as a whole "says" since not all the New Testament documents have been looked at, and the diversity of approach discernible in the material which has been considered should caution us about claiming generalisations for the complete collection of New Testament documents.

Given these qualifications the examples looked at reveal that the early Christians interacted extensively with the culture of their day. Not only was there no general withdrawal from the host society, there are suggestions of extensive penetration. This penetration can be seen not only at the level of involvement in the social institutions, and responses to the social problems which that created for the early Christians, but also at the level of the imagery and understanding which those institutions had for those involved in them. Furthermore, the precise way in which different New Testament writers interacted differs not only from the point of view of the stance taken towards particular points, but as to the use made of the institutional imagery. The different purposes, and different developments of the “household codes” vividly illustrates this.

It also emerges from these examples that the approach to social ethics, and ideas of social obligation, are formed within the framework of this interaction. It is, of course, true that the correct understanding of the New Testament writers’ conception of social obligation must be understood in the light of the actual social situation addressed.²⁸ It appears also to be the case that the very notions themselves were worked out in the context of a continuing interaction with the society in which the early Christians were, and always had been located.

This is true not only for matters of social ethics, but also for matters of central theological concern. The central concepts of the nature of Christianity were not simply expressed in the terms of the social context, but they were actually developed and formulated in this context. Whether one thinks of the servant christology of I Pet the ecclesiology of Eph or the understanding of the Christian as redeemed slave by Paul, the point is the same. Central convictions are not only being expressed by the social institutional images, but the actual understanding, the actual shape of those convictions, is being influenced by involvement with these institutions. Furthermore, there is revealed in this process a clear indication that important Christian convictions, both theological and ethical (if such a distinction is really appropriate), are being worked out on the understanding that the present context was not only an allowable framework for such an activity, but that the present was guided by the Spirit of God and that an understanding of Christian truth was to be informed by that fact. It was not the case that they thought that all Christian truth was located in the past and that they had nothing to contribute. Their understanding of the kind of truth with which Christianity was

²⁸ E. A. Judge, *The social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*, London 1960, 72.

concerned was not compatible with such a notion, nor was their understanding of their own position.

This point naturally implies that, what we would call their theological method was not fixed and rigid. On the contrary, they appear to deal with things in a very fluid and even pragmatic way. The way in which the slavery imagery is used for different purposes and to different effect illustrates this. On a broader scale it is this point which lies behind the observation of diversity, not only of expression, but of theological standpoint within the New Testament.²⁹ Such diversity exists not only as between different writers in the New Testament, but also between different documents by the same author. The terminology of freedom, or that of justification, is not only used in a different way in Gal and Rom, but the very notion itself is discernibly different.³⁰ The same kind of flexibility can be seen, within Romans if one observes the different, and not immediately related ways in which the theme of the relationship between the believer and Christ is expressed and discussed.³¹

In emphasising the fluid, contextual and genuinely creative way in which the New Testament writers worked out their ideas, it ought not to be overlooked that there are clear signs of the development of a Christian culture, a sub-culture within the host society where the Christians were located, with which they were so extensively and importantly involved. The development of this group sense was aided not only by the sense of the present significance of the Christian community, but also by an attachment to the past, and, most fundamentally, an attachment to the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus.

If we may return to the points made by Cullmann in the article referred to at the beginning of this chapter it is now possible to set out some contrasts with what he said. Whereas he drew attention to the disinterest of the early Christians with regard to their society, I should like to emphasise the striking depth of their involvement in and interaction with that society and its institutions. Whereas he sought a formulation which would explain a common basis for different approaches, I should like to emphasise the diversity of approach and standpoint. Whereas he took it as axiomatic that social obligations were determined by theological convictions, I should like to stress that both theological convictions and ethical commitments interacted on each other and were worked out within the framework of a number of influences,

²⁹ See the recent discussion by J.D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London 1977, who is consciously taking up the analysis of W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, E. T. London 1971.

³⁰ See B.N. Kaye, "'To the Romans and Others' – Revisited", *NT* 18 (1976) 37–77.

³¹ B.N. Kaye, *The Argument of Romans*, Austin (Texas) 1979 66 ff.

an important one of which was the society to which these Christians belonged. It perhaps hardly needs to be said at this stage that the idea that the early Christians came from the lower orders of society is open to the gravest possible doubt.

From the point of view of Bultmann's contribution to the interpretation of early Christianity his emphasis upon "understanding" as a central category and the prime importance of the historicity of that understanding is well known. It is from this latter emphasis particularly that the demythologising programme begins. However, the social images familiar to the early Christians were an important part of the cultural context with which they interacted. This aspect of the question would seem not to have been sufficiently explored by Bultmann and in the present circumstances is certainly an important consideration which has to be investigated and developed much more. The knowledge which is social is by that very fact, part of the social world of the people who thus know. It is in this sense an important if even tacit element in their understanding. The degree to which early Christianity was committed to the development of a group consciousness naturally leads to the development of traditions of one kind or another. Those traditions in turn have an important contribution to make to the historical continuity between generations of Christians and therefore also to the interpretation of earliest Christianity from our own position of enquiry.

If there is anything at all to the picture of Christianity of the New Testament writers which has been sketched here then there are important implications which need to be pursued. The very understanding of Christian truth, and the way in which this is worked out and expressed, is on this analysis essentially and specifically a first century thing. Furthermore, it must in some sense always remain a first century statement of the matter. The importance attached to the developing Christian subculture makes it difficult to discount too quickly, and certainly not at all as a matter of principle, that sub-culture which continued to develop after the first century. No doubt it becomes more diverse, and its precise significance less easy to be definite about, but it nonetheless stems from an important element in the Christian understanding of the first century New Testament writers.

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