THE FIRST URBAN CHRISTIANS

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

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PREFACE

In my first year of teaching, certain students at Dartmouth College let me know that the splendid constructions of modern New Testament scholarship, which I was eager to impart after seven years of professional and graduate schools, were not really intelligible to them. By the end of the semester, some of the students' questions had become my own; I have spent eighteen years trying to answer them. If this book achieves any clarity, those students and their successors at Indiana University and Yale University deserve the first thanks.

I do not mean that I have abandoned the methods and results of New Testament criticism. On the contrary, I believe that those methods and results, viewed from a perspective different from the usual, can provide materials for a genuine social history of some parts of the early Christian movement. It is such a social history that I have undertaken here.

Had I attempted to acknowledge my entire debt to previous scholarship, the reference apparatus would have become gargantuan. I have tried to keep the text clear of such distractions, and the endnotes mention only the most important secondary works and those upon which I am immediately dependent. The specialist will know many others that are germane; the general reader who wishes to find more can do so through the ones I have cited. At the beginning of the notes I have explained my method of citation. Translations from ancient and modern languages are my own unless otherwise specified.

Research for this book was made possible by leaves from Yale University in 1975–76 and 1980, supported respectively by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. I am grateful to all three institutions.

Conversations with many colleagues at Yale and elsewhere have given focus and reason to this project. Especially helpful were discussions in the working group on the Social World of Early Christianity of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature and in two summer seminars for college teachers, sponsored at Yale in 1977 and 1979 by the National Endowment for the Humanities. My colleague Abraham J. Malherbe and my wife, Martha F. Meeks, read the whole manuscript and made

many valuable suggestions for improvement. Ramsay MacMullen did the same for chapter 1. My wife also researched and drew the map. For this generous help and for much else I thank them.

The expert and superbly efficient staff of the Yale University Press, especially editor Charles Grench, and the copyeditor Ann Hawthorne, whose precision is awe-inspiring, have made the book far more readable than the manuscript was. For preparation of the indexes I am grateful to Mr. David Kuck and to the A. Whitney Griswold Fund for the Humanities.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the Roman Empire, a new sect of Judaism appeared and spread rapidly, though not in great numbers, through the cities of the East. It did not stand out among the many "Oriental" cults being carried from place to place by immigrants and traders. Few people of importance paid attention to it. Its origins were unnoticed by writers of the day. Yet it was to become a new religion, separate from, even hostile to, the Jewish communities that gave it birth. In a few centuries it would become not only the dominant religion of the Roman Empire but unique in its imperial sponsorship.

The origins of Christianity have excited deep curiosity since the second century. In modern times no ancient phenomenon has been the subject of such intensive research. Yet its beginnings and earliest growth remain in many respects mysterious. There are a number of reasons for this. The sources are few and consist almost exclusively of the internal literature produced by the sect for its own purposes. They confront the interpreter with complex literary, linguistic, and historical puzzles. Further, these documents have themselves had a unique history, for some were suppressed in the later struggles of the Christian movement to achieve and preserve a unified "catholic" and "orthodox" self-definition, while others became part of the movement's new canon of scripture. To employ the latter as historical sources, we must try to disentangle them from the dense web of traditions in which they are embedded, traditions that are integral with the cultural identity of the West and with the personal faith of many.

WHY A SOCIAL DESCRIPTION OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY?

Yet these factors do not altogether explain the air of unreality that pervades much of the recent scholarly literature about the New Testament and early Christianity. A clear symptom of the malaise is the isolation of New Testament study from other kinds of historical scholarship—not only from secular study of the Roman Empire, but even from church history.[1] Some New Testament students have begun to retreat from critical history into theological positivism. Others no longer claim to do history at all, but favor a purely

literary or literary-philosophical reading of the canonical texts. Moreover, those who do continue to regard themselves as historical critics fill the learned journals with articles that depict a strange world, one that seems composed exclusively of theological ideas or compact mythic complexes or purely individual "self-understandings." If we ask, "What was it like to become and be an ordinary Christian in the first century?" we receive only vague and stammering replies.

To be sure, ordinary Christians did not write our texts and rarely appear in them explicitly. Yet the texts were written in some sense *for* them, and were used in some ways by them. If we do not ever see their world, we cannot claim to understand early Christianity.

Since we do not meet ordinary early Christians as individuals, we must seek to recognize them through the collectivities to which they belonged and to glimpse their lives through the typical occasions mirrored in the texts. It is in the hope of accomplishing this that a number of historians of early Christianity have recently undertaken to describe the first Christian groups in ways that a sociologist or anthropologist might.[2] Without wishing to abandon previous accomplishments in philology, literary analysis, history of traditions, and theological insight, these scholars have sought in social history an antidote to the abstractions of the history of ideas and to the subjective individualism of existentialist hermeneutics.

To write social history, it is necessary to pay more attention than has become customary to the ordinary patterns of life in the immediate environment within which the Christian movement was born. It will not do to describe that environment in terms of vague generalities: "the Greek concept of immortality," "the Roman genius for organization," "the spirit of Hellenism," "the Jewish doctrine" of this or that, "the mystery religions," nor to be satisfied with reproducing the generalizations and idealizations that aristocratic writers of antiquity themselves repeated.[3] Rather, to the limit that the sources and our abilities permit, we must try to discern the texture of life in particular times and particular places. After that, the task of a social historian of early Christianity is to describe the life of the ordinary Christian within that environment—not just the ideas or the self-understanding of the leaders and writers. This is the double task undertaken in the following pages, for a discrete segment of the early Christian movement.

SOME OBJECTIONS

Not everyone welcomes the renewed attempts to describe the social history of early Christianity. A number of scholars, principally theologians, have warned that sociological interpretations of religious phenomena are inevitably reductionist. The questions that the social historian addresses to religious texts, for example, seek to extract from them something contrary to or at least different from their manifest content or "intention." This kind of approach often denies the religious phenomena any distinctive character of their

own by treating them as the effects of nonreligious causes. In this fashion, say these objectors, the social scientist is wont to "explain" religion by explaining it away, to claim that religious beliefs are really projections of group consciousness or individual fantasies, or that faith in an all-powerful God is nothing more than compensation for a group's perceived deprivation of power, and so on. In offering such explanations the sociological interpreter imposes his own belief system on his evidence, implicitly or explicitly claiming to know more about the meaning of religious behavior than did the participants.

There are good reasons for these allegations. The two best-known attempts at thoroughgoing sociological interpretation of early Christianity have in fact been reductionist. One of these is the Marxist reading, beginning with Karl Kautsky's *The Foundations of Christianity;* the other is the Chicago school of New Testament studies in the early part of this century.[4] Marxists undertook to discover the roots of Christianity in the class struggle of ancient society. Religious beliefs and ideas were discounted as belonging to ideology, which not only is a secondary formation deriving from the underlying economic causes—at least in the crude popular versions of the Marxist critique—but also *conceals* its social roots by pretending to be autonomous. The Chicago school also, for rather different reasons, had little use for theological concepts. Shirley Jackson Case, for example, insisted that the "essence" of first-century Christianity was "its entire content," "since each phase of it arose in answer to some demand of the time."[5] Case explained the ideas, values, and practices of the early Christians simply as responses to "needs" manifest in the society of that time. Yet even these extreme interpretations, though undoubtedly reductionist, were not without value. More recent Marxist historians, adopting a much more complex conception of the dialectic between social structures and belief structures, have made important contributions to our understanding of ancient society, not least the social context of early Christianity.[6] The Chicago school, too, wrote an agenda for historians of early Christianity that remains impressive and unfulfilled. The naiveté of Case's functionalism must not be allowed to overshadow the subsequent advances of functionalist theory in secular sociology or to lead us to deny its interpretative power when more carefully used. In fact what is most surprising about Case and his Chicago associates is their apparent indifference to sociological theory and their failure to develop any specifically sociological modes of analysis.[7] Since that time social scientists themselves have become increasingly sensitive to the problems of conflict between participant and observer viewpoints, of "latent" and "manifest" function, of cross-cultural translation, and of the dialectic between cognitive and structural elements of culture. Some of the things the theologian dislikes most about the social sciences are no longer characteristic of those disciplines.

Moreover, the theological remover of specks from the social historian's eye must beware the log in his own. To assert that only theological interpretation of the canonical texts is legitimate is surely only another kind of reduc-

tionism. The claim that all such texts are really about theological ideas conceals several sorts of confusion, including the following. First, it fails to distinguish among different contexts of meaning and among different uses of the texts in question. What a text (or other phenomenon) "means" depends at least in some important degree on what the interpreter wants to know. If the interpreter wishes to discover patterns of language that can serve as norms for behavior or for belief by members of a community that takes these texts as scripture, then it may be appropriate to insist that the context is the whole canon of scripture and that community's whole interpretative tradition. He may, if that tradition permits, ignore historical questions altogether. Or he may insist that all he needs to know from the historian is what explicit beliefs about God, Christ, salvation, and so on the early Christians held. Whether he would thereby be shortsightedly cheating himself is a question of theological, not historical, method. On the other hand, if the interpreter wants, out of sheer curiosity, to know what the earliest Christians were like and what they were doing when their first writings were composed—before there *was* a canon of "the New Testament"—then to limit questions to those concerning explicitly stated beliefs would be odd and misleading. In any case there would be no reason to let the theologian legislate what questions the interpreter is allowed to ask.

Second, theological reductionism conceals some model of what religion is, a model which ought to be made explicit and opened to criticism. The matter is made more difficult by the reluctance of some theologians, influenced by polemical assertions made in a special historical context by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to use the word *religion* at all for normative Christianity. (By this reluctance they exactly miss the point made by Barth and Bonhoeffer, but that is another issue.) Nevertheless, it seems that critics of this sort usually operate with one of two implicit models of religion: a distinctive set of ideas, or a set of symbols that express an underlying state or array of dispositions. We will return to this question later.

Third, the theological critics seem often to imply a reduction of language's meaning to its ostensive, locutionary force, its "manifest intention." Yet when I use the word *God* in a sentence I may be doing any number of things other than conveying information or recommending a belief about God. I may be currying favor by showing that I am pious; I may be threatening my audience by means of a prophetic utterance; or I may be swearing and thus only expressing anger or dismay. Now, it could be argued that my speaking in this way presupposes that my speech community holds or once held certain beliefs about God, without which my utterance would not have the force it does. Hence those beliefs, too, would be part of a "thick description" of my communication—but only a part. We are certainly interested in what the early Christians believed and what they said. But we are also interested in what else they did, including what they did by means of what they said.

Not only theologians are suspicious of social history; a great many

philologians, working exegetes, and ordinary historians also have doubts. What they chiefly object to is the way in which the social historian fills in the many gaps that exist in the evidence from the past. The sociological interpreter is tempted to infer what *must* have happened and the conditions that *must* have obtained on the basis of certain assumed regularities in human behavior. To the extent that he yields to this temptation, he modernizes. He recreates the people of the past in his own image, for the supposed laws of behavior are based on observations in our own or other contemporary cultures that may differ in fundamental ways from those of antiquity. To avoid these dangers, the exegetical critic insists that the task of the historian is only to report the facts: what the texts say, what the monuments show. To an extent, this is a matter of taste. Some scholars are more comfortable with generalizations than others, perhaps less disturbed by the possibility that they may be wrong. Nevertheless, these are important warnings. There are good reasons to be chary of grand theory and unproven "laws." We ought to keep as closely as possible to the observed facts.

The difficulty is that without interpretation there are no facts. Every observation entails a point of view, a set of connections. The pure empiricist would drown in meaningless impressions. Even so simple a task as translating a sentence from an ancient language into our own requires some sense of the social matrices of both the original utterance and ourselves. When we take up dictionary and grammar to aid us, we err unless we understand that they only catalog the relics of language as a fluid, functioning social medium. If we translate without that awareness, we are only moving bones from one coffin to another. To collect facts without any theory too often means to substitute for theory our putative common sense. Making that substitution modernizes no less than does the scientist who follows his theory, for our common sense, too, is a cultural artifact. The advantage of an explicitly stated theory is that it can be falsified.

In writing social history, then, we cannot afford to ignore the theories that guide social scientists. But which of the competing schools of sociology or anthropology or social psychology shall we heed? At what level of our inquiry and on what scale are theoretical proposals useful? To what degree of overall coherence can we reasonably aspire, without endangering our appreciation of our objects' stubborn particularity? There is no comprehensive theory of social movements so commanding that we would be prudent to commit our method to its care. Even if there were, we should be suspicious of it. Christianity, even at the earliest moment we can get any clear picture of it, was already a complex movement taking form within several complex societies. What social theory is adequate to grasp the whole?

In this study the use of theory will be suggestive, rather than generative in the manner of experimental sciences. As Max Weber long ago pointed out, historical hypotheses do not admit of verification in the manner of scientific laws, and the controlled experiment is inevitably a misleading model for historical inquiry.[8] In asking about the social context and social forms of

early Christianity, we are not undertaking to discover or validate laws about human behavior in general. We are seeking rather to understand a particular set of phenomena in the second half of the first century, although *understand* need not be taken in the special sense that Weber used. Our case is analogous to Clifford Geertz's description of the social anthropologist's task as an ethnographer, a describer of culture. The description is interpretative. What it interprets is the "flow of discourse," from which it tries "to rescue the 'said' . . . from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms."[9] For that purpose theory is necessary, both to construct interpretation and to criticize constructions, but it must "stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction."[10] As Peter Brown said in one of his elegant essays, the historian's attitude toward the social sciences is like that of the African tribal chief who described the neighboring tribe for the inquiring ethnographer, "They are our enemies; we marry them."[11]

In short, the application of social science in the following chapters is eclectic. I take my theory piecemeal, as needed, where it fits. This pragmatic approach will be distasteful to the purist; its effect will be many rough edges and some inconsistencies. Nevertheless, given the present state of social theory and the primitive state of its use by students of early Christianity, eclecticism seems the only honest and cautious way to proceed. I am encouraged by Victor Turner's remarks about the way theory works for an anthropologist in the field:

> Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scattered data. . . . The intuitions, not the tissue of logic connecting them, are what tend to survive in the field experience.[12]

Still, although there is no comprehensive theory of human social behavior to guide us, there is a family of perspectives shared by a growing number of social scientists and historians of religion that encompasses the general point of view of this book. Society is viewed as a process, in which personal identity and social forms are mutually and continuously created by interactions that occur by means of symbols. Culture, as Geertz puts it, consists of "webs of significance."[13] Moreover, there is some real but complex relation between social structure and symbolic structure, and religion is an integral part of the cultural web. It is, however, neither necessary nor wise to decide in advance just what role religion plays, for it plays many. Even Geertz's famous diagram of sacred symbols synthesizing "world view" and "ethos" may be misleading, for it tends to imply that religion's function is always integrative.[14] In fact, it may be disruptive or, paradoxically, integrative for a disruptive movement.

Within this general context, this view of religion as a system of commu-

nication, as a subset within the multiple systems that make up the culture and subcultures of a particular society, I assume the position of a "moderate functionalist."[15] That is, the sort of questions to be asked about the early Christian movement are those about how it worked. The comprehensive question concerning the texts that are our primary sources is not merely what each one says, but what it does. Of course, what language does, most of the time, it does by saying something, but that is only part of the transaction. By adopting a functionalist perspective in this moderate form, we can avoid the reductionism that would result from smuggling in the whole of Durkheim's theory of religion's functions. We will be able in principle to remain open to the particularities of the unique groups we are interested in, and we need not neglect the beliefs and concepts of those groups.[16]

As a result this kind of social description may, after all, be useful to the theologians whose skepticism I mentioned earlier. This book deliberately avoids theological categories as its interpretative framework. I hope it will not on that account be viewed as antitheological. Yet it will be, so long as the prevailing models of religion implicit in theological discourse are, as George Lindbeck has recently observed, either "cognitivist-propositional" or "experiential-expressive." Lindbeck himself, however, urges theologians to adopt a "cultural-linguistic" model rather like that employed here.[17] If they did so, theologians might find raw material in these explorations of Pauline Christianity.

PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

New Testament scholarship in this century has discovered great diversity in early Christianity.[18] To heed Geertz's advice that our "thick description" be "microscopic," we should choose one reasonably coherent and identifiable segment of early Christianity. For several reasons the most satisfactory choice comprises the extended missionary activity of Paul of Tarsus and a broad circle of co-workers and the congregations they established in cities across the northeastern quadrant of the Mediterranean basin. First of all, they are intrinsically fascinating. Second, they are the best-documented segment of the early Christian movement. We have at least seven indubitable letters by the principal figure (which in their received form may contain fragments of yet other letters). These are the earliest of all extant Christian writings. Two characteristics make these letters particularly useful for social-historical inquiry: each responds to some specific issue in the life of one of the local churches or in the missionary strategy of the leaders; and they frequently quote traditional material, which provides glimpses of rituals, rules, admonitions, and formulated beliefs common to the Pauline communities. In addition, the Acts of the Apostles contains an extended description of the Pauline mission written within a few decades of Paul's death by someone who was probably not an immediate member of the Pauline school.

From both the letters and Acts it is evident that Pauline Christianity was

not the work of a single person, but of an extended group of associates. Furthermore, there are six letters in the canon of the New Testament that are purported to be by Paul but whose authorship modern scholars dispute. Two of these, the Letter to Colossians and the Letter to Ephesians, were most likely written by disciples of Paul. The same may be true of 2 Thessalonians. These pseudonymous letters provide evidence that the Pauline association was a self-conscious movement which accorded to Paul the position of "founder" or leading authority. It is likely that this distinctive movement within Christianity kept some identity for a time after the apostle's death, although the notorious difficulty in dating the letters just mentioned prevents their serving as evidence for this. Much more problematic is the evidence of the remaining canonical letters—the so-called Pastoral Epistles addressed to Timothy and Titus—and the various apocryphal writings attributed to Paul or written about him, such as the Acts of Paul, the spurious correspondence with Seneca, the several Apocalypses of Paul, and 3 Corinthians. Often the Pastorals and such works as the Acts of Paul and Thecla are regarded as products of a Pauline school that continued into the second century. It seems more likely, however, that they all represent a slow development in which the figure of Paul was adopted as a patron both in the great church and in "heretical" movements because of his general fame or, less often, because of specific aspects of his teaching.[19] They therefore cannot be used with any confidence, either as evidence of any sort of social continuity or as independent testimony to any traditions of the Pauline groups, so I do not employ them here as sources.

The third reason Pauline Christianity is an apt subject for our investigation is that it was entirely urban. In that respect it stood on the growing edge of the Christian movement, for it was in the cities of the Roman Empire that Christianity, though born in the village culture of Palestine, had its greatest successes until well after the time of Constantine.[20] This does not mean that Pauline Christianity was typical of all urban Christianity of the first century. There are many signs that it was distinctive in some respects, and we do not really know enough about the other contemporary forms of the movement to say with confidence how many basic characteristics were widely shared. There is merit, though, in trying to describe as carefully as possible the one we do know.

It has become customary among some scholars to speak of the "social world of early Christianity,"[21] and that term usefully describes the object of this inquiry. It has a double meaning, referring not only to the environment of the early Christian groups but also to the world as they perceived it and to which they gave form and significance through their special language and other meaningful actions. One is the world they shared with other people who lived in the Roman Empire; the other, the world they constructed.[22] We will begin with the outside view, the ecology of the Pauline groups, and work in toward the patterns of meaningful action by which their lives were shaped.

1

THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT OF PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

PAUL AND THE CITY

Paul was a city person. The city breathes through his language. Jesus' parables of sowers and weeds, sharecroppers, and mud-roofed cottages call forth smells of manure and earth, and the Aramaic of the Palestinian villages often echoes in the Greek. When Paul constructs a metaphor of olive trees or gardens, on the other hand, the Greek is fluent and evokes schoolroom more than farm; he seems more at home with the clichés of Greek rhetoric, drawn from gymnasium, stadium, or workshop.[1] Moreover, Paul was among those who depended on the city for their livelihood. He supported himself, at least partially, by work "with my own hands"—making tents, according to the book of Acts—and he several times reminded his churches of that fact with a kind of wry pride, either in self-defense or as an object lesson.[2] This life as an artisan distinguished him both from the workers of the farms, who, slave or free, were perhaps at the very bottom of the social pyramid in antiquity, and from the lucky few whose wealth and status depended on their agricultural estates. The urban handworkers included slave and free, and a fair range of status and means, from desperate poverty to a reasonably comfortable living, but all belonged thoroughly to the city. They shared neither the peasant's hostile fear of the city nor the aristocrat's self-confident power over both *polis* and *chōra*. When Paul rhetorically catalogs the places where he has suffered danger, he divides the world into city, wilderness, and sea (2 Cor. 11:26). His world does not include the *chōra,* the productive countryside; outside the city there is nothing—*erēmia.* The author of Acts hardly errs when he has Paul boast to the tribune, astonished that Paul knows Greek, that he is "a citizen of no mean city" (Acts 21:39, RSV).

If Paul's world consisted, practically speaking, only of the cities of the Roman Empire, then it is perhaps easier to understand the extraordinary claim he makes to the Christians in Rome. "From Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum," he writes, "I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." The result was that "I no longer have any room for work in these regions" (Rom. 15:19b, 23a). Yet what he had done to "fill everything with the Gospel of Christ" (as Luther paraphrases)[3] was only to plant small cells of Christians in

scattered households in some of the strategically located cities of the northeast Mediterranean basin. Those cells were linked to one another and to Paul and his fellow workers by means of letters and official visits and by frequent contact through traveling Christians, and he had encouraged local persons of promise to establish new groups in nearby towns. We shall return later to the geographic pattern and the missionary method; the point to be made here is simply that the mission of the Pauline circle was conceived from start to finish as an urban movement.

An astute reader may object, remembering Paul's own reminiscence of his conversion in Gal. 1:15–17, that Paul's first reaction, upon receiving his strange revelation commissioning him to "preach [God's son] among the Gentiles," was to abandon the city and head for Arabia. "Arabia," however, is not the sandy wasteland of romantic imagination, but the Nabataean kingdom, which extended to the territory of Damascus and possibly even included Damascus.[4] We know this because it was the ethnarch of the Nabataean king Aretas IV who tried to have Paul arrested in Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32). It is evident that Paul had stirred up this official hostility not by meditating in the desert nor by wandering from village to village, but by preaching in flourishing Hellenistic cities such as Petra, Gerasa, Philadelphia, and Bostra, whose remains have recently been excavated.[5]

FROM VILLAGE TO CITY

This preoccupation with the cities was not peculiar to Paul. Before Paul's conversion the believers in Messiah Jesus had already carried their new sectarian message into the Jewish communities of the Greco-Roman cities. It was their success in Damascus that had aroused Paul's "zealot" attack on them and there that the strange reversal of his life occurred that we call his conversion (Gal. 1:13–17).[6] Even more important, the movement had been planted in the Jewish community of Antioch-on-the-Orontes, and in that city certain Cypriots and Cyrenaeans, among the "Hellenists" who had been forced out of Jerusalem, first passed outside the bounds of Judaism to seek gentile proselytes (Acts 11:19–26).[7] After Paul's three-year sortie into the Nabataean kingdom, which produced no lasting results, and his rather ignominious exit from Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32) and brief consultation with the leaders in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18f.), Antioch became the center of his activities, perhaps for most of the twelve to fourteen years that he spent "in the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal. 1:21; cf. 2:1–14 and Acts 11:25f.; 13:1).[8] Antioch, center of political, military, and commercial communication between Rome and the Persian frontier and between Palestine and Asia Minor, was one of the three or four most important cities of the empire and the home of a large and vigorous Jewish community. There developed the form of missionary practice and organization which we call Pauline Christianity, but which was probably characteristic of most of the urban expansion of the movement. There Paul served his apprenticeship, as the fellow worker of Barnabas and