SHifting Sectarian Boundaries in Early Christianity

L. Michael White
Department of Religion, Oberlin College

From Sect to Church

Jesus of Nazareth did not pronounce the death of Judaism; nor did he proclaim the birth of a new and separate religion. Rather, he appeared as one among many proclaimers of religious change and expectation within the framework of Palestinian Judaism of the first century. The movement that originated around the figure and memory of Jesus was almost inconsequential at first and hardly unique. It can best be described as a mere ripple in a sea of religious and social ferment. Thus, the Christian movement originated as a renewal movement, or what some would call a 'reforming sect', internal to Judaism. This assertion has now become a commonplace in treatments of Christian origins. Its acceptance as the starting-point for discussing development has had enormous implications for both historical study and theological reflection, especially in the light of the fact that somehow over time the Christian 'church' would emerge as a far-reaching and dominant force in the later Roman Empire.1 Nor has this fact gone unnoticed by historians and sociologists seeking insights into the growth of new religious movements in modern contexts.

It is not the intention of the present study to contest this basic assertion, but to test some of its implications in the light of recent work in sociology and the social history of earliest Christianity. From it we may offer cautions and qualifications which will give further nuance to the historical considerations. Hence it will be suggested that recognizing the sectarian origin of the movement, albeit fundamental, is not by itself an adequate explanation, either on historical or on sociological grounds, for the diverse patterns of growth and development of early Christianity in the wider framework of the Roman world.

The term 'sect' is fraught with a number of problems in both

popular parlance and technical usage. To some it will likely bear unsavoury connotations out of contemporary usage; to others it will suggest a specific model of religious organization and development, a legacy of earlier scholarship. Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber used the notion of sectarianism to explain certain features of development in Christian history which had resulted in differentiation and pluralism down to modern times. In both cases the matter of Christianity's 'sectarian' origins was adduced as a correlate in the process. Troeltsch, of course, popularized the distinction between 'sect-type' and 'church-type' to explain issues of conservatism and change in religious movements. The 'church-type' accepts (or preserves) the secular order; the 'sect-type' reflects indifference or hostility towards the secular order and, through small cell groups, attempts to form an alternative social order. For Troeltsch, however, Jesus, as innovator of a new religious ethic, was not the founder of such a sect (as Marxist historiographers had claimed), even though his message spoke to similar social issues of class and economics.

Weber employed this basic distinction in service to his model of religious evolution, in which a significant role was seen in the charismatic figure and the moment of 'breakthrough.' Implicitly, Weber's use of ideal types in this model resulted in an equation of first-century Judaism as the 'national church', the institutional religion out of which arose Jesus, as sectarian, charismatic reformer. The fullest expression of this model, applied primarily to the pluralism in American Christianity, was given by the influential work of H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr argued that a sect tends to arise out of social discontent and is essentially unstable as a religious organization. Over time sects tend to be transformed into institutional churches.

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4 Ibid., i. 39-46. Troeltsch was responding directly to the work of the Marxist Karl Kautsky, a student of Engels. This view is best represented in his book *The Foundations of Christianity* (New York, 1919) and gives rise to Troeltsch's alternative social ethic of 'love communism.'


7 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Holt, 1929; repr. Meridian, 1957). Niebuhr was more sympathetic than Troeltsch to the challenge of Marxist social concerns and, consequently, to the picture of early Christianity as a proletarian movement of protest.
But, he observed, this very transformation results in discontent, which in turn precipitates tension, splits, and a new round of sectarian formation. The result is a cyclical process of 'denominationalism' which effectively commenced with the first stage of institutionalism of the original message of Jesus, which Niebuhr decries as the 'emascula­tion of the Christian ideal.'

Despite individual differences in theory and intent, these three seminal works have left their mark on the study of earliest Christianity as a sectarian religious movement. In particular, we may note three common areas from which certain social and historical assumptions have persisted in more recent scholarship. The first is the tendency to portray first-century Judaism as a static and monolithic institution, against which Jesus then arises as charismatic reformer. The second is the implicit picture of the social level and organization of the earliest Christian groups, especially since sects often seem to be protest movements of the oppressed or disadvantaged. The third is the assumed process of institutionalization and the emergence of Christianity as a world religion. Each of these three areas incorporates both sociological and historical elements, which need to be tested in the light of current work in both fields. All too often the picture has been based on simplistic, idealized, or theologically tendentious reading of the New Testament documents, as in traditional Marxist historiography of early Christianity. It is no less in evidence elsewhere, as in the characteristic equation in Protestant historiography: first-century Judaism is seen by analogy with the medieval Catholic church, against which Jesus and the Reformers were parallel sectarian responses. Such analogies have also been read into the process of institutionalization of the Christian movement, especially when the notion of *Fruh­katholismus* (or 'nascent Catholicism') comes to have polemical implications. Hence, caution needs to be exercised against overly simplistic applications, either of the sociological categories or of the historical information.

THE JESUS-MOVEMENT: A SECT AMONG SECTS

In contrast to this church-sect typology, it may be more appropriate to
see the earliest Christian movement as one among several fluid sects within first-century Judaism. In part this recognition has come as sociology has questioned the Troeltschian typology itself. The result has been to narrow significantly the definition of sect. The work of Bryan Wilson has emphasized the role of social and economic factors alongside religious ideology, in the formation of sect movements as protests against the prevailing outlook of the wider society. Similarly, studies of early Christianity have raised new issues of diversity, development, or of ‘myth-making’ as a function of sectarian boundary maintenance. Following Wilson’s recasting of the basic model, Robin Scroggs attempted to check the evidence of earliest Christian movement against the ‘ideal type’ of sect. Thus, Scroggs identified seven areas in which the sectarian model applies, since Christianity (1) emerges out of protest, (2) rejects the values and ideology of the establishment, (3) is egalitarian, (4) offers adherents love and acceptance, (5) is voluntary, (6) demands total commitment, and (7) is often adventist (or eschatological) in orientation. Moreover, as a protest against the perceived ills of society, such movements tend to appeal to certain classes of society, typically those without power or status.

Further modification of the picture must come, however, once we begin to test the other side of the church-sect model in relation to Christian origins, by asking to what extent first-century Judaism is properly considered a ‘national church.’ To be sure the analogy continues to be used, even by historians who would otherwise challenge some of the basic assumptions of Troeltsch and Weber regarding early Judaism. In general we must say that the inclination to portray Christianity as a protest against a static institution of Judaism, often characterized in terms of ‘barren legalism,’ cannot be

11 So, I take the heading of this section from Robert Markus, Christianity in the Roman World (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 13.
maintained. Rather, there were divergent currents of pre-70 Judaism, even in the Homeland, some (though not all) of which had emerged as sectarian movements. The best known example, of course, is the apocalyptic sectarianism reflected by the Essene community at Qumran. Hence, one must also begin to look at the environment towards sectarianism as a feature of the second temple period.

Such examples ought to cause us to think carefully about traditional assumptions of Jewish religiosity. A good example is the case of the Samaritans and their relations to Jerusalem Judaism in the second temple period. It has been traditional to portray the Samaritans as a ‘schismatic’ or heretical sect which broke away from ‘normative’ Judaism. On the basis of further historical analysis, an alternative reconstruction emerges, especially as one begins to consider the Samaritan accounts alongside the Jewish polemic. A provocative thesis of Ferdinand Dexinger suggests that the tensions were more properly a result of divergent forms of ‘Israelite’ piety between the indigenous population (the proto-Samaritans) and the returning Exiles (who would re-establish Jerusalem as their exclusive cult centre). We may build on this observation by noting that the self-awareness of the Jerusalem group was heightened as time passed and the temple priesthood went through subsequent reforms under Ezra and his successors, with a resulting sense of distinctness from the Samaritans.

From this perspective, then, it is no longer possible to treat Jerusalem as the normative ‘church’ from which the Samaritans separated. On the contrary, the minority exilic group may be seen as

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19 The view of the Samaritan ‘schism’ after the model of ‘heresy’ reflects a traditional Christian historiography, one that also needs to be re-examined in terms of the social process at work in later Christian development. Here the legacy of Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) is a valuable caution. The basis for the traditional view, of course, was the polemical Jewish sources against the Samaritans as found in second temple documents, most notably 2 Kg. 17 and Ezra 4:1–5, but also reflected in Josephus, *Antiquities*, xi.302–47.


22 Ibid., 113. Thus, in the process of development of the Exilic/Jerusalem group, the proto-Samaritans came to look more and more backward religiously (and they were more suspect politically as well).
the sectarian protest which hardened and limited its boundaries against other indigenous forms of the older Israelite heritage. Only later would the two groups theologize their own historiographical accounts of the split as each group established its institutional religious character. As a test case, then, the Samaritans ought to make us wary of too hastily applying ‘sectarian’ and ‘normative’ labels in Judaism of the second temple period. In the final analysis, the Samaritan case represents but one among many occasions of small-group separatism as a characteristic phenomenon of Palestinian Judaism of the period, including the Hasidim of the Hasmonean period and their heirs, the Pharisees and the Essenes. The eventual course of Judaism was further splintering in matters of interpretation and group identities, even though there were certain common tenets.

Claiming Jesus as the Messiah, the original group that emerged after the crucifixion has to be seen as an apocalyptic sectarian movement within this spectrum. The irony of a ‘crucified messiah’ adds a particular dimension over against other groups and movements of the time. Here the Jesus movement has to be seen as one variation in a plethora of popular movements, not all of which were ‘sects’ per se. Recent studies, such as that by Richard Horsley and John Hanson, challenge the simplistic picture of Judean society and religious life leading up to the first revolt against Rome (66–70 CE). They see the dominant impulse to be the social and economic distress of the peasantry (over against the landed aristocracy as collaborators with the Romans). The movements produced, however, were quite varied in social form: (1) escalating social banditry; (2) a broad range of ‘messianic’ movements, calling for political independence; (3) prophetic movements (often inspired by expectation of an eschatological deliverance and triumph); (4) other prophets serving as social critics (calling for reform but not usually leading cohesive movements); and (5) the ‘Zealots’ proper (who emerged as a revolutionary force with an idea of establishing an alternative government in Jerusalem). Each of these kinds of social movements had its own distinctive features, but shared a widespread apocalyptic spirit, a mood of imminent eschatolo-

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23 Ibid., 109. It is significant, then, that both groups would look back to ‘origins’ in scripture, that is Moses and Torah, for their source of legitimation. The result was the historiographical polemics in each respective account. Dexinger also rightly stresses the social and economic factors at work in the situation; however, they should equally caution us against too hastily assuming that a ‘sect’ necessarily feels deprivation (though it may feel threatened), at least not in the case of the Jerusalem group.


gical expectation. In this picture, however, Jesus was not just another one of the ‘Zealots’ but is more like the prophet figure. After the death of Jesus, then, there were likely different groups which responded to his message in terms of local forms of social concern and identity, only some of which emerged as identifiable apocalyptic sects attached to Jesus, the crucified messiah. It is their sectarian formation and apocalyptic expectation (glimpsed in mere kernels of the oral tradition) that would emerge out of the pre-literary obscurity of the early years into the period of formalization (when the Gospels were compiled) after the first revolt.

Gerd Theissen has attempted to reconstruct from these later written sources some of the lines of an early Jesus sect, which he calls Die Jesusbewegung (The Jesus movement). For Theissen the Jesusbewegung was one form of Christianity, the Palestinian phenomenon (as opposed to Hellenistic missions) which spilled over into Syrian regions and later evolved into Jewish Christianity. Prior to 70 CE it had been in direct competition with other renewal movements of Judaism, but afterwards, when Pharisaism became the major voice, the Jesusbewegung was excommunicated. Theissen develops what is referred to as a socioecology of this movement as a way of understanding its internal order and the dynamics of its peculiar development. In particular, religious renewal movements are seen to arise out of social tensions and conflict; they attempt to give impulses for resolution. Thus, Theissen analyzes the social expression of these earliest tensions in terms of an ethos of wandering charismatic proclaimers of the imminent kingdom; their message was exclusively directed ‘to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.’ The earliest disciples of the Jesus movement were itinerant radicals, for whom homelessness, poverty, miracles, and asceticism were the ideal by which they hoped to resolve social ills, and Jesus was the authority of their message and their

27 Ibid., 250.
30 Meeks, Moral World, 97-108.
33 This picture is based on the implications of the so-called ‘missionary discourse’ of Matt. 10:5-23. The discourse itself is pre-Matthean (or Q) in source, but reveals some specifically Matthean touches.
ethos. Part of the course of development involved the support of local sympathizers, who then became the cells of local Christian group formation. But the Jesus movement itself expected a more radical transformation of society through miraculous means, and as such it was a failure, though a form of its ideology continued in the local cell groups. Using Theissen, like Horsley and Hanson, it would be difficult to apply strict terms of sect formation to some early forms of the Jesus movement. In Theissen's reconstruction, it might be argued, the more strictly sectarian form arose as the original ethos of itineracy, born of apocalyptic and prophetic impulses, took root in local groups. Apocalyptic sectarianism as we see it in the Jesus movement was both a product and precipitant of development in varied forms.

For these reasons, some of the traditional models of sect formation are not as directly applicable to the historical situation of first-century Judaism and Christianity as has often been claimed. The complex typology of Bryan Wilson, for example, has been very influential, but is predicated almost entirely on pluralistic tendencies within the cultural framework of contemporary Christianity. It does not fit so neatly to all the types of splinter groups one sees in first-century Judaism, much less to the complexities of religious life in the larger Roman Empire. Instead, we may opt for a more basic, cross-cultural definition of 'sect' as a deviant or separatist movement within a cohesive and religiously defined dominant culture. Thus, despite expressed hostilities and exclusivism, the sect shares the basic constellation of beliefs or 'worldview' of the dominant cultural idiom. One then begins to identify sectarian boundaries on the basis of the particularities of reaction to the 'world' within this shared spectrum. As Wayne Meeks puts it:

It was those [particularistic] beliefs and that kind of behavior that determined who the Christians were, and not the great institutions . . . even though the latter might be presupposed and the attitudes toward them by various groups of Christians might vary. Thus, the early believers in Jesus the Messiah have to be compared with other

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34 Theissen, *Early Palestinian Christianity*, 8-16. Theissen sees the model of resolution offered as radical, close to a Marxist view of conflict, as opposed to the lines in Paul, which is characterized as 'love patriarchalism' (a term borrowed from Troeltsch), cf. J. Schütz's 'Introduction,' in Theissen, *Essays on Corinth*, 14, 18.
36 Ibid., 112.
37 Ibid., 115.
38 B. Wilson, 'An Analysis of Sect Development,' *Patterns of Sectarianism*, 22-45. One problem noted by critics of Wilson is a slippery use of the term 'sect' when moving from clearly Christian cultural contexts to non-Christian or third-world social structures. Within Christianity, Wilson distinguishes between sects and denominations, especially in that sects tend to have egalitarian organization and a higher sense of exclusiveness and hostility to the secular society. Wilson thus identifies four basic types of sects: conversionist (evangelical), adventist (revolutionist), introversionist (pietist), and gnostic (mystical).
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identifiable movements of sects of Jews, such as the Essenes, the Pharisees, and the Therapeuta. Like them, the Jesus movement presupposed the great traditions of Israel and many of the common interpretive procedures and institutions, yet it interpreted those traditions, used those procedures, and responded to those institutions in deviant - sometimes radical - ways. Like other Jewish sects, it drew the boundaries of the sacred community differently and more narrowly than did the established leaders in Jerusalem.

In turning to the historical evidence we should keep in mind three elements noted here. First, that not all movements of early Judaism are properly speaking 'sects' (though some were), but all shared the same basic 'symbolic universe' characterized by apocalyptic expectations overlaid on the great traditions of Israel. Second, there is an inherent tendency towards diversity in sect formation based upon varied responses to, or interpretations of, the shared cultural idiom. In other words, the same points of contention (over practice or interpretation) that galvanize the separatist tensions of one group are likely to precipitate other groups as well. Third, boundary construction and maintenance, reflecting tensions or hostilities in terms of group self-definition against the 'world,' is a key defining feature in the formation of a given sect (as opposed to other types of religious or social movements). In the case of the Jesus movement a particular form of apocalyptic emerged around the imminent expectation of a new social order, the Kingdom of God, governed by Jesus, the crucified messiah.40

IN THE ROMAN WORLD: SECTS OR CULTS?

One of the problems of reconstructing the history of the Christian movement is that our earliest evidence of its existence comes only after it had moved out beyond its original Palestinian Jewish moorings. All the surviving literary remnants (from the New Testament), indeed the impulse to write at all, presuppose an encounter with the larger Hellenistic-Roman world and new vistas of self-definition.41 The question, then, is: given its exclusively Jewish origins, how did this encounter come to pass, and what was its effect on the original sectarian Jesus movements? This is in large measure the issue addressed by John Gager in examining early Christianity as a millenarian movement.42 In traditional Christian categories millenarianism is often associated with Bryan Wilson's category of 'Adventist Sects,' that is groups (such as the Millerites, Christadelphians, or Jehovah's Witnesses) who predict the imminent end of the world.43 Among

40 Meeks, Moral World, 100-4.
41 Cf. Markus, 'The Problems of Self-Definition,' Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, i.4. 9, who suggests two phases of self-definition.
43 Wilson, Patterns of Sectarianism, 27-8.
anthropologists, however, a large sub-field has generated around this particular phenomenon, which (like the typologies of sect formation) shows potential as a theoretical template for understanding earliest Christianity and its environment.  

Several features of millenarian movements bear special interest in this regard. They tend to be movements of the disinherited. They arise when a group accepts the same values as its society but is kept from the rewards associated with those values. A radical change of the present social order is thus expected to correct this deficiency. In many cases a charismatic ‘prophet’ figure serves as the stimulus for galvanizing these feelings of dissatisfaction and expectation by symbolizing key social relationships. Such movements tend to be short-lived, however, and are characterized by a burst of emotional energy. In that momentary burst, something of the new order may indeed be achieved, as the old rules are rejected. Still, the brevity of such expressions tends to give way to new regulations of order, which are comprised of elements old and new. Thus, millenarian movements, like certain sects, tend to die out (and be reabsorbed) or become institutionalized. Here, Gager sees a clue to the beginnings of the missionary impulse in the Christian movement, as ‘proselytizing’ new converts became a way of rationalizing the radical disconfirmation of the expected end.

While certain points of convergence are apparent here, both with sectarian phenomena and with the early Christian evidence, there are some difficulties in theoretical application. One problem is a matter of technical vocabulary, as the term typically applied to millenarian movements is ‘cult’ not ‘sect.’ To be sure, the two terms are often interchangeable slurs in popular parlance. Still, and despite the fact that ‘Adventist Sects’ appear in Wilson’s typology, the two terms bear essential differences. Thus, not all millenarian cults are sects, and

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45 Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 22, citing Worsley (see note above).


48 Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 21, 35.

49 Ibid., 38–49, especially following L. Festinger et al., *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper, 1956). Gager also recognizes that there is a reciprocal problem in that many of these studies of millenism were relying uncritically on assumptions regarding New Testament materials.

not all sects are millenarian (adventist). Becoming clearer on this distinction may help us in understanding some features in the development of early Christianity. Here let us posit, for the sake of discussion, an arbitrary definition that accounts for the process of formation of a New Religious Movement (a) from a point of origin and (b) in relation to the culture in which it develops. Thus, as we have seen, a sect is a separatist (or schismatic) revitalization movement which arises out of an established, religiously defined cultural system, with which it shares a symbolic worldview. A cult is an integrative, often syncretistic, (re)vitalization movement which is effectively imported (by mutation or mobilization) into another religiously defined cultural system, to which it seeks to synthesize a basically foreign (or novel) symbolic worldview. 51

At the point of origin both sects and cults are 'deviant,' that is they stand in tension with their social environment. This tension is reflected in the 'message' or basic beliefs of the group. Cults or sects may become accepted, even dominant, in their given environment over time and with a concomitant lessening of the sense of tension. This is generally seen as a process of acculturation or socialization on the part of the group, but at the same time it may result in further splintering in the transitional stages. In other words, by this definition it would be possible for either a sect or a cult on the way to an acculturated 'mainstream' position within a given society to be the object of its own internal schism. Even within a group that had started out as a cult movement, what would result would be a new sectarian movement. 52 By the same token, a movement might originate as a sectarian phenomenon in its own indigenous cultural context, but once transported to an alien culture, it must be seen as a cult movement in relation to the new environment. Thus, it will be possible to see certain aspects of early Christianity emerge from sectarian origins but still have the appearance of a cult in the Roman world. 53

It may be suggested that this definition will be especially pertinent in the complex social environment of the Roman world for understanding the movement of both Judaism and Christianity. The many forms of Judaism, like other foreign religious groups from

51 The definition is dependent upon the distinction formulated by Stark and Bainbridge (cf. note above), but I have added an additional component to this primary defining category ('tension' with the environment) by incorporating the category of 'worldview,' meaning 'symbolic universe' in the sense of Peter Berger or Clifford Geertz. In this I follow the cultural linguistic approach for understanding the ancient religious environment, as espoused by Meeks, Moral World, 11-18, also seen in his The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

52 Stark and Bainbridge, Future of Religion, 26.

53 Rodney Stark, 'The Class Basis of Early Christianity: Inferences from a Sociological Model,' Sociological Analysis, 47 (1986), 216–25. Stark (223) reclassifies the Christian movement from 'sect' to 'cult,' commencing in the Palestinian environment, at the death of Jesus. Using my definition, this is far too early; however, I would agree that in the Diaspora environment it became predominantly a 'cult.'
Egypt, Phrygia, Syria, or Persia, in the Hellenistic-Roman Diaspora are primarily cult movements, and not sects. Whereas the Jesus movement began as a schismatic sect in the Palestinian context, the forms found in the Diaspora are likewise to be seen as cult movements, variations on an existing Jewish pattern of cult diffusion. In this sense neither ‘cult’ nor ‘sect’ is to be seen as a rigid category or model, since both are defined in relation to a larger-cultural context. The key defining element is the resonant sense of tension that each type of group feels towards that culture. Thus, two other characteristics should be noted. First, both cults and sects, almost from the moment of origination, tend to be in a process of transition, through resolution of the basic defining tensions, either in the direction of acculturation or in the direction of absolute confrontation. Second, both cults and sects are inherently diversified in the process of transition and proliferation. We should not expect two cell groups of similar background, even stemming from the same original movement, to follow exactly the same course of development over time. Here, a range of variables from environmental context and outside influences will come into play for each case.

A good example, then, can be found in recent studies of the diversity of Jewish groups and experiences in the major centres of the Diaspora. Vast differences are visible for Jewish groups from city to city in western Asia Minor, as in the highly acculturated and socially prominent synagogue community at Sardis (from the third and fourth

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55 Both sects and cults tend to proliferate in an environment characterized by structural differentiation, cf. Ruth Wallace, ‘Religion, Privatization, and Maladaptation: A Comment on Niklas Luhmann,’ Sociological Analysis, 46 (1985), 29f. Thus, tension is not a straight-line reflex from high to low; in many cases ‘tension maintenance,’ meaning holding on to symbolic differentia or boundaries, will persist or even increase when acculturation is relatively complete. Most groups (sect or cult) that survive tend in the direction of acculturation to the dominant culture, so that high/low ‘tension’ shifts will occur in different patterns. Nor would I use the term ‘church’ to represent the endpoint of this process, since it assumes but one cultural ideal of ‘normative’ religion. In the Greco-Roman world, then, the course of acculturation, and the resonant sense of tension, must be predicated on its own accepted patterns of institutional (or official) religion, which are in turn consistent with its own symbol system. Thus, to become acculturated involves an acceptance of some of these symbols of institutional religion, which for Jews or Christians might well create tensions with some traditional defining identity. A good example might be the progressive shift in Christian attitudes over the matter of who killed Jesus, as one of several indicators of variable attitudes toward the Roman state. Cf. the criticism of ‘christianized’ views of Roman religion in S. R. F. Price, Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 247; also S. C. Humphries, Anthropology and the Greeks (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), esp. 242–75 (on structural differentiation in the ancient world) and Luther Martin, Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 155–64.

centuries CE).\textsuperscript{57} In contrast, the earlier synagogue community on the Aegean island of Delos had (by the first century BCE) achieved a different equilibrium with its local environment and appears more similar to a neighbouring Samaritan enclave.\textsuperscript{58} While both groups would look quite strange to a Jerusalemite of the first century, they were yet recognizably Jewish, but in their local environment they were cults in a relative state of acculturation. This perspective may shed light on the diverse (and often paradoxical) evidence of Antioch for the relation of Jews and Christians both to one another and to the larger environment in the period from the first to the fourth centuries.\textsuperscript{59}

The developing Christian movement took varied forms. At times it appeared as the apocalyptic Jesus sect in the original Palestinian setting. At other times it is seen as a salvation cult or a philosophical school in the cities of the Empire.\textsuperscript{60} The key defining element in each case is the resonant sense of tension of the group with its environment. This sense of tension is expressed in the ‘message’ or beliefs of each Christian cell group, but the tension is actually composed of interrelated factors, each of which has its own relative scale of deviance from the environment. One factor is the ‘new’ message, which symbolizes (usually through myth or story) key relationships and goals of resolution;\textsuperscript{61} the other is the construction of boundaries which define the group (internally as well as externally) by enacting key relationships socially.

Because of the different tensions relative to their environment felt by sects over against cults, they tend to define and maintain boundaries differently. A cult and a sect each originating in the same cultural context will both appear deviant on the surface, but the boundary definition will not be the same, due to different motivational vectors. In such instances, the cult group will tend to be more accommodating to the culture at large, while the sect group will be more stringent, as a result of the different starting-point for the relationship of each to the symbolic worldview represented by the dominant culture. Put simply, then, cult rhetoric tends to stress the similarities, while sect rhetoric


\textsuperscript{61} Thus, in each situation there might be variant messages. A good example which emphasizes the overlay of sect and cult developments is the suggestion of Gerd Theissen that the opponents of Paul at Corinth (the so-called ‘superapostles’ of 2 Corinthians) were a holdover of the ‘wandering charismatic’ ethos of the Palestinian Jesusbewegung, but which had adopted a thoroughly Hellenistic ‘Divine Man’ christology; ‘Legitimation and Subsistence: An Essay on the Sociology of Early Christian Missionaries,’ \textit{Essays on Corinth}, 27–68.
will tend to stress differences.\textsuperscript{62} Finally, when we bring these perspectives to the historical development of the Christian movement, it will be seen that a further dynamic obtains. For it represents a complex and multilayered process, especially at those points where the sectarian rhetoric of the apocalyptic Jesus movement had to be adapted to the motivations and functions of cult formation in the Roman world.

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND SYMBOLIC WORLDS

As a result of different starting-points, motivations, and relations to society, boundary definition (or maintenance) in cults differs from that of sects in two important ways: first, in the way they relate to the ‘world’, and, second, in the way they conceive of ‘conversion’ or recruitment of new adherents. Thus, in the early Christian movement the boundaries may shift owing to environmental tensions (or their abatement), especially when the basic defining language is preserved from different social contexts. In several cases, for example, Pauline Christianity preserved the dualistic ethical categories of an apocalyptic worldview very close to the original Palestinian environment,\textsuperscript{63} but there are conscious shifts in the traditional boundaries with the ‘world.’ So in 1 Cor. 5:9–11 a corrective is issued precisely against such sectarian boundary definition:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world . . . since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed . . . not even to eat with such a one.

The attitude towards the ‘world’ represented here is much more open, the tensions much less severe, as is clearly indicated when Paul later in the same letter rehearses guidelines for members of the group who wish to participate in social life, including dining with pagans (1 Cor. 10:27). Thus, dining restrictions still serve as symbols of the community boundaries, but the lines are drawn differently. Social dining with a pagan is allowed, while communal dining with a fallen Christian is not.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} As indicated earlier, this is not meant to suggest that tension resolution/maintenance was a simple, straight-line process. I refer here more to the motivational vectors of each type of group out of which self-definition will arise. Thus, the motivational vectors (or the ‘rhetoric’ of self-definition) is another factor (alongside acculturation) which will affect (and complicate) the sense of tension felt by the group. So, notice the self-defining stance in the apologetic of Epistle to Diognetus, 5.1–9.

\textsuperscript{63} E.g., 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1 (a unit of apocalyptic material). The prohibition against contact with ‘unbelievers’ runs quite counter to the view in 1 Cor. 5:9–11. Cf. V. Furnish, Second Corinthians (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 361, 371–83.

Dining as a boundary symbol socially enacted should not seem unusual since Jesus was remembered as having drawn criticism precisely for breaching such boundaries by eating with ‘publicans and sinners’ (cf. Matt. 11:19; Mk. 2:16; Lk. 5:30). It reflects the ideal of an altered social order through key relationships. But we must contrast this use of subtle boundary language with that found in Matt. 18:15–18, since it too bears strong similarities to apocalyptic sectarian language from Qumran. The keynote of this uniquely Matthean unit of church order material is that it finally defines the self-conception of the Christian community through recognizably Jewish sectarian terms: ‘if he [the offender] refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a gentile and a publican.’ At least within the Matthean community that preserved this material the traditional Jewish lines of sectarian self-definition were still operative even though there was a consciousness of proselytizing Gentiles. Still, the attitudes towards the Gentile world stand in sharp distinction from that in Paul. Thus, it is no great surprise that their correlative attitudes towards the Law, as a traditional defining mechanism, should also differ. In the final analysis, it may be argued that neither Paul’s nor Matthew’s communities were radically distinguished from Judaism. They were not as yet cognizant of a ‘third race’ definition of Christianity as a separate religion, as becomes apparent in the second century. Rather, the key difference between Pauline and Matthean boundary definition is that one is of a ‘cultic’ type (Paul) and the other is of a ‘sectarian’ type (Matthew), each in its own process of development and tension-resolution relative to its environment. Nor is it too surprising, then, that Paul should have to confront other Christian missionaries or communities which had adapted the original sectarian message of


Jesus in their own form. In consequence there were different expectations of the ‘convert.’

These correlative differences in boundary definition and attitudes towards the ‘world’ also produce different social locations for the movements. Recognizing such differences will be important, since it has traditionally been assumed that ‘revitalization’ movements (either conversionist sects or millenarian cults) tend to appeal to those who feel economic or status deprivation. Recent studies on recruitment patterns and social location, however, suggest that cult movements (in contrast to sects) tend to attract members from a slightly higher socio-economic level. Thus, Christian conversion or appeal need not rely solely on psycho-social deprivation for recruitment and diffusion, especially in the Roman environment. This observation is confirmed by a growing recognition of the social location, organization, and status of Pauline congregations in recent research. Still, it should be noted that other kinds of social location might be expected of a more strictly sectarian boundary definition, as indicated for the early stages of the Palestinian Jesus movement. Tensions with environment, attitudes towards the ‘world,’ and the social location of members tend to be correlated within cultic and sectarian boundary definition as expressed in earliest Christianity. Hence there are numerous variations that can be explored, as they give shape to individual groups.

As a concluding point we stress that ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ should be seen as terms expressing a group’s self-understanding religiously and

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70 The best example of such a dispute is the controversy between different Christian groups in Galatians. Cf. H.D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).


77 From this perspective, Philo, the platonizing Jewish philosopher from Alexandria has to be seen as promoting a kind of ‘cultic’ Judaism; so, then what should we begin to do with the case of Jewish and Christian gnosticism? Cf. Birger Pearson, ‘Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of Gnostic Self-Definition,’ *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, i. 151–60; Alan F. Segal, ‘Ruler of This World: Attitudes about Mediator Figures and the Importance of Sociology for Self-Definition,’ *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ii. 245–68.
socially in relation to its larger cultural environment. Hence boundary definition is a way of coping with the ‘world.’ There will be subtle differences for a group that arises out of protest but with a sense of shared worldview, in contrast to a group that imports an essentially novel worldview into a dominant culture. In part, then, the diverse lines of development in earliest Christianity are a product of this feature of boundary definition, both in relation to the Jewish soil out of which it arose and the Hellenistic-Roman environment in which it took root. The tensions and motivations differ as well. Thus, the notion of the ‘worldview’ or ‘symbolic universe’ offers an important backdrop against which to assess cult/sect dynamics in religion. It may be fair, then, to expand upon the observation of Kenelm Burridge, that millenarian movements are ‘new-cultures-in-the-making’ as well as new religions in the making. The same is true of both cults and sects in our definition, though the dynamics and the directions may be slightly different. In the case of early Christianity the new symbolic world was in large part an amalgam of the old symbolic universe out of which the sectarian movement arose with the new cultural environment in which it developed. Tensions, motivations, and boundary definition reflect the dynamics of amalgamation. One feature that must be kept in mind is that a religious group, whether sect or cult, does not entirely jettison the traditions out of which it comes.

We continue to see elements of the original sectarian boundaries even in later forms of Christianity which are more thoroughly acculturated to the Roman world. This sectarian boundary language at times serves as a symbolic reminder of the tensions which gave self-definition to the group, as in language of separation in conversion/initiation rituals. For sects or cults in intermediate stages of transition or acculturation, elements of boundary definition, in fact, mediate the tensions as well as reflect them. The message suggests a course of resolution that is to some degree approachable; therefore, it offers a moderate degree of resolution to the basic tensions, so that living in the ‘world’ is manageable in day to day social life. But some basic sense of tension must also be maintained, or else the group will lose its identity altogether. Hence fluctuations in tension resolution

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80 Thus, sociological theories that posit ‘secularization’ as antithesis to religion are unsatisfactory, from this perspective and in the framework of ancient societies. Here more co-operative interchange with anthropologists is called for.
and maintenance occur over the course of development to a mainstream position of acculturation. It is a delicate balancing act faced by each such group. Shifting boundary definition language may survive long after the tension has subsided and the ‘world’ ceases to be a hostile environment. Such language marks but one process whereby sectarianism can become part of a new cultural system under construction.\(^{81}\) If such language becomes internalized to the point that it is objectified to its own level of symbolic reality, it then becomes a cornerstone of the new symbol system. An example, although oversimplified, is the Pauline axiom ‘all people, both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin’ (Rom. 3.9, 23), which was used to adapt the sectarian message of Jesus to a Gentile mission. Its success as a boundary maintenance mechanism is measurable in part by its internalization into the western consciousness. Thus, the doctrine of original sin (since Augustine) might be seen as the reflection of an early Pauline boundary marker shifted or projected to the level of new cultural symbol.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{81}\) Hence Meeks’ ‘The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism’ represents just such a case, which has in fact become part of the western mainstream (though not without subsequent modifications). Another example is the survival of apocalyptic categories in western culture (e.g. Heaven/Hell, good/evil, and kingdom language). cf. Everett Ferguson, ‘The Terminology of Kingdom in the Second Century,’ *Studia Patristica*, xviii (1982), 669–82; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and, on the Jewish side, let us not forget the revivals and reinterpretations of millenarianism, as in the case of Sabbatarianism (cf. Festinger et al., *When Prophecy Fails*, 8–12).