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## The Contribution of Sociological Research in the New Testament Studies : An Appraisal

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1970 the use of the social science has played an increasingly prominent role in the New Testament studies. Of course, the application of a sociological perspective to the New Testament is not a new idea, but it is currently undergoing something of a revival. Early efforts concentrated on applying specific sociological theories to biblical studies, but more recent research has drawn from a wider range of social scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines including anthropology, peasant studies, political science, economics and Mediterranean sociology,<sup>1</sup> also more explicit sociological concepts such as, 'sect', 'millenarian', 'cult', 'class', 'role', and 'charismatic authority'.<sup>2</sup> Assessing this movement this paper introduces some of the recent discussion in this area and gives an account of sources of literatures that have raised interests in this field. To do this, this paper traces its needs and historical development in the New Testament studies identifying some of its principles that are in use. This paper also concerns how this discipline is used in the New Testament studies. Therefore, a brief analysis of a significant pioneering work in the study of the first century Christianity is undertaken. Further, to understand the use of this discipline the writer of this paper has undertaken to analyze the Gospel according to Matthew from the sociological perspective, before concluding by identifying its strengths and weaknesses by way of evaluation.

### **The need for sociology in the New Testament Studies**

The reality of growing importance of sociological approach in the study of the New Testament has been impressively portrayed in recent scholarly works. The basic idea of this new approach was an idea from the sociology of literature, namely that type of literature or genres (*Gattungen*) are bound to and shaped by specific types of social life-settings (*Sitz im Leben*).<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was introduced by New Testament Form Criticism, but it received a severe blow due to the fundamental shift in cultural and theological climate, and its interest declined for almost a fifty years. "What it came instead was dialectic theology and existential hermeneutic of biblical texts and with them a focusing of interest on theology and individual".<sup>4</sup>

The social life of the receiving communities was left far aside; although form criticism was directed into finding the social basis of the life and faith of the early church. Thus,

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Thomas F. Best writes, "It cannot be denied that even form criticism, with all its talk of the *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting) of the text, was a literary and theological discipline which produced hardly any concrete historical, social or economic information about the traditions which it studied".<sup>5</sup> Thus this discontentment arose a certain interest for more solid knowledge about concrete social history of the sociological approach. This resulted in the last three decades a flood of investigations concerning the social life of the early Christian movement and its contemporary world in the New Testament studies. We see books about slavery, the life of women and children, institutions, household and family life, poverty and riches, social classes and status stratification, and many similar phenomena.

Abraham J. Malharbe writes, "Another reason for the sociological interest of these involved in the enterprise is their discontent with the present status of historical inquiry and theological interpretation,"<sup>6</sup> For example, this discontentment led to a group of scholars who have focused on the religious life and culture of the Aegean in early Christian times under the leadership of Helmut Koester of Havard University. In fact, this trend began in the twentieth century and scholars have realized that understanding of the New Testament on theological grounds alone is very inadequate. Expressing this inadequacy Robin Scroggs writes, "the discipline of the theology of the New Testament (the history of ideas) operates out of the methodological Docetism, as if believers had mind and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate body."<sup>7</sup> This strongly distorting perspective of early Christian reality is viewed as the "fallacy of idealism,"<sup>8</sup> Best holds similar view and he writes, "Behind the sociological approach is a conviction that the emphasis upon theology is a symptom of a perspective, which renders the proper understanding of the NT impossible."<sup>9</sup> It is because the social setting of the NT and early Christianity have been seen as an indispensable ingredient in holistic interpretation.

But there were also weaknesses in their methodology that sociological criticism seeks to correct. There were some areas of human life unresearched for a long time. Holmberg points out that "we need not only study about the social life of New Testament communities, but the social dimension reinstated into the analysis of New Testament faith and theology."<sup>10</sup> However, interest in the sociology of early Christianity is not an attempt to limit reductionistically the reality of Christianity to social dynamics; rather it should be seen as an effort to guard against a reductionism from other extreme."<sup>11</sup> Thus, this discipline needs methods of analysis and understanding that take seriously the continuous dialect between ideas and social structures..."<sup>12</sup> In short, sociology of early Christianity wants to put body and soul together again.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if we want to understand its "soul", we must find the "body" as it lived.

### **The use of Principles of Sociological Approach**

Defining sociology and its principles is no easy task. There are almost as many definitions and principles of sociology as there are sociologists. However one may define it, "sociology is certainly an attempt to understand society and social relations within society in a disciplined way."<sup>14</sup> In order to gain this understanding he uses various tools and methods, which can be tested and validated by others. If one surveys current sociological studies of the early church, One find a luxuriant variety of theories and techniques being applied to (sometimes rather reluctant!) New Testament data"<sup>15</sup> which have been developed independently of each other.

Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out four different directions that research in this field had taken.<sup>16</sup>

- (1) The description of social reality found in early Christian writings and contemporary materials.
- (2) A genuine social history of early Christianity.
- (3) Investigations into the social organization of the early Christianity.
- (4) Understanding the early Christianity with the help of sociology of knowledge as a social world.

The last direction needs the application of sociological theory to New Testament evidence, while the first three may be characterized as different approaches of social description, using ordinary historical methods and these two levels or types of research has become more and more used by other authors in the subsequent years.

Philip J. Richter has distinguished three different approaches, the first two of which are similar to Smiths.<sup>17</sup>

- (1) "description of social realities" by pointing to Joachim Jeremia's *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus* and Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism*.
- (2) "Social history", he mentions Abraham J. Malharbe's *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (1977) and Gerd Theissen's *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity*.
- (3) "analytic use of a sociological concept", such as 'status', or 'power distribution' or 'sect' upon which an explanation can be applied. The work of John G. Gager's *Kingdom and community* falls in this category.

Theissen identifies three different methods of proceeding, depending on the province of the sociological models used.<sup>18</sup>

- (1) Historical types-models may be taken from the ancient world, e.g., Greece and Rome were Characteristics of this.
- (2) Ethnological models, for example, in the New Testament, the Jesus movement and early Christianity were investigated as a 'millenaristic' or 'Chilistic movement' (J. G. Gager).
- (3) Social history: Many terms and concepts are drawn from sociologically oriented historical studies, e.g., the term 'charisma' (Max Weber).

M. R. Mulholland, Jr. identifies five general levels of sociological criticism in the New Testament interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

- (1) Descriptive: The study of the social setting of the New Testament to understand political, economic cultural, religious, social, historical and communal situations of the New Testament.
- (2) Analytical or explanation: The description of the sociological dynamics of the New Testament world.
- (3) Both descriptive and analytical.
- (4) Study of the text and the words and symbols of the text within the sociological matrix.
- (5) Distinction between the sociological horizon of the interpreter and that of the text.

The first two of the approaches are identified by both Thomas F. Best<sup>20</sup> and Saldarini.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, from the above survey, two types of sociological interpretation can be distinguished evidently: (1) social history or description that tries to identify the social composition of Christian groups and (2) sociological analysis or explanation that seeks to discover the larger understanding dynamics at work within the groups and in their relation to the wider society. Significant contributors to social history are M. Hengel, E. A. Judge, A.J. Malharbe, and R. Grant. Sociological analyses have been used in diverse theoretical models. Robin Scroggs has identified five such models.<sup>22</sup>

- (1) Unconscious social protest or typology in the work of R. Scroggs and G. Snyder.
- (2) Millenarian model and Cognitive Dissonance theory as applied by J. Gager.
- (3) Role analysis as practiced by G. Theissen.
- (4) Sociology of knowledge in the example of W. Meeks.
- (5) Reductionist model of the Marxist, historical materialism in the writings of M. Machovec.

### **Historical Development of Sociological Research in NT Studies**

The origin of the current interest in applying the social sciences to biblical texts cannot be defined precisely, but it is possible to place the movement in some historical perspective. Gerd Theissen<sup>23</sup> has distinguished three phases in the history of origin of sociological exegesis in Germany which began as early as in the era of liberal theology (ca. 1870 – 1920), dialectical theology (1920 – 1970), and renewal period (1970 to present time). However, at the beginning of the century the subject was extensively discussed but with few exceptions, was abandoned in the period between the two world wars. Following the wars there was series of German and English studies of the social world of the first Christians and had a renaissance in the last few decades under new presuppositions.

Among them the work of Shirley J. Case, entitled *The Social Origin of Christianity* (1923) and *The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church* (1934) and Fredrick Grant's *The Economic Background of the Gospel* (1926) are notable. It is, in fact, true, as Rodd also has pointed out, that their "research into the social history of the Early Church has produced the more solid and many ways more satisfactory results."<sup>24</sup> In more recent years in the similar lines, Martin Hengel, in his *Judaism and Hellenism* (1973), *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (1974) and in his other works was concerned with the concrete political and economic history in relation to the first centuries of the origin of the Church, and the formative period as well. He has, furthermore, offered us a useful model in the relevance of such social history for reflection in the Church today. A book with slowly growing influence was published in 1960 by E. A. Judge, entitled *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (1960).<sup>25</sup> The works by Abraham J. Malharbe, entitled *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (1977), and by Robert Grant, entitled *Early Christianity and Society* (1977) can also be included in this group.

Several other scholars use sociological analysis and theory, particularly that of Max Weber, whose breadth of understanding makes his writings amenable to research in New Testament society. One of the most important books within this category is Wayne A. Meeks

*'The First Urban Christians, The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (1983).<sup>26</sup> Its value lies both in the picture of 'the social world of Paul and his use of sociological ideas. He does not use the term "middle class" for the early Christians but he stratifies them according to economic factors and picks up the concept of "status". Meeks<sup>27</sup> also contributed an important article earlier than the above work, entitled "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism" (1972) in which he is concerned with social function of theology.

There are two recent works in which the model of a "millenarian movement" is explicitly used – Howard Kee's *Community of the New Age* (1977),<sup>28</sup> and John G. Gager's *Kingdom and Community* (1975).<sup>29</sup> Beside the above model, Gager uses two more theories in his works namely, "cognitive dissonance" and "the functions of social conflicts". A second major writer in this area is Gerd Theissen and among his notable work is *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (1978),<sup>30</sup> which has been taken to analyze for it is one of the more important early attempts to employ sociology. His other notable works entitled *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (1982)<sup>31</sup> and *The Gospels in Contexts* (1992)<sup>32</sup> which is the pioneering investigation of social and political history that enlightens the prehistory of the Synoptic texts from their beginnings up to the writing of the Gospels.

It is, therefore, unquestionable that the application of sociological theory has played a highly significant part in the development of biblical studies in recent times.

### **A Sociological Analysis of the Gospel According to Matthew: A Case Study**

The old consensus of the scholars regarding the stock picture of early Christians is that they were economically poor and socially deprived.<sup>33</sup> Recently G. Theissen demonstrated that the early Christian preachers and leaders were wandering charismatic who lived on voluntary gifts of the settled community.<sup>34</sup> According to H.C. Kee, the Marcan community is rurally oriented,<sup>35</sup> while J. Gager describes, the early Christian conversion is due to the large factor of deprivation.<sup>36</sup> They have under scored these customary views of the early Christians as overwhelmingly lower class. However, with the publication of a short book by Judge this old consensus regarding early Christianity faced with challenge but it was, at that time, somewhat a lonely protest. Writing seventeen years later, Malherbe shows how the pendulum, at least in his judgement, has swung and concluded concerning this emerging "new consensus" that the early Christians were on higher social level than Deissmann had supposed.<sup>37</sup>

This 'new consensus' finds the community of Matthew to be reasonable affluent, urban, moderately educated, and much disturbed by excessive charismatic behavior.<sup>38</sup> This opinion finds its attestation in first Corinthians to a number of Christians with adequate and ample means, as also the reports of Acts. Jesus and the disciples were largely "free workmen, craftsmen, small businessmen and independent farmers. Many early Christians could be justly called "middle-class."<sup>39</sup> In fact the recent study of Matthew in the sociological perspective showed that Matthew and his community do not seem to fit the popular picture of unlearned evangelist and unwashed people. The following is an investigation into the study of the social contexts of the Gospel of Matthew upon this line.

#### **A. Social Setting**

##### **1. Socio-Political : Urban Community**

Matthew has changed the setting of the ministry of Jesus offered in Mark. In fact Matthew's

Gospel has an “undeniable urban character.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus’ activity throughout the Gospel is city oriented. Kilpatrick<sup>41</sup> locates the Church of Matthew in an urban environment. He bases his conclusion in part on Matthew’s use of the Word City (πολις, 2:23, 4:5, 5:14, 8:34, 9:1, etc.). Matthew refers to cities some twenty six times (by contrast to Mark’s eight times) and to the word ‘village’ (κωμη, 10:11, 21:2, etc.) occurs four times (by contrast to Mark’s seven times). Capernaum is designated as “his own city.” (9:1) “For Matthew locates numerous events in and around the city of Capernaum”<sup>42</sup> and this give ample evidence to urban setting for Jesus’ ministry. Even his disciples travel from city to city (10:11-15,23; 23:34; etc.). Kingsbury also strongly believes that “the Matthaean community was a “city Church” that was materially well off”.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Matthew was most likely writing for an urban community. “They were not rustic”.<sup>44</sup>

## 2. Socio-Economic Setting: Rich, Affluent Audience

The audience seems to have consisted of “affluent Christian Jews who probably belonged to upper class society.”<sup>45</sup> Few factors could be drawn in favour of this argument.

- (a) Genealogies were especially safeguarded as the historical records of the urban elite. They served to keep record of a family’s line of ancestors in order to defend its prestige.
- (b) Matthew’s audience evidently included many landholders, merchants, businessmen and entrepreneurs. They were people who would appreciate the words on debtors and courts in 5:25-26. Also, they were shocked by the suggestions regarding generosity in 5:39-42 and the casual attitude toward sound financial planning in 6:19. They were charmed by the dealer in pearls (13:45-46) and confused by the logic of the landowner in 20:1-16, and thus, warned about the fate of those who have this world’s goods but failed to share their resources with “the least of these my brethren” (25:31-46).
- (c) Luke was content to write “μακαριοι οι πτωχοι” (“blessed are the poor,6:20) but Matthew restricts this to “μακαριοι οι πτωχοι τω πνευματι” (“blessed are the poor in spirit, 5:3) for his community – “it is a spiritual condition and material poverty that is blessed.”<sup>46</sup>
- (d) Matthew has a more extensive vocabulary of coinage and wealth than Mark or Luke.<sup>47</sup>
- (e) For example, Markan Jesus command the disciples in conjunction with their missionary journey to take with them no “copper coin” (6:8) but the Matthaean Jesus commands them to take no “gold, no silver, nor copper coin” (10:9). Luke’s parable of the ‘minas’ (19:11-27) escalates in Matthew to the parable of the “talents” (25:14-30) an amount fifty times more valuable than a minas.
- (f) In Mark (15:43) and Luke (23:50-51), Joseph of Arimathea is identified as member of the Sanhedrin, but in Matthew describes Joseph as a ‘rich man’ (27:57) who was also a disciple of Jesus.

Therefore, these references clearly show to a wide range of affluent people, money and little concern about poverty would agree more with a rich city community than with a country one with its limited economy.

### 3. Socio-Cultural Setting: Scholastic Community

The Gospel according to Matthew is a literary piece, sophisticated in construction and in theological argument, exhibiting a far greater mastery of the Greek language than his predecessor Mark.<sup>48</sup> In recent assessment of the Greek of the Matthew's Gospel, N. Turner states that Matthew's Greek is assuredly not a translation, in spite of its Semitic idiom, for its style is too smooth, too much interpreted with subordinate clauses and genitive absolute... (and) the Greek puns are too complex ...<sup>49</sup> On the same subject C.F.D. Moule writes about Matthew's Gospel that "the editor was an educated person, commanding sound Greek with a considerable vocabulary."<sup>50</sup> Donald Senior also believes that "The Greek style of Matthew is of good quality, not the kind of 'translation Greek' that a native Hebrew or Aramaic speaker would be likely to use. At the same time, the Jewish tone of Matthew's Gospel suggests that a majority of his community was Greek speaking Jews."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Matthew had apparently enjoyed some considerable schooling, "a privilege of the upper-class."<sup>52</sup> It is because most modern commentators on Matthew see the author pictured not in the tax collector Matthew Levi of 9:9, but in the scribe of 8:19 and 13:52, as observed by Smith.

Further, Smith has reported that it was Ernst Von Dobschutz (1928) who suggested that the Matthew's Gospel was written as a manual of discipline and catechism for Christian behavior by a rabbi trained in the Jewish school of Johanan ben Zakkai and subsequently converted to Christianity.<sup>53</sup> G.D. Kilpatrick pictured Matthew's community at prayer, using pieces of the gospel tradition, for liturgical reading and homilical exposition in the midst of the worshipping community.<sup>54</sup> Kristen Stendahl while comparing the Matthew's Gospel with the Qumran "Manual of Discipline" and the early Christian "Didache", sees strong evidence of scholarly activity behind the production of the Gospel in its systematic teaching and its neat and symmetrical arrangement of materials into clusters of three, five, seven and tens.<sup>55</sup> Therefore the Greek language and the scholarly activity of the Matthew's Gospel would seemingly place the community of Matthew in a 'scholastic environment.' This is very much in line with the theory of E.A Judge<sup>56</sup> on early Christian community.

#### B. *Matthew's Community*

##### 1. Wandering or Settled

Edward Schweizer claims for the Matthean community of about AD 90 the same ethic of "itinerant radicalism", that Gerd Theissen ascribes in his terms "wandering Charismatic"<sup>57</sup> the first Christians following Easter who first transmitted the sayings of Jesus. Perhaps Theissen has correctly explained the ethic of the earliest transmission of the sayings of Jesus. Since the earliest Christianity was in a transition period, Schweizer's view would be wrong, because "this ethic can be seen to have undergone modification within the community of Matthew."<sup>58</sup> The Matthean Jesus commands the disciples in connection with the missionary journey to take no gold, neither silvers, nor copper coins (10:9). Matthew predicted difficulty in entering the kingdom not mere to those who have means (Mk. 10:23) but to the rich man (19:23). Against such background, such as these, "it is unlikely that the greater number of Matthew's community can be regarded as "wandering itinerants" who have left behind house and possession."<sup>59</sup> It appears that the ethos of being without home, family and goods has been breached. It is already observed in the preceding discussion that the smooth Greek of Matthew and his affinity for the word "city" but avoidance of the word "village" suggest



at once that his community was associated with an urban area and was most probably domiciled.

The picture of the community of Matthew fits well with the Gospel's presentation of Jesus and the disciples. For example, the harsh sound of the traditional saying that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (8:20). Matthew included Mark's account (1:29-30) of Peter that he had a "house" in Capernaum and was married (8:14). In the case of Jesus, he similarly records that his father Joseph, "dwelt" in Nazareth (2:23) and that Jesus himself left Nazareth and came and "dwelt" in Capernaum (4:13). In fact, Capernaum is described by Matthew as "his (Jesus) own city" (9:1). Kingsbury thinks that this may be a sign that Matthew regarded the "house" in such passages as 9:10,28; 13:1,36; and 17:25 as Jesus' own. Moreover, he observes that Matthew pointedly restricts the travels of Jesus during his ministry almost exclusively to Galilee and, for the most part of the environs of Capernaum.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, we can say that it does not seem likely that the community of Matthew practiced literally the wandering ethic of renouncing home, family and goods, neither does it seem likely that the shape of its ministry was identical to that of these earliest Christians.

## 2. Charismatic or Anticharismatic

It is generally agreed that Matthew's Gospel comes from a Jewish-Christian community with a strong antipathy toward certain elements in the synagogue. For instance, Matthew rebukes his fellow Jews who refused to confess Jesus as the Christ the Son of the living God (16:16). Also chapter 23 is a notorious denunciation of scribes and Pharisees who teach Moses without Christ.

Schweizer views Matthaean community as broadly "charismatic" in character in the sense that those Christians discharged a vigorous ministry not only of preaching, but also of healing.<sup>61</sup> It is in fact the case that these Christians saw themselves as continuing in their own day the healing ministry of Jesus.<sup>62</sup> Theissen also views that earliest Christians were charismatic figures who discharged in their wanderings ministry of both preaching and healing.<sup>63</sup> But Kingsbury observes that "in the community of Matthew, the stress was not at all on healing but on teaching and preaching."<sup>64</sup>

*Secondly*, Jesus attacks upon certain charismatic, as Smith has observed. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus' warning to the community about "false prophets in sheep's clothing." (7:15-20). These enemies of the community are Christians (sheep), not Jews or a pagan outsider. They confess Jesus in language sufficiently orthodox charismatic: "Lord, Lord" (7:21-22). Yet they have been excluded from the kingdom (25:1-13), came as a surprise to them. Smith describes this activity is due to their charismatic endowment.<sup>65</sup> They had no doubt they were spiritual people, God's people, because of the gifts of the Spirit were clearly displayed among them: tongues and spiritual utterances, exorcisms, prophecy, and power to do miracles (7:14-23). The possession of these gifts and Spirit became the ground of their boast and over confidence. Thus they have to be rebuked.

*Thirdly*, Matthew, in fact, positive about the Spirit and spiritual gifts. Again Smith writes, "Matthew describes Christian discipleship in terms of charismatic deeds and charismatic speech in Jesus' mission discourse (10:5-20). Even Jesus himself was conceived by Spirit (1:18-20), endowed with the Spirit at baptism (3:16; 4:1) and performed charismatic deeds

of healing, exorcism and raising the dead (11:2-6) ... Matthew has a very high view indeed of the charismatic endowments in the congregation"<sup>66</sup>

Although Matthew presents some charismatic figures of his community, nevertheless, time and again he showed his uneasiness with certain charismatic.

1. His formulation of Beatitude appears to include anticharismatic cautions, "Blessed are the poor in spirit (5:3) seems aimed at those who boast of their spiritual riches just as the "Blessed are the meek"
2. Jesus' words on prayers uttered secretly behind closed doors and spoken simply without bubbling or prating sound. (9:7).
3. Matthew omits the generous sayings of Mark 9:38-41, concerning exorcisms performed by a charismatic leader who does not follow Jesus.
4. According to Matthew 25:31-46, it is not the charismatically endowed people who enter the kingdom. It is doers of deeds of loving kindness, people who exhibited love toward the deprived and unmerited.
5. Finally it is seldom noted that Matthew is silent about Pentecost. He neither has Jesus promised the spirit nor does he describe the coming of the spirit.

Thus the preceding discussion gives us the evidence that Matthew's community is anticharismatic as much as charismatic.

The above analysis of the social context of the Gospel of Matthew emerges as urban, well to do, educated and in a certain sense, anticharismatic as much as charismatic. Socio-political factors indicates that Matthew's community was urban, city oriented. Socio-cultural factors reflect the well-cultured and educated community. And socio-economic factors explains that Matthew's community was not living in poverty but was materially well-off which are reflected in such things as his easy familiarity with a wide range of money and the circumstances that his concern is more with the rich than with the poor. All these confirm the impression that his community was not wandering radicals but settled, domiciled community. The Gospel also indicated that the community was both anticharismatic as well as charismatic.

### **An Evaluation and Conclusion**

The use of methods and theories and models derived from the sociology and their application to the study of the New Testament have not been without criticism. It has both weaknesses and strengths.

Many theories and models have been propounded as it is observed, to understand the New Testament in the sociological perspective, but these have raised confusion at the same time. We may ask questions, which are valid? Which are appropriate for the data to be interpreted? Thus Best has pointed out "there is no single methodology proper to New Testament sociology. In this it is quite different from older approaches, particularly form criticism, which sprang virtually full-grown at birth from one book, ... It is this systematic review of the corpus from a consistent theoretical and methodological perspective which is still lacking in New Testament sociology"<sup>67</sup> Probably Scroggs<sup>68</sup> suggestions would be applicable here. (I) We need to understand fully how the methods work and to be clear that it can be applied to the data at hand. (ii) We need to know both the theoretical presupposition and implications of the use of the methods.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE NT STUDIES

Question is also raised, how can models created by modern interpret an ancient culture? Saldarini expresses the same concern; “sociological categories after contain modern presuppositions which render them inappropriate far understanding antiquity.”<sup>69</sup> Another concern in the common factor lies in the texts and method. The biblical texts were not written to yield the kind of information sought by sociology. We have learned that how little in the way of data was available for the sociological analysis of the New Testament, because most texts are speaking about theological verities, not sociological conditions.

There is also the change of reductionism, that is, some think sociology reduces religious phenomena to non-religious factors<sup>70</sup> or tend to reduce all theology to sociology in disguise. Another change is that, it also distances the interpreter from the text and renders it a subject for investigation but not a scripture that scrutinizes and searches the interpreter.

While acknowledging the validity of many of these weaknesses, there are also strengths that must be kept in mind.

- i) While models run the risks of introducing anarchism, they also supply controls to a study.
- ii) It hopes to bring us closer to that experience and thus to the full reality of the early Christian movement including its theology.
- iii) It can also be seen as restoring perspective to the development of the early Church and the formation of the Scripture.
- iv) The use of the sociology can contribute to our understanding of the inspiration of the Scripture.
- v) The sociology provides many tools for conducting the difficult task of the relevance of ancient document to speak to the modern world.
- vi) Perhaps the greatest strengths or sociological criticism is its focus upon the incarnational reality of human life.<sup>71</sup> Because sociology awakens us to the reality that all human existence is lived within specific sociological situation with all the ebb and flow of its political, economic, social, religious, educational, institutional and cultural dynamics.

Though there are promise and perils of the sociological approaches to the study of the New Testament, the fact we must know is that, “sociological models are not absolutes or iron laws should not blind us to the more general truth that models are necessary in all understanding. A researcher must work with the utmost caution and strictness, with adequate guard against over enthusiasm. There can probably never be any complete sociological analysis of early Christianity. And yet there may be times when a sociological model may actually assist in our ignorance.

### NOTES

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17. P. J. Richter, "Recent Sociological Approaches to the Study of the New Testament" (*Religion* 14, 1984, 77 – 90), p.78.
18. G. Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians; Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*; trans., Margaret, Kohl, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark19ff, 1993), pp. 19ff.
19. M.R. Mulholland, Jr., "Sociological Criticism" in D.A. Black & D.S. Dockery (eds.), *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*. (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, 296 – 316), pp.303f.
20. Cf. Best, *Op. cit.*, p.185.
21. cf. A.J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach*, (Delaware: Michael Glazier) pp.15f.
22. cf. Scroggs, *Op. cit.*, pp.171ff.
23. Theissen, *Op. cit.*, pp. 3ff.
24. Rodd, *Op. cit.*, p.637.
25. Cited in E.A. Judge, "The Social Identity of the First Christians: A Question of Method in Religious History", *Journal Of Religious History* 11, (1980); Cf. An analysis by Holmberg, *Op. cit.*, pp. 36ff.
26. W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians : The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (London: Yale University Press, 1983).
27. W. A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johanine Sectarianism", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91 (1972) pp. 70 – 76.
28. H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).
29. For more details cf. Tidball, *Op. cit.*, pp.24ff.,
30. G. Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).
31. G.Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
32. G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Contexts : Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. L. M. Maloney, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).
33. Deissmann, *Op. cit.*, pp. 6f, is a good representative of this consensus and this was quite widespread, although not homogeneous. For example, a Marxist like Kautsky, in his book *The Foundations of Christianity*, describes the early Christians as originally a proletarian and revolutionary movement among the lower classes, See Holmberg, *Op. cit.*, pp. 28f. Among the modern variants Kee, Gager, Theissen, few could be mentioned.
34. See above.
35. Kee, *op. cit.*, pp. 102ff.
36. J.G. Gager, "Kingdom and Community", analysed in Tidball, *Op. cit.*, pp. 26-36.
37. See f.n.: 6, *Op. cit.*, p. 31; Theissen also seems to be moving in this direction now when he observed of a

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leading minority upper-class Christians at Corinth, over against a lower-class majority, see f.n. 31; M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (London: S C M, 1974) Cf. pp. 37f;

38. R.H. Smith, "Were the Early Christians Middle – class? A Sociological analysis of the New Testament" in K. Gottwal (ed), *The Bible and Liberation: Political Hermeneutics*, (Orbis Books, New York, 1983) p.445.
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40. Smith, *Op.cit.*, p.447.
41. Kilpatrick, *Op. cit.*, p. 124
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43. *Ibid.*
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46. Kilpatrick, *Op.cit.*, p.125.
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49. J.H. Moulton and N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963) 4, pp. 37-38.
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57. Theissen, *op.cit.*, pp. 7-16.
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59. *Ibid.*,
60. *Ibid.*, p.71.
61. E. Schweizer, "Observance of the Law and Charismatic Activity in Matthew", *New Testament Studies* 16 ( 213-30) pp. 216-213.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.
63. Theissen, *op.cit.*, p.9.
64. Kingsbury, *op.cit.*, p.71.
65. Smith, *op.cit.*, p.449.
66. *Ibid.*
67. Best, *op.cit.*, p.187.
68. Scroggs, *op.cit.*, p.166.
69. Saldarini, *op.cit.*, p.15
70. Theissen, *Sociology*, *Op.Cit.*, p.4.
71. Mulholland, *op.cit.*, p.308.