

The Study of Religions: 1

The Present State of Studies Of

Early Christianity

Recent changes of academic direction in the study of early Christianity have tended to confuse even those working in the field. The situation has been made even more complex by the rapid popularization of scholarly debate. For example, the August 15, 1988 issue of *Time* had a six page article entitled *Who was Jesus?*, intended to give some background to the furor aroused by Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*. The BBC documentary *Jesus: the Evidence* on recent research in the field was soon followed in 1984 by a book of the same name by Ian Wilson and continues to circulate. It is curious that such interaction between scholarly debate and religious commitment seems to be more vital in Christianity than in any other religious domain. I do not perceive Buddhist studies similarly interacting with Buddhist adherents or even Jewish studies causing such concern among committed Jews. Yet the *Time* article is able to state: In the end does the search for the Jesus of history have any relevance for believers?... Believers do care about the historical Jesus and urgently want him to square with the figure they know through faith. (p.62)

Christians seem desperately to want to know what is the 'real Christianity' and they expect scholars to provide a cogent answer. There is, further, an expectation that 'real Christianity' will correspond to its primitive form and that it is the responsibility of scholars to retrieve the Urform. Perhaps all of this

is simply the Western propensity to see history and science as 'true' knowledge with the consequent felt need to assimilate religious knowledge to these.

However that may be, given that Christian believers take Christian studies so seriously and particularly those studies associated with Christian origins, it would be of interest to chart the general phases of the study of Christian origins in recent times and the subsequent reactions to such study that have been formulated by believers.

The first major phase was literary.¹ This Phase still continues even though it has spawned new directions. It began with the application of literary canons from secular scholarship to the Bible, eventually to the gospels specifically. Whereas at an earlier period emphasis had focussed on the content, the events and ideas, Biblical Criticism, particularly since the last century, focussed more on authors. Thus, source critics analyzed texts into component parts or 'documents'. Many texts were discovered to have an oral prehistory and to have previously undergone usage in a variety of social settings.

The Formcritic set out to recover the Urform and its life-situation. The Traditio-historical critic attempted a reconstruction of the whole genetic development from the oral tradition through the various states of literary formulation to the received text. However, there is a significant change taking place. The emphasis is changing from a diachronic to a synchronic

investigation of texts. It is now maintained among scholars that the synchronic has priority in importance over the diachronic. Diachronic investigation refers to how a text arrived at its present form. The synchronic investigates the meaning of the text as it presently stands. It studies the relationships of co-existing parts from which the time factor has been deliberately excluded. As de Saussure wrote: The linguist who wishes to understand a language-state (*état de langue*) must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of the speakers only by completely suppressing the past.²

An analogy can be made with a game of chess. In order to understand the present state of a particular game it is quite unhelpful and even irrelevant to know how the pieces have arrived at the present configuration. Such knowledge may be of interest to an historian of chess but not to the player. The same thing is now being said of the investigation of the biblical text. The critical focus was on the activity of the 'author', although there was continual refinement of the very concept of 'author'. Source criticism multiplied authors while Form criticism generalized 'author' into a community. Tradition-historical criticism attempted to chart the successive stages of development of the text as it passed from one 'author' to the next.

The logical consequence of this sequence was Redaction Criticism. It distinguished between the meaning imparted by the final redactor and the objective reference of the content. Quite deliberately it bracketed out questions of historical veracity; the redactor's meaning was paramount.

Redaction criticism, while still being part of the diachronic trend, was now directing attention to the received text. It prepared the way for a shift to synchronism.

The new emphasis insisted that the received text should be the focus of attention. The text is an organic whole that must be studied in itself as a totality. Brevard Child's 'canonical criticism' is one such synchronic reaction, even though his interest is in the Hebrew Bible rather than in the gospels.³ He claims that the intentions of authors are only of peripheral interest in so far as such intentions and subjective meanings might give a clue to the text's intrinsic meaning. The text itself, he maintains, has an inherent and objective meaning.

A further synchronic instrument has been structuralism. It is based on the premise that a natural language forms a unified system at any given point in time. The meaning of the parts of this language is a function of their interrelationship within that system. An individual author's meaning is of no consequence. The interpreter must investigate the objective meaning of texts seen as a function of their interrelatedness. Another style of synchronic criticism has been Rhetorical criticism.⁴ There have been many fashions in Rhetorical criticism so far and its methodology is obviously still being developed. Rhetorical discourse is definable as any discourse which aims to influence and, quite simply, Rhetorical criticism has as its task the understanding of how such Rhetorical discourse works.⁵ It focusses on the texture and structure of the text, its interest lying not in the genetic history of that text, nor in the intentions of the author or authors, but in the definition of the text's literary

limits and the structure of its composition. It sets out to investigate how a particular piece of literature has been organized into a totality that is intelligible as it stands. In order to identify and define such a totality and its structural limits, it searches for rhetorical devices within the text. Beneath such external structural details the rhetorical critic will then discern a line of persuasion, an argument, as the communicator has become involved with an audience, interacting with it and evoking a response from it.

The response of Christian adherents to such literary developments has tended to take two directions. First, some have completely rejected, a priori, any literary methodology on the grounds that this literature is *sui generis*. It is not possible to apply human canons of literature to it. Secondly, there are those who have stressed that a theory of divine inspiration of Scripture entails the activity of a divine agent working through a human instrument. If the instrument is human then, within limits, literary criticism can be applied to the human aspect of the text.

The diachronic approaches centred attention on the human authors and the life-situation of the transmission of the text. The synchronic approach centred on the actual text. But a text meant for whom? The literary study aroused interest in the social description of possible audiences and possible authors. The ground was prepared for utilizing chance discoveries that had thrown light on the background of the written text. In 1947 there was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls which raised the question of the background against which the New Testament material should be read. The Second

Temple period became a fecund field of scholarly interest for both Jews and Christians. Ideas such as 'Truth', 'Light', 'Spirit' required rethinking in response to their usage at Qumran. Specific Christian rituals seemed to have precursors there. However, a heated debate was generated when the precise intersection of Christianity and Qumran was discussed.

There is a strongly maintained consensus position on Qumran and Christianity. It states that in the middle of the second century BCE a group of Essenes went out into the desert and began rebuilding a ruined Jewish fortress.⁶ The founder and leader was a figure mentioned in their sectarian documents, the Teacher of Righteousness. The sect was confronted by the Wicked Priest, a renegade member of the sect, who sought to destroy the Teacher. The consensus view identifies the Wicked Priest with one or other character of the Hasmonean period, usually Jonathan (160-143 BCE) but sometimes Simon (142-134 BCE). The sect's commentaries revel in the death of the Wicked Priest at the hands of the Gentiles. Jonathan was in fact murdered by the Seleucid general Trypho but Simon was murdered by his brother-in-law, Ptolemy.

Another important figure in this early period was the 'Man of the Lie', usually distinguished from the Wicked Priest. He caused a schism in the sect's following. The troubles of the period are demonstrated by the text of a commentary on Nahum which describes Jerusalem, symbolically depicted as 'Nineveh', inhabited by 'lions', each of which is then equated with a specific gentile. Of highest significance was the 'Lion of Wrath', identified by the consensus view with Alexander Jan-

naeus who crucified many Pharisees in 88 CBE. The pesher of Nahum maintains that the enemies of the 'Lion of Wrath', who are called the 'seekers after smooth things', were hanged on a tree. This seems to fit the Alexander Jannaeus incident, although he was a Jewish king and not a gentile.

The sect was dissipated after an earthquake in 31 BCE.⁷ The consensus view maintains that it regrouped in the early Christian era with substantially the same category of followers. It continued at Qumran until the settlement was destroyed by the Romans in 68 CE at which time the scrolls were deposited in the caves.

The consensus view allows variants. H. Stegemann, for example, attributes the origins of the sect to the outrage felt by Hasidim at the increasing hellenization of their compatriots in Jerusalem.⁸ In several centres they formed groups willing to resist that process but, due to their involvement against Antiochus Epiphanes, they were eventually forced out into the desert areas. The Teacher of Righteousness joined such a group. He was a High Priest of Jerusalem, ousted by Jonathan in 152 BCE and Jonathan was the Wicked Priest. The Teacher consequently took refuge in one of the already existing communities of Hasidim.

Stegemann maintains that the arrival of the Teacher led to a schism in the group. 'The Man of the Lie' abandoned the group with a substantial following of sectarians. The split was due to a clash of authority with the Teacher, who still claimed the prerogatives of the authentic High Priesthood. 'The Man of the Lie' formed a separate group who were to become the Pharisees. The Teacher, now established as the leader at Qumran, developed his

own teaching as a new law for the true Israel.

Another possibility of a variant is demonstrated by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor.⁹ He maintained that the origins of the sect are to be discovered in groups of Jews who returned from Babylon, where their forebears had been exiled in the sixth century, to Palestine in the second century BCE. They had been encouraged to return upon hearing of the successes of Judas Maccabaeus and the restoration of a theocracy in Jerusalem. Murphy-O'Connor sees a substantial vindication of this position in the text:

The Well is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel who went out of the land of Judah and sojourn in the land of Damascus. (CD 6, 4-5).

'Damascus', he claims, is a symbolic name for Babylon. The returnees were disenchanting with Jerusalem and its priesthood and returned to the desert. It was amongst these recluses that the Teacher, a High Priest prior to Jonathan (who was the Wicked Priest), took refuge. The 'Man of the Lie' split from the community because of the Teacher's proposal to take the group out into the desert region of Qumran so as to fulfil the requirements of Isaiah 40:3:

A Voice cries: 'Prepare in the wilderness a way for Yahweh.

Make a straight highway for our God across the desert.'

The schismatic group, led away by the 'Man of the Lie', were those Essenes later mentioned in the writings of Philo and Josephus.

Despite these variations there is a consistency in the framework of the consensus view, even though there is

diversity in the details. Likewise, while it is apparent that there are similarities and parallels between the sectarian writings and the New Testament there are considerable variations in the way in which this relationship is explained even within the consensus framework. The most radical position is taken by those who hold that Jesus and the early Christians belonged to Qumran and broke away from it in the first century CE¹⁰. Thereafter, the Essenes of Qumran and the Christians lived a separate existence. The most conservative position is that the early Christians and the Essenes simply shared a common thought-world and a common Jewish background. Inevitably this would mean that there would be commonalities of expression and practice. However, the Christians and the Essenes would have no historical involvement, shown by the fact that the Essenes are not even mentioned in the New Testament, at least explicitly. Between these two positions would come those who maintain that at least some of the followers of Jesus, particularly John the Baptist, were previously inhabitants of Qumran. They would have brought to Christianity ideas and practices known among the sectarians. The consensus view has, however, been challenged. Serious questions have been raised concerning the basis for archaeological dating. It seems that the literary material from Qumran was used to determine archaeological periods while that literary evidence was based on rather questionable palaeographical grounds.¹¹ There is now far less certainty over the chronological sequence and the Qumran question is again fluid.

But Qumran was not the only new discovery. A similar chance discovery

was made at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945.¹² This was the Gnostic literature. The texts amply demonstrate that at least in the first two centuries of the common era, Christianity was far more diverse than was previously thought. The idea of a unified Christian group with a common sacred canon of writings, common creed and common ritual was dispelled. Perceptions of Jesus and his message and ideas concerning the process of salvation differed greatly.

Phase two was now ushered in. It was a consequence of the need to interpret the biblical literature as a human construct. Biblical interpretation is the interpretation of a past written language. It presupposes and indeed is based upon models of how the human world works and why it so works. These are social science models which seek out commonalities, general trends in society and human behaviour. In this case the social science models must relate not only to socially diverse groups but to non-contemporary social groups. It follows that a social science model dealing with the past must be welded in some way to an historical model. History is an interpretation of the past, focussing on meanings in the past, socially constructed, that still affect us in the present. Having reconstructed the meanings in the past, history then explains past events.¹³ This had always been done implicitly. Now it was being done explicitly. A defensible case could be put forward that biblical interpreters had been working on an ethnocentric model which presumed that the human world of the first century CE was (and should have been) similar to the Western world of the twentieth century. No one social science model would ever

cover all needs of interpretation. These models are question-specific. They are concerned with explanations of social facts and various vantage points can be taken. At times the focus is class, at times politics, at times popular insurrection, at times gender.

Two quite different broad models of early Christianity have emerged. In one there is a 'golden age' of unity, sincere searching for meaning and the realisation of a spiritual heritage. However, this unity begins to dissipate within a short period and various splinter groups disengage themselves. Mainstream Christians distinguish themselves from the breakaways by means of a canon of Scripture, approved rituals and developing creeds. The second model maintains that there never was an original unity except by later rationalization. Christianity began as a multifaceted movement that eventually was dominated by one group claiming 'orthodoxy', and this group ostracized others as 'heretical' and unorthodox.

In themselves the new models do not necessarily disturb the believer. The believer can disregard their relevance, maintaining that neither Qumran nor Nag Hammadi have any connection with authentic Christianity. Alternatively, if the relevance is accepted, a form of 'incarnational' theology would explain that the salvific event of Jesus took place in a human context and was understood in a human way. Such research simply elucidates the context of Jesus.

The studies on early Christianity have given rise to a final spate of historical theories on Jesus himself. These could be seen as constituting phase three. Who was Jesus the Jew? Reinterpretations of Jesus see him as

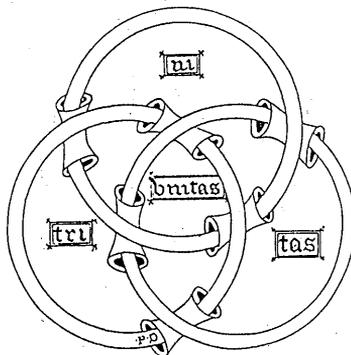
an eschatological prophet who saw his death as part of a plan to fulfil this present age or whose death was interpreted post factum by his followers in this way.¹⁴ He is seen as a political revolutionary whose death at the hands of the Romans becomes credible and even excusable. In this case he would be similar to the Zealot guerillas and he and the other two with whom he was crucified would all have been insurrectionists.¹⁵ He has been seen as an Essene, identified with both the teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest.¹⁶ More commonly he has been identified as a Galilean charismatic,¹⁷ going around doing good, healing and preaching. He has also been seen as a Pharisee of the Hillel school, berating the Shammaites for their severity of legal interpretation.¹⁸ Where such interpretations are accepted there is a very orthodox touchstone and that is the declarations of Nicaea and Chalcedon concerning the complete humanity and complete divinity of Jesus. Where the interpretation will allow for the two natures then there would not seem to be any problem in adherents following it. Where the interpretation excludes the divine nature then it is to be rejected. Even in this latter case a new line has developed and that is the concept of myth. Can there be legitimate discrepancy between myth and historical and scientific fact? Bultmann had long ago claimed that this was so. Can a believing Christian adhere to a political revolutionary caught up in the intrigues of the day and executed by the Romans for subversion, and also to the 'myth' of Chalcedon that Jesus was truly man and truly God, like humans in all things but sin and at the same time fully divine? That is the problem

at the moment.

In conclusion, three phases can be extricated from developments in the study of Christian origins. The first phase was the literary development and some scholars have preferred to remain within this area. Its focal point has moved from content to author to text. Its initial challenge to Christian belief in an inspired and inerrant text was adequately defused by the proposition that the divine author worked through human authors who activated the typical literary paraphernalia of an author. Literary criticism then stimulated a new phase in the application of social sciences to the context of early Christianity. This took its rise particularly as a result of the remarkable finds at Qumran and Nag Hammadi. The social science inroad on faith commitment was countered by a stress on the context of theological thought and incarnational theology. Jesus was born into a specific human world, it was said, and he chose human followers who thought and acted as did others of the time. A social context must be expected as the medium for the conveyance of a divine message, and social sciences need to reconstruct that context. Phase three has been the generation of new historical presentations of Jesus and the early Christian community.

Perhaps this has had the greatest impact on the committed believer. Some presentations are compatible with the "Jesus" of present-day Christianity. It must be remembered that the "Jesus" who is preached in the mainstream Christian churches is the Jesus of the New Testament as filtered through early Conciliar reconstructions, particularly Nicaea and Chalcedon. One solution for believers, only now being formulated and not widely accepted, is the distinction of history and myth.

It is certain that Jewish religious institutions, including the Temple and its priesthood, the Torah and its instruments of interpretation, the synagogal system, the ideologies of messianic and apocalyptic expectation were differentially activated by competing groups such as the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Sadducees and the Zealots. None of these was able to provide a secure and credible fulcrum in a period that knew devastating political and social disintegration. It was from such a matrix that there was spawned both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. But it is the precise historical process, its attendant social context and subsequent literary formulation that remain at the hub of debate.



- 1 There is a good overview in J. Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism", *JSOT* 29(1984), pp. 19-35. See also R B Crotty, "Changing Fashions in Biblical Interpretation", *Australian Biblical Review* 33(1985), pp. 15-30; N Watson, *Striking Home*, Epworth, London, 1987.
- 2 F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Peter Owen, London 1960), p.81.
- 3 B.S. Childs, "The Exegetical Significance of Canon for the Study of the Old Testament", *VTS* 29(1978), pp. 46-68; *Introduction to the Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia and London, 1979.
- 4 Some of the landmark publications in the development of Rhetorical Criticism as a biblical methodology have been J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond", *JBL* 8 (1969) pp. 1-18, J. Jackson and M. Kessler (Eds.) *Rhetorical Criticism* (Pickwick Press, Pittsburg, 1974); C.D. Evans, W.W. Hallo, J.B. White (Eds.) *Scripture in Context. Essays on the Comparative Method* (Pickwick Press, Pittsburg, 1980.
 More recently, D.F. Watson, *Invention, Arrangement and Style. Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter*. Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1988; W. Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?", *CBQ* 49(1987), pp. 448-63.
- 5 E. Black. *Rhetorical Criticism. A Study in Method* (University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1978), p. 16.
- 6 The standard reference work on the archaeology of Qumran is R. de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973 which is an English translation, with some revisions of the Schweich Lectures, 1959. More recently G. Vermes and M. Goodman, "Essenes: According to the Classical Sources", *JSOT*, London, 1989. A handy bibliography is C. Koester, "A Qumran Bibliography 1979-1989", *BTB* 15(1985), pp. 110-120. For an overview of recent developments see R.B. Crotty, "Qumran Studies - Challenge to Consensus," *Religion Traditions* 7-9 (1984-86), pp. 41-52.
- 7 The date is established by references to Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* IV, 121: "Meanwhile the battle of Actium took place between Caesar and Antony, in the seventh year of Herod's reign, and there was an earthquake in Judaea, such as had not been seen before".
- 8 H. Stegemann, *Die Entstehung der Qumrangemeinde*, Bonn, 1971.
- 9 J. Murphy-O'Connor, "The Essenes and their History," *Review Biblique* 81 (1974), pp. 215-244.
- 10 Consternation was felt in the academic community in the last decade when J. O'Callaghan maintained that some of the fragments from Qumran were in fact New Testament texts. "Papiros neotestamentarios en la cueva 7 de Qumran", *Biblica* 53 (1972) pp. 90-100.
- 11 Judgements on handwriting are based on the number of strokes used to compose a letter, the starting point and shape of the letters and the ductus of the letter. Four basic periods are recognised covering the era with which the scrolls deal: Archaic or proto-Jewish script (250-150 BCE); Hasmonean script (150-30 BCE); Herodian script (30 BCE-70CE); Post Herodian or Ornamental Script (70 CE - second century). B.

Thiering, *The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church*, Australia and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, Sydney, 1983, has seriously challenged the consensus position and, on the basis of a reassessment of the paleographical material, she maintains that IQS and 4QpIsac, which both mention the Teacher, are not Hasmonean semiformal but Herodian script influenced by Palmyrene characteristics. Such a contention would open the way to new reconstructions.

12. Some important texts are:

R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, sec. ed. New York, 1966; C. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., 1986; B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1981; A.H.B. Logan and A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of R. McL. Wilson*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1983; E. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, Nashville, 1973 id., *Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*, Philadelphia, 1975; id., *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, 1979; id., *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1988; J.M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Harper and Row, New York 1977.

13. Some interesting studies on the social science background of the New Testament are:

J. Elliott (ed), *Social Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and its Social World* (Semeia 35), Scholars Press, Atlanta 1986); J. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: the Social World of Early Christianity*, New Jersey, 1975; R.M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1977; B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1981; id., "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation", *Interpretation* 37 (1982), pp. 229-42; A. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1977; G. Theissen, *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978; M.A. Tolbert (ed.) *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics* (Semeia 29), Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1983.

14. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, SCM, London, 1973.

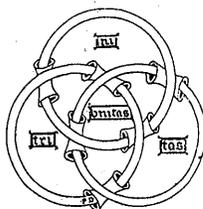
15. H. Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance*, Orbach and Chambers, London, 1973; R.A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence. Popular Resistance in Roman Palestine*, Harper and Row, New York, 1987.

16. B.E. Thiering, *The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church*.

17. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, rev. ed. Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1981. Somewhat differently M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, Harper and Row, New York and San Francisco, 1978.

18. H. Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee*, Paulist Press, New York, 1981.

Robert Crotty
South Australian College
of Advanced Education



ANNOUNCING A NEW JOURNAL.....

**THE JOURNAL
OF RELIGIOUS
PLURALISM**

**A Publication of The Faculty of Religious Studies,
McGill University, CANADA and The Department
of Religious Studies The University of San Diego,
United States.**

**Executive Editors:
Kathleen Dugan
Arvind Sharma**

**The Journal of Religious Pluralism will appear as an Annual.
The first volume is due to appear in 1990.**

For information, write to:

**The Journal of Religious Pluralism
Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University**