

# A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO "KINGDOM AND COMMUNITY"

by David Tracy

The widespread discussion of John G. Gager's *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975) is ample testimony to its contribution to the social-scientific study of early Christianity. Gager seems correct to me in his claim that his work advances upon the social-scientific study of Christianity of the past (especially in this country by the Chicago School of Shirley Jackson Case), for the more recent work of several American scholars—Wayne Meeks, Jonathan Z. Smith, Gager himself, and others—has over its predecessors the distinct advantage of more sophisticated social-scientific theories and of course more historical and archaeological evidence to test the theories.

I join therefore with Gager and his social-scientific colleagues in the hope that my fellow Jewish and Christian theologians may learn to take more seriously these social-scientific studies of Christian origins. Since I share Gager's admiration for the work of Van Austin Harvey in *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1966), I presume I speak for both of us when I state that Harvey's careful analysis of how theological beliefs can interfere and have interfered with the scientific study of early Christianity in the recent history of Christian theology may serve as a model of the same kind of analytical and methodological study needed on how theological beliefs can interfere and have interfered in many studies of the social world of early Christianity. Although Gager's brief "Introduction" does indicate these difficulties in a suggestive but very abbreviated fashion, there remains a need for a full study on a par with Harvey's, perhaps entitled *The Social Scientist and the Believer*. Such a study obviously would demand someone whose professional competence includes both social science and modern theology.

At that point one might hope also that the constructive theological

David Tracy is professor of theology, Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1025 East 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

[*Zygon*, vol. 13, no. 2 (June 1978).]

©1978 by The University of Chicago. 0044-5614/78/1302-0005\$00.75

conclusion of Harvey's work might find its analogue here to suggest the constructive theological possibilities of the analyses of the social world of early Christianity. In the meantime, however, some theological comments may be made by way of constructive criticism of *Kingdom and Community*.

My critical comments will be divided into two brief sections: first, a methodological plea for the entry of another conversation partner into the dialogue Gager suggests between social scientists and historians of religion; second, an analysis of how the failure to include that partner can lead to difficulties by a study of Gager's seeming parallel analyses of Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity.

#### ANOTHER CONVERSATION PARTNER

As Gager observes, social-scientific methods are varied, and the discipline as a whole is pluralistic in search of a reigning paradigm. As he fails to observe, so too is contemporary Christian theology. He seems unaware that it is in fact as difficult to state what "Christian theology holds" as it is to state what "social science holds." More pertinent to the present discussion, there are many contemporary Christian theologians who argue on strictly theological grounds for the same position admired by Gager in Harvey's work, which, let us recall, is also a theological work. In short, many contemporary Christian theologians clearly hold to the insistence that, on strictly methodological and inner-Christian theological grounds, personal beliefs cannot be allowed to influence a tough-minded historical or social-scientific analysis of early Christianity into a somehow "exceptional" (more exactly, tender-minded) analysis of "Christian origins." For myself, I call this discipline within Christian theology "fundamental theology" wherein hermeneutical, historical (and, in principle, social-scientific) studies of Christian origins are related to philosophical analysis of the meanings and truths of Christian cognitive and ethical claims.

The major difference between this position and that outlined by Gager can be stated briefly. The latter speaks of the need for social-scientific and historical studies while the former also calls for philosophical analysis of the reinterpreted meanings of historical and hermeneutical and social-scientific meanings. In my view—to employ Gager's own logical distinction—only philosophical analysis can provide the conversation partner needed to provide the sufficient, as distinct from necessary, conditions to assess the religious meanings of the social world of early Christianity. Now of course one could respond that this philosophical conversation partner is helpful to scholars whose concerns are theological but need not concern the hermeneut, the historian, or the social scientist of Christian origins. This

is in fact methodologically correct as long as we keep these considerations in mind: first, the present position is entirely distinct from that Gager rather loosely labels “theological”; second, when one recalls that Judaism and Christianity are living religions, there always will be some thinkers called theologians anxious to analyze the truth claims of Christian origins on fully public grounds. For that analysis the functional definition of religion employed for social-scientific studies will need to be complemented by a philosophical analysis of the meaning and truth of religious claims. In short, there will be a need to provide for the wider scholarly community public discussions of substantive definitions of religion as well.

In fact I suspect that something like the absence of a philosophical conversation partner (and thereby the absence of a substantive definition of religion) from Gager’s dialogue may be operative in what otherwise remains mysterious (in a nontheological sense) in this analysis of Christian origins, namely, the occasional surfacing of a curious insensitivity to and thereby inadequate understanding of Christian religious meanings. The most obvious but by no means the sole example of this difficulty may be found in the fascinating and complex final chapter, “The Success of Christianity.” There Gager argues that the “single, overriding *internal* factor” to Christianity’s success was the “radical sense of Christian community—open to all, insistent on absolute and exclusive loyalty, and concerned for every aspect of the believer’s life” (p. 140). This sense of community, he argues, distinguished Christianity from its pagan competitors although not from Hellenistic Judaism. Furthermore, this community sense is testable unlike the theories of Carl G. Jung and others on the religious attractiveness of the Christ symbol to religious sensibilities.

#### FOR A SUBSTANTIVE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

The argument, on purely internal grounds, for the importance of the sense of *communitas* among early Christians is persuasive in its historical relationship to Hellenistic Judaism’s analogous sense of community. What remains far less persuasive is Gager’s seeming reluctance to include more “internal” religious factors—presumably for their non-testability (although why he then praises E.R. Dodds’s work is a puzzle).

A reasonable position at first sight, but then how does Gager’s analysis of the social world of Hellenistic Judaism include factors of a more substantive religious sort?:

Now we must seek to explain how it happened that, in the words of Renan, Christianity and not Judaism reaped the fruits of that experience. Once again

the alternatives are reasonably clear: either we must revise our earlier conclusion that the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the Christian congregation, or we must search for additional factors. If, as we have argued, *communitas* was the decisive element that favored Christianity in comparison with other cults, and if this sense of *communitas* derived from the synagogue, why was the copy more successful than the model?

Lest there be any thought that the issue as stated is really a false one, requiring no explanation at all, we should take note that before the war of 70 C.E. Judaism was a widely disseminated and expanding movement in the empire. The factors behind its growth have been endlessly debated—some emphasizing natural proliferation, others missionary success—and various population figures have been estimated, but with few reliable data and no conclusive results. But whatever the causes, and whether one characterizes Jewish proselytizing as active or passive, many synagogues included numerous converts. The conversion of the royal house of Adiabene in Mesopotamia and the sentencing of Flavius Clemens and his wife Falvia Domitilla, both relatives of the emperor Domitian, on charges of atheism (that is, Judaism) demonstrate that Jewish sympathizers were to be found at every level of pagan society. Indeed, the attractions of Judaism were both numerous and appropriate to the time: an ancient heritage, preserved in written form (no pagan cult had the equivalent of the Jewish Scriptures); an uncompromising monotheism, combined with serious moral standards; a belief that basic religious truths had been revealed directly by the divinity and thus were beyond dispute; a strong sense of community; and finally, a conviction that Judaism represented the religious destiny of all humanity. Of course not all Jews shared these views, but if we examine the apologetic literature of Judaism, these themes will be found to recur constantly. Together they constitute the program of Judaism as a universal religion, and not coincidentally they were to constitute the program of universal Christianity at a later date. [P. 136]

Save again for the factor of community, all the other factors mentioned are of a substantive, nonfunctional, nontestable sort—and all, it should be added, make intuitive and theological and substantive definitional sense. Why then when we come to Christianity are all the internal factors other than community omitted? This is especially puzzling since, as Gager himself mentions on page 136, these factors were shared by both early Christians and Hellenistic Jews. And, one must add, if monotheism, belief in revelation, etc., may be named as “internal factors,” then why not the figure of Jesus and the Christ symbol which after all, on strictly hermeneutical grounds, distinguishes Christianity from its parent religion? Can one really understand Christianity’s “success” without analyzing these realities as well? If one can, Gager’s book provides no argument how; it only cites the admittedly difficult nature of analyzing these factors.

In sum, the fact that Christian theologians have provided obstacles to the analysis of Christian origins should not become the occasion for what cannot but seem to the fair-minded as the opposite presuppositional animus, namely, that the internal religious distinctive-

ness of Christianity is discounted when analyzing the success of Christianity with respect to the religious sensibilities of the Hellenistic period. My own position by now should be clear; a functional definition of religion should be complemented by a substantive definition of religion (and its appropriate disciplines, including philosophy and fundamental theology) to analyze so complex a subject as the internal factor operative in early Christianity. Since such factors were introduced by Gager in the actual analysis of Hellenistic Judaism, I can find no logical reason for their omission from the analysis of early Christianity. If this suggestion is accepted, then Gager's analysis based upon the important contemporary conversation of historians of religion and social scientists will be complicated properly to include those absent conversation partners (philosophers of religion and fundamental theologians) and that silent subject (a substantive definition of religion and its internal factors). Perhaps, given the past and even present history of theological imperialism and the resultant social-scientific animus against theology, this projected widened conversation is utopian, not to say eschatological. However, one must hope—even if in vain—for such a necessary and sufficient conversation.

The historical grounds for such hope may be found in the conversations initiated in the Hellenistic period by the Jewish and Christian philosophers and apologists. Are not Philo, Celsus, Justin Martyr, and their successors valuable conversation partners for us all even now if we are really to understand so complex and perplexing a subject as Christian origins?