

JOHN G. GAGER'S "KINGDOM AND COMMUNITY":
A SUMMARY AND RESPONSE

by David L. Bartlett

In his *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* John G. Gager attempts an analysis of the early history of Christianity, using an approach which he says is both "comparative and theoretical: theoretical in the sense that I will make use of explanatory models drawn from the social sciences, and comparative in that much of the evidence for these models is based on studies of non-Christian religious movements."¹ He does not work out a comprehensive theory of the sociology of nascent religious movements. Neither does he present an exhaustive picture of the first three centuries of the Christian movement. Rather he draws on several specific (and diverse) studies from the social sciences and applies these studies as "models" to several specific (and diverse) phenomena in the rise of Christianity.

GAGER'S ANALYSIS

In the preface Gager issues a caveat which indicates the limits of his undertaking: "More than anything else, I wish to stress the experimental, almost gamelike character of these studies. This is not to say that I have approached them with anything less than utmost serious-

David L. Bartlett is associate professorial lecturer in New Testament at the 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. 0044-5614/78/1302-0001\$01.23

ness or that I have willfully ignored relevant information. . . . In the long run, however, I am less committed to particular models, e.g., the relevance of cognitive dissonance theories for explaining missionary activity, than I am to the more general program of a rapprochement between historians of religion and theorists in other fields" (pp. xii-xiii). Later, in a somewhat cryptic paragraph, he issues yet another disclaimer about his enterprise: ". . . I do not harbor any illusions about the scientific validity of the social scientific models utilized in these studies. The fact that I make use of certain models rather than others means only that I regard them as more fitting for the data, not that they are more 'objective'" (p. 13).

Nonetheless, Gager's book certainly must be tested not just by its ability to entice historians of religion and other social scientists to cooperative scholarly enterprises but by the persuasiveness of his arguments, the pertinence of the models he cites, and the illumination which they shed on some of the murkier problems of the history of early Christianity. As Gager himself admits, "For students of early Christianity, however, the final test must be whether the perspective that we have adopted makes good on the claim to appreciate the genesis and growth of the Christian religion in ways that have not hitherto been possible" (p. 13).

In his first chapter Gager sets out the theoretical basis for the studies of the later chapters. He claims that Christianity (like any new religion) is a "social world in the making" (p. 2). I take it that this claim points in two directions. First, any new religion is fundamentally social. To understand the rise and the persistence of Christianity one must understand those sociological factors which allowed it first to be appealing and then to be enduring. Second, any new religion creates a "world." That is, it cannot be understood only as a manifestation of piety but as the creation of a whole new constellation of myths, values, relationships, obligations, and perspectives. This world emerges from and sustains a concrete community of believers. The emergence and persistence of a new religion depend upon its capacity to define a world which is sufficiently distinctive from the previous worlds of its adherents and from the worlds of its competitors.

The problem with understanding the social world of early Christianity, as Gager suggests, is that "the historical evidence is so diffuse and fragmentary" (p. 3). His solution to this problem is to look to studies from other eras and other cultures. These studies may provide models which "fit" the admittedly fragmentary data of early Christianity. If they do fit, then we have an analogical basis for better understanding the early Christian world. "In other words, new 'data' may come in the form of new models" (p. 4). Furthermore, the mod-

els Gager uses are deliberately drawn from non-Christian evidence (p. 12).

Chapter 2, "The End of Time and the Rise of Community," discusses the first constellation of problems which Gager wishes to address. How can Christianity be understood as a millenarian movement? How does early Christian eschatological expectation help to account for the apparent missionary zeal of the early Christians?

The first section of the chapter uses as its "model" a picture of millenarian sects drawn from such studies as Peter Worsley's work on Melanesian cargo cults, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, and Kenelm Burridge's *New Heaven, New Earth*.² Gager draws the common traits for a millenarian movement from I. C. Jarvie: "the promise of heaven on earth—soon; the overthrow or reversal of the present social order; a terrific release of emotional energy; and a brief life span of the movement itself."³ Gager goes on to add a fifth trait, "the central role of a messianic, prophetic, or charismatic leader" (p. 21). He then adds, "Without further argument at this point, we will take it as given that earliest Christianity meets these criteria and thus deserves to be designated a millenarian movement" (p. 21). Having thus conceded the first point to himself by default, Gager recognizes a problem—that Christianity does not meet the criterion of the brief life-span. The solution is obvious, claims Gager. Any millenarian movement which is to survive must become less millenarian; so Christianity started as a millenarian cult but did not survive as such.

Having decided that earliest Christianity was a millenarian movement, Gager is now free to apply the millenarian model to several problems of early Christian history. First, there is the problem of who joined the movement. Gager suggests on the basis of sociological studies that millenarian movements are generally movements of the disinherited. He then goes on to suggest that there is evidence that the earliest adherents of Christianity were also among the disinherited. Palestine, under Roman rule, was clearly a land of the politically disinherited. According to evidence in the New Testament there was an ethic of poverty within the early church, and Gager assumes that this means that the early Christians were themselves predominantly poor. Gager sees as the most likely source for the emerging movement the so-called *am ha-ares*, the people of the land, who were set apart from the more powerful and influential classes of Palestine. Having said all this about the social structure of earliest Christianity, however, Gager takes a bit of it away: "[There are] indications that the *am ha-ares* were by no means limited to the poor and ignorant, that the earliest believers did not necessarily come from the lowest social and economic strata" (p. 28). In other words, the stress on "poverty" in early Chris-

tianity may have been as much a religious symbol as a socioeconomic indicator.

The second problem which the millenarian model helps to solve, says Gager, is the problem of the role of the prophet in earliest Christianity. Here Gager seeks to apply the category of "charisma" to Jesus. Drawing largely on Worsley and Burridge, Gager suggests that the charisma of the leader in a millenarian movement is to be understood as descriptive not of the personal traits of the leader but of the leader's role within the social structure of the movement itself. To be charismatic is to be recognized by members of the community as a leader, a prophet.

The role of the prophet is to provide a new set of values in competition with older values and to claim that he knows the way of access to those new values. Jesus becomes a classic example of the charismatic leader in that he seeks at once to undermine the older authority of the Jewish leaders and to provide through his teaching access to those values which he teaches. Such a prophet arises when two groups (here the social and religious establishment and the disinherited) share the same values "but only one of these groups has access to the rewards implied in them" (p. 31). The charismatic leader shifts the definition of the values and himself provides for the disinherited access to those new values he has defined.

The third feature of early Christianity which the millenarian model helps to explain, according to Gager, is the nature of the Christian community and its ethical suppositions. Millenarian movements are communal movements which are marked by their stress on moral regeneration: "If we look back to the first generations [of Christianity] from the perspective of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, we cannot help but be struck by the relative absence of specifically theological reflection on the one hand and the tremendous emphasis on community and ethics on the other" (p. 32). Moreover, the ethic which we find is the ethic of an essentially egalitarian community, where "kinship" relationships predominate (fellow Christians are "brothers") and where hierarchical structures are almost entirely lacking: ". . . the earliest Christian documents are remarkable for their neglect of questions concerning leadership within individual communities" (p. 33). To be sure, we can see within our sources both radically egalitarian communal structures and structures which are more ordered and hierarchical, but this is because of the shift from pure millenarianism which inevitably occurs over several generations of the Christian movement. As ordered communities and set rules begin to emerge, Christianity becomes less and less millenarian.

The second section of chapter 2 is entitled "Christian Missions and

the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.” Here Gager uses as his model Leon Festinger’s, Henry W. Riecken’s, and Stanley Schachter’s *When Prophecy Fails*, the study of a group which in the 1950s had prophesied the end of the world on a specific December 21 and had to find ways of adapting to the undoubted fact that the world did not end on the predicted day.⁴

Gager accepts as a given the contention that “the missionary zeal of the early churches was related to their eschatological consciousness” (p. 38). However, the bare statement of this relationship is inadequate to account for the phenomenon. What does more helpfully account for the phenomenon is the theory of “cognitive dissonance.” This theory suggests that when a religious community has its fundamental beliefs disconfirmed it may not disband but rather engage in active proselytizing. The often unconscious motivation for the proselytizing is the conviction that if more people can be convinced to accept the threatened belief then the belief itself must be correct, despite the apparent disconfirmation.

Gager suggests that there were two such moments of disconfirmation in the early years of Christianity. First, Jesus’ crucifixion seemed to disconfirm the messianic conviction of Jesus’ followers. Second, the expected coming of the kingdom was so long delayed that Christians had to deal with the dissonance between their eschatological hope and the fact of a history which simply went on and on. It was these two factors which caused the Christians to seek new believers in order to strengthen that faith which otherwise was threatened severely. Gager admits that this cognitive dissonance was probably only one factor among several in the Christian missionary movement but adds: “The strength of this factor in relation to other motivating forces is beyond final determination. Here we must rest content with the general principle that as other factors, such as commands of Jesus or influence from Judaism, are minimized, the factor of cognitive dissonance must be maximized” (p. 46).

Using Festinger et al., Gager further suggests that along with proselytization cognitive dissonance leads to rationalization, so that initial beliefs are modified to fit changed circumstances. (Presumably in relation to early Christian cognitive dissonance such rationalization included the development of the theological claim that Jesus’ death was a necessary part of his Messiahship and the development of various theologies which dealt with the delayed coming of the kingdom.)

Finally in dealing with cognitive dissonance Gager suggests that the theory of cognitive dissonance may also have implications for our understanding of conversion. In those cases where conversion represents a clear choice between two alternatives, if the two alternatives are

initially attractive, dissonance occurs when one is chosen at the expense of the other. That dissonance is reduced when the convert stresses his confidence in the alternative chosen and downplays the attractiveness of the alternative rejected. This, suggests Gager, might help to explain Paul's polemic against the status of the mosaic law.

The third chapter, "The Quest for Legitimacy and Consolidation," continues a discussion of early Christianity from the perspective of millenarian movements and asks how the initial impetus which creates a new social world can be shifted to meet the long-term requirements of sustaining that world. How did Christianity move from its original enthusiastic beginnings toward a more consolidated and institutionalized religion? Gager introduces the chapter by suggesting that the movement away from charismatic leadership and enthusiastic congregations was essential if Christianity was to survive.

The two sections of this chapter deal with two broad issues which give some perspective on the movement toward consolidation. In the first, "The Question of Legitimacy," Gager returns to the question of charisma and suggests that the early charismatic leaders, Jesus and Paul, reevaluated traditional values and beliefs but nonetheless defined themselves in relationship to a tradition: "Thus the tension in the early communities is between charisma and office, not between charisma and tradition, and it is within this polarity that we must locate the process of routinization and consolidation" (p. 70). Gager then briefly traces the development from the early charismatic leaders to the much more structured, hierarchical leadership of the second century. Gager goes on to relate the problem of charisma and structure to the question of the canon. He suggests that after the canon had been established, far from being an unflinching instrument of institutionalization, it provided a means of preserving something of the original charismatic impulse which lay behind Christianity: "Now if, as was the case in early Christianity, these normative symbols include a body of writings that preserve and even idealize an image of the group's charismatic origins, these writings themselves may become a recurrent focus of change and conflict" (p. 75).

In the second section, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," Gager draws on the historian Walter Bauer who suggested that orthodoxy and heresy were not clearly defined categories in earliest Christianity but that "orthodoxy" represents those positions which won out in the long power struggles of the early years of the Christian movement.

Then, drawing on Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Gager suggests the ways in which the struggle among competing ideologies served a positive function in strengthening the social structure of those Christian communities which later would be called "or-

thodox.”⁵ Coser (with Gager) makes four points about the role of “heresy” in the first years of Christianity: (1) “Conflict serves a group-binding function” (p. 80), that is, the identity of the community is defined in large measure as it forms its values and claims in opposition to the values and claims of the enemy, the “heretics.” (2) “Ideology intensifies conflict” (p. 82), that is, if religions are ways of constructing social worlds, then the more comprehensive those worlds the more strenuous the competition among them. The competition among ideologies can be seen at three moments in early Christian times, “the conflict with Judaism over the claim to represent the true Israel; the conflict with paganism over the claim to possess true wisdom; and the conflict among Christian groups over the claim to embody the authentic faith of Jesus and the apostles” (p. 82). (3) “The closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict” (p. 83). The proposition accounts for the intense conflict between Jews and Christians in the early years, when they seemed most alike, and for the antagonism between emerging “orthodoxy” and emerging “gnosticism,” which used many of the same terms and scriptures as the orthodox. (4) “Conflict serves to define and strengthen group structures” (p. 85). Gager suggests that some of the consolidation we see in early Christianity and the movement toward canon and offices arose from conflict with heretics, who forced the “orthodox” to set clearer limits and rules of faith and conduct.⁶ Finally he suggests that the villainy of opponents is often exaggerated in this kind of conflict situation, so that for instance we can hardly assume that the first-century portrait of Judaism is an accurate portrait of Jewish practice or theology at that time (p. 88).

In his fourth chapter Gager deals with “Religion and Society in the Early Roman Empire,” trying to place Christianity in the context of the broader Roman social structure. Again he draws on the work of Burridge to suggest that early Christianity as a millenarian movement drew primarily on the ranks of the dispossessed. Then, drawing more on social history than on any newer sociological “models,” he attempts to place Christians within the larger context of the Roman social orders.

Gager maintains that in urban Rome it was the class of *plebs* which provided the most ready converts for a new religious movement: “These groups, says [Max] Weber, are privileged enough to recognize the potential benefits of higher social and economic status but are unable to attain this status. The result is a high degree of alienation from the social order and a consequent openness to religious movements that are future-oriented and congregational, especially if they offer some basis for future compensation. Thus far our analysis has

borne out Weber's thesis" (p. 103). Gager says that his claim is that people drawn to millenarian groups are those who suffer "relative deprivation," and this might include people who are not from economically lower classes (p. 95). In the section "Early Christianity and the Roman Social Order" he again turns to Weber and now suggests that Christianity in the early years within the Empire exhibited the marks of a religion of disprivileged urban classes: "a strong tendency toward congregational units; future-oriented systems of compensation (salvation); and a rational system of ethics" (p. 107).

In his final chapter, "The Success of Christianity," Gager seeks to account for Christianity's rise from a small millenarian cult to the dominant religion of the Empire. He admits that a complex set of factors must account for the "success" of Christianity. He suggests that two questions can help in determining which factors are relatively important: "What factors, internal as well as external, can we imagine as absent without materially affecting Christian expansion? In comparison with its chief competitors, what factors enabled Christianity to survive and flourish, while others either disappeared (e.g., Mithraism) or ceased to grow (e.g., Judaism)?" (p. 122). Gager then cites those factors which seem to have been necessary, if not sufficient, for Christianity's growth. He discusses among "external factors" the nature of the Empire from Augustus on, an Empire in which general peace and religious toleration made possible the competition of religious movements and their widespread dissemination. Further, the phenomenon of martyrdom added to Christianity's appeal. In part this is because martyrs served as inspiring examples of human courage. In part it is because (with E. R. Dodds) Gager finds evidence of a widespread "death wish" in the years of the Empire. He thinks that Christian martyrdom provided either a vicarious or an actual solution to a general longing. The final external factor was Diaspora Judaism, which provided Christianity with sacred literature, methods of interpreting that literature, modes of argument for addressing the pagan world, and—in the synagogue—a viable model of religious organization. In this part of chapter 5 as in the preceding chapter Gager is not so much drawing models from sociology as he is providing a fairly broad and sketchy outline of the social history of early Christianity.

When Gager discusses "internal factors" leading to Christianity's success, he stresses the communal nature of Christianity as the central feature in its success. Since he has defined emerging religions as the creators of new social worlds, it is not surprising that he discovers a social explanation for the success of one such new religion.

The social structure of early Christianity helped its expansion in several ways. First, Gager downplays the role of missionary preaching

and suggests rather that the movement spread through what John Lofland calls "pre-existing friendship nets" (p. 130). The reason the new movement could retain the loyalty of converts was that it offered a "sense of community" which was pervasive and covered an amazingly broad range of activities. Its success was further aided by the exclusivist nature of Christianity. The fact that the choice of Christianity was so radical made its appeal—as a genuinely new social world—all the greater.

In the next section of the chapter Gager discusses "Christianity and Its Competitors," trying in very brief compass to suggest reasons why Mithraism, philosophical schools, and Judaism failed to achieve the kind of growth which Christianity showed. He uses both sociological and historical theories to try to explain the lack of success of Christianity's competitors.

In a final subsection, "Results," Gager acknowledges that "the Christ-symbol must have touched religious sensibilities in many ways we can no longer measure" (p. 142). However, having nodded to the importance of religious sensibilities in explaining the growth of Christianity, he quickly backs off: "But to assert that [the Christ symbol] was the major cause of Christianity's success is to claim more than the available evidence will allow" (p. 142). Apparently the available evidence does allow him to maintain his claim that the rise of Christianity resulted from a number of external factors but primarily from one internal factor, namely, "the radical sense of Christian community. . . . From the very beginning, the one distinctive gift of Christianity was this sense of community" (p. 140).

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Gager certainly entices interest in the ongoing discussion between historians of early Christianity and social scientists. He acknowledges the limitations of his work (and makes criticism difficult) by his claim that he wants to stress the "experimental, almost gamelike character of these studies" (p. xii). However, some games are played better than others, and for all its enticements Gager's book leaves me with a host of unanswered questions.

First, there is the question of the use of models to provide new data. As a historian I confess to being somewhat puzzled. Gager's "models" are too diverse and his groups too small. One aspect of Christianity is explained by reference to Melanesian cargo cults. Another aspect of Christianity is explained by reference to a group of people in Lake City who expected the end of the world on December 21 some time in the 1950s. How are these diverse "models" related to one another? And how do these small samples help us to understand the phenome-

non of early Christianity—which covered three centuries, involved a striking variety of theological and eschatological assumptions (almost from the beginning), and covered communities in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and every corner of the Empire? I am further puzzled by his claim that “the fact that I make use of certain models rather than others means only that I regard them as more fitting for the data, not that they are more ‘objective’ ” (p. 13). Does this mean that he makes no claim that his models accurately describe those communities which they purport to describe? Is their only value that they do fit the data of early Christianity? If so, why use them at all (since we already have the data, and the models do not tell us anything new)? Or if the only purpose of a model is to “fit” data drawn from independent sources, might we just as well seek models for the study of early Christianity in fiction (say in utopian novels) as in social science?

My second problem with Gager’s work is that categories are sometimes unclear and therefore the force of the argument uncertain. One of the puzzles of the book, for instance, is whether Gager is making any claims about the socioeconomic class(es) from which early Christianity arose. At first when he talks about the early Christians as drawn from the ranks of the dispossessed we are inclined to think that he means the socially and economically dispossessed: “[Certain gospel sayings] reflect the fact that early believers came primarily from disadvantaged groups and that in return they were rewarded with the promise that poverty, not wealth, was the key to the kingdom” (p. 24). Then, however, we learn that the key feature of potential new Christians is that they feel “relatively” deprived (p. 27). This broadens the field greatly since it includes everyone who feels left out of desired rewards in some way, so that, Gager says, “. . . the *am ha-ares* were by no means limited to the poor and ignorant, [and] the earliest believers did not necessarily come from the lowest social and economic strata” (p. 28). When we get to the chapter on Christians in the Roman Empire, “relative deprivation” has opened the way to an even more diverse group of early Christians. Now in the urban setting it is most commonly “the lower-middle and middle classes” who are relatively deprived and therefore ripe for conversion to Christianity (p. 95). Furthermore, the concept of relative deprivation “puts us in a position to reconcile the view that Christianity was a religion of the disprivileged with Pliny’s comment that the churches had attracted persons of every social rank. For according to our definition of what it means to be ‘disprivileged,’ Pliny’s statement is entirely consistent with the view that Christianity was in fact a community of the dispossessed” (pp. 95–96). Other concepts which seem insufficiently clear are “charisma” and “world-construction”/“world-maintenance.”⁷

My third problem is perhaps inevitable. In the brief scope of his work Gager tends to homogenize the evidence concerning early Christianity to make Christianity sound much more of a piece than it really was. The distinction between “millenarian” (or apocalyptic) literature and more structured, rationalized theology is not just the distinction between literature early and late in the period. Mark’s Gospel, one of the earliest writings, already tries to deal with the “problem” of a delayed kingdom, and Revelation, one of the latest writings, is perhaps the most thoroughly “millenarian” writing in the New Testament. Gager simply misreads both the diversity and the direction of early Christian theological development.

Similarly Gager does injustice to the diversity of earliest Christianity when he applies Burridge’s understanding of millenarian morality to the first generations of Christianity: “Burridge proposes the formula: old rules—no rules—new rules. . . . Old practices are overthrown, only to be followed quickly by new ones, many of which bear a striking resemblance to the old ones” (p. 35). He applies Burridge’s analysis to Paul, who at some points does seem to fit this kind of “new morality.”⁸ However, he ignores another strain of Christianity, even earlier than Paul’s, which existed alongside Pauline Christianity and probably in competition with it. The kind of Christianity represented by the Jerusalem church probably included fairly strict adherence to the old rules of the Jewish law and quite possibly included structures of authority based on kinship.⁹ How account for the fact that two contemporary Christian “millenarian” movements had such different relationships to tradition, morality, and authority?

My fourth problem is that some of Gager’s theories simply do not fit the evidence. The most difficult case is the use of cognitive dissonance as a ground for explaining the missionary movement. In the one instance where we have direct access to the motivation of a missionary—the case of the apostle Paul—none of Gager’s analysis fits. For Paul the crucifixion of Jesus was not the disconfirmation of any cherished belief that Jesus was the Messiah. He had no such belief until after the crucifixion and resurrection. Further, the delay of the kingdom was not a problem for Paul, at least not in his earliest writings. He seems to have been a vigorously enthusiastic missionary precisely because he expected the confirmation of his belief in the near future, not because his millenarian hopes had been disconfirmed. Further, the whole discussion of cognitive dissonance barely mentions (the exception is p. 43) a fundamental structure of the growth of Christian belief. The primary response to the crucifixion (whether that “disconfirmed” messianic expectations or not) was the resurrection. Paul believed it was the resurrected Lord who commissioned him

to be a missionary (Gal. 1:16). According to Matthew's Gospel the Risen Lord commissioned the disciples to be missionaries as well (Matt. 28:16–20). I suspect that no account of the rise of early Christianity or of its missionary impulse can neglect the function of the belief in resurrection without glaring inadequacies.

Another place where Gager's model confuses rather than helps the evidence is in the claim that the New Testament (as the document of a millenarian community) is basically an ethical rather than a theological book: "If we look back to the first generations from the perspective of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, we cannot help but be struck by the relative absence of specifically theological reflection on the one hand and the tremendous emphasis on community and ethics on the other" (p. 32). If by theological reflection Gager means the systematic analysis of theological propositions then of course he is right. If, however, he means that the basic thrust of the New Testament is communitarian and ethical then I think he underestimates the extent to which the gospels are theological literature and the extent to which ethical concerns in Paul's letters, for example, are the product of an overwhelmingly theological preoccupation.

This brings me to a fifth problem. Although Gager's initial definitions of religion as world creating certainly includes the capacity of religions to create or sustain a compelling myth, what one misses throughout the book is any sense of the peculiarly religious aspects of early Christianity which may have added to its appeal. To be sure, Gager is reacting against historical studies dominated by theological concerns, but surely the social scientist who deals with religion needs to deal with those needs which are specifically religious as well as those which are more narrowly sociological or psychological. Gager hints at this when on his last page he acknowledges that "the Christ-symbol must have touched religious sensibilities in many ways that we can no longer measure" (p. 142). Whether it is the fact of historical distance or the unquantifiable nature of religious experience which keeps him from raising the question of how Christianity appealed to religious sensibilities in ways similar and dissimilar to its competitors, the omission points to the need for a more thoroughgoing work which would include attention to the phenomenology of religion in the early Christian years. Surely it takes no more imagination or courage to move from our contemporary studies of religious phenomena to the religious understanding of the first century than it does to move from the sociology of Lake City in the 1950s to that of Jerusalem in 29 c.e.

Finally there is a sense in which Gager does not deliver what he hopes to deliver. His hope, I take it, is that "for students of early Christianity . . . the final test must be whether the perspective that we

have adopted makes good on the claim to appreciate the genesis and growth of the Christian religion in ways that have not hitherto been possible" (p. 13).

Gager's method for illumining the genesis of early Christianity is to move from the contemporary sociological models in the hope that they will shed new light on the old problems. However, in one major instance of such model use, that of cognitive dissonance, Gager has not yet shown us how his model really does fit the evidence of the New Testament. In the other instance, the use of the model of the millenarian community to illumine the nature of the earliest Christian communities, he tells us that millenarian communities are apocalyptic and enthusiastic and center in a prophetic leader. Then he suggests that Christianity fits this definition. It seems hardly deniable that at least some early Christian communities were millenarian in this sense, but, when we have said that, what do we know that we did not already know—that some early Christian communities were apocalyptic, enthusiastic, and focused on Jesus as prophetic leader? What is added by giving us the term "millenarian" or referring us to the Melanesian cargo cults? Presumably Gager wants to make a further point, that, like other millenarian movements, Christianity drew its members from the dispossessed. However, the use of the model in itself does not make that case. Gager has to go to the literary sources, and there he discovers, not surprisingly, some indications of an ethic of poverty, some hints that many Christians were not well-to-do, evidence that some Christians *were* well-to-do, and Pliny's claim that Christians came from all classes. So again the model becomes less important than the data. The data suggest that Christianity drew from all classes, with perhaps a special concern for and preponderance of the poor. However, we could have known that from the sources, without recourse to the model.

Gager's is an interesting and important book more because of what it attempts than because of what it accomplishes. I do not doubt that a greater rapprochement between historians of early Christianity and other social scientists is both possible and desirable. I do suspect that future work will have to go in one of two directions. One direction would be to concentrate on some smaller subgroup within early Christianity, to describe it as thoroughly as possible from our sources, and to see what light contemporary social science has to shed on that subgroup's character.¹⁰ The other direction would be more ambitious and comprehensive. Work in this direction would need to deal more thoroughly with the remarkable diversity of communities within early Christianity. It would need to deal not simply with selected models but with a more inclusive theory of the rise of religious movements. It

ZYGON

would need to articulate those methodological steps by which one can move from sociological studies in one place and time to observations about communities in another place and time. It would need to pay attention to those religious sensibilities which account in part for the rise and success of any new community of belief.

NOTES

1. John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 2.

2. Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); cited by Gager, p. 20 and passim in this chapter.

3. Gager, p. 21. I. C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1967), p. 51.

4. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). Gager, p. 39.

5. Gager, p. 80. Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956).

6. Cf. Gager, p. 85. However, he almost certainly is mistaken in thinking that the Pastoral Epistles, which presuppose increasing structure within the churches they address, were written late enough to be a response to Marcion.

7. Cf. Gager, pp. 29-30, 70-72, on charisma. The other items are borrowed from Peter L. Berger; cf. Gager, p. 9 and passim. Cf. my attempt at understanding above.

8. Cf. esp. the Epistle to the Galatians.

9. Gager does take note of this kind of Christianity on p. 69.

10. I am indebted to Lewis Donelson for reminding me of the potentials of this approach.