

Christian Origin: A Sociological Approach

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Introduction

Peter Berger defines religion as “the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.”⁽¹⁾ By this he attempts to describe the phenomenon of religion as one example of his broader assertion that every human society is an “enterprise of world-building.”⁽²⁾ Human worlds by their very nature are social constitution. Although they first confront us in objective form, our conception of meaning, value, goals, truth, reality, duties, social roles, and etc. are not there as eternal entities. They are the products of human creativity in the social order. As such, they must be constantly created, adapted, maintained, and legitimated.⁽³⁾ Without these primary processes — Berger calls them world construction and world maintenance — there can be no social existence whatsoever.⁽⁴⁾ In essence, this means that the social world in which we live determines our experience of what is real.

According to Berger religion, then, is that particular mode of world-building that seeks ground its world in a sacred order, a realm that justifies and explains the arena of human existence in terms of the eternal nature of things.⁽⁵⁾ In dealing with the established religions under stable conditions, the main emphasis is on the aspect of world-maintenance, i. e., the process whereby a given social world is maintained and legitimated for those who inhabit it. But in treating new religions, the emphasis falls on world-construction, i. e., the processes whereby a new world is brought into being and seeks to establish itself in competition with numerous worlds.

For discussing an “enterprise of world-building,” an assumption borrowed from sociology of knowledge is necessary. What binds any society together is a vast set of common assumptions about human origin and destiny, about values, limits, responsibilities. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Lukmann have analyzed these phenomena.

According to Schutz and Lukmann, since the members of a society share a view of the world, they view their subjective experience in typical patterns and stabilize their society by commitment to common values and institutions and symbols.⁽⁶⁾

Thus, when we apply their concept to the Christian origin, we need to consider three aspects of inquiry and analysis: 1) world-building process along with the charismatic leadership; 2) new community-building of followers; and 3) institutionalization of the Christian religion for its transmission to the next generation. So that, in this article these three aspects will be investigated under the following three headings: 1) world-building; 2) new Community; 3) institutionalization of the Christian movement.

I. World-building

John Gager insists that when any new religion emerges, it starts with process of world-building: All new religions are directed toward the creation of new worlds: “old symbols are given new meaning and new symbols come to life. . . .”⁽⁷⁾ In the world-building process, according to Weber, the most important element is the charismatic leader. He describes one of functions of charismatic leadership as followings:

Charismatic domination means a rejection of all ties to any external Order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality Of the prophet and hero. Hence, its attitude is revolutionary and transvalues [transforms] everything: it makes a sovereign break withall traditional or rational norms: ‘it is written, but I say unto you.’⁽⁸⁾

According to him, such charismatic leadership typically emerges in circumstances where there is a crisis of moral and political leadership, where the traditional framework of the populace feels itself deprived of access to power and of a sense of personal or social identity.⁽⁹⁾ In such a setting, the charismatic leader articulates the concerns of the group that rallies around him, provides the adherents with sense of direction, and does so either by defining the ancient tradition and aspiration in new ways or simply calling for a radical break with the past.⁽¹⁰⁾

In this broader perspective, we understand that the process of world-building in any kind of new religion begins with a charismatic leader in the context of already established tradition, rallying group which receives the message of its leader and through

which routinization of charisma may occur, and furthers its development by institutionalization through the group and its successive generations. If we admit the fact that the Christianity emerges with the people who follows Jesus, we need to focus on him in the framework of charismatic leader.

1.1. Jesus as a charismatic leader

Weber portrays charismatic leader as a person persuading others that he is the agent of transcendent God, and that the precepts which he teaches are the expression of the divine will.⁽¹¹⁾ The potency of his charismatic endowment is evident in the special gifts he posses (such as healing or predictive capacities) and in the effectiveness of his preaching. Although the exercise of his gifts tends to confirm his authority, it is the persuasive power of the revelation that, as he claims, has been granted to him. And that is the ultimate ground of his effectiveness.⁽¹²⁾

Leader of this type arises in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political distress. They were not previously office-holders, nor are they gainfully employed in regular occupation. Rather, they recognize that “those gifts have been believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody.”⁽¹³⁾ The holder of charismata seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and following by virtue of his missions. His success determines whether he finds such followers. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him and he knows how to maintain recognition through proving himself, he is their master. But he does not derive right from their will, in manner of an election. Rather, the reverse holds: it is the duty of those to whom he addresses that he is to be recognized as their charismatically qualified leader.⁽¹⁴⁾ And charismatic message, according to Weber, “may be addressed to a group of men who are delimited locally, ethnically, socially, politically, occupationally, or in some other way.”⁽¹⁵⁾ And charisma is never a source of private gain, nor is it a dual patrons provide the necessary means of mission.⁽¹⁶⁾ The charismatic leader as well as his disciples must stand outside the ties of this world and the obligation of family. Charismatic power “rests upon this purely factual recognition and springs from faithful devotion.”⁽¹⁷⁾

The followers of charismatic leader recognizes the personal mission of the char-

ismatic master.⁽¹⁸⁾ If the charismatic leader wants to be recognized as a prophet, he must perform miracles. His power and recognition, and the devotion of his followers rests upon his ability to demonstrate the extraordinary, to challenge tradition, and thereby to confirm his link with the divine.⁽¹⁹⁾ Along with such extraordinariness of the charismatic leader, he is suggested by Theissen as itinerant teacher-preacher like the Cynics.⁽²⁰⁾

As the tradition of early Christianity portrays Jesus, he is indeed a perfect model of the charismatic leader as described above. The Gospels in the New Testament⁽²¹⁾ tell about Jesus who himself claims to be called and sent by the divine will, whose message is revealed by God alone, whose works are done by the power of the divine Spirit. And the Gospels also portray him as confronting with the leaders and traditions of the old religious institution. He rallies around himself the followers with teachings of the divine will and manifests wonder workings. He claims himself to be the Son of Man and even further to be the Son of God.. He also claims that he has the mission directly from God and the direct knowledge of God. Even further he claims that he has the power to forgive sin and to give life which belongs only to God. Jesus' activities in many instances are so radical even to break Sabbath and regulations for purity — such are tabooed among the Jews. His radical break with the old Jewish religious institution appears also in his radical reinterpretation of the law of Moses, so that he figures himself above the authority of Moses.

Along with his authoritative teachings, his wonder workings, which may legitimize his claims as such, may be enough to draw attention from the large crowd and, as a result, to make many followers. Many people who see his wonder workings recognize him as the one who can deliver them from the foreign political power and establish the new kingdom of God which has been waited for a long time. In such a case they will be certainly vindicated by God for their sufferings and shamefulness under the foreign power. Thus, at one time they attempt to snatch Jesus and make him their king by force after he feeds over five thousands with two fishes and five loaves of bread (John. 6).

His radicalness also is demonstrated in the various areas of their normal life. For example, he urges followers to break with the life supporting occupation and even from the tie of families, and to follow him. So that, he and his followers do not

have a regular occupation and their living rests on the patrons. Like the old itinerant teacher-philosopher of Cynics, they make consistent travel and proclaim the promise of future and the judgment of God. As we have noted the figure of Jesus is fit to the one of a charismatic leader in Weber's terms in every aspects. Jesus, the charismatic leader, is the originator of Christianity.

1.2. Transformation of the tradition

1.2.1. Old tradition

As Schutz and Luckmann have drawn attention to the phenomenon that for all human beings the world of everyday life is "the province of reality in which man continuously participates in ways which are not at once inevitable and patterned."²² And according to them, one of the most important tasks of empirical sociology of knowledge is the examination of social structural factors, namely society's modes of communication and contours of its world view with special reference to the religious dimensions that serve to fix the tradition. And such factors "play a decisive role in the historical processes of the accumulation of knowledge."²³

Long before the rise of Christianity such social processes of transmitting tradition and of giving it fixed historical and mythic form are evident in ancient Israelite religion. So, some common themes, such as the nature of the covenant people, monotheistic world view of creation, problem of evil, eschatological expectation were seen in the contemporary competitive religious parties in the earliest Christian period such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

Jewish adaptation of some other element to their own tradition in the process of transmission of it within a society and throughout the historical development down to the time of Jesus is obvious. Without conscious repudiation of the past and its traditions, it was possible for Israel to adopt to new circumstances. Howard Kee suggests four themes which experiences adaptation in Israelite tradition: 1) theme of creation; 2) problem of evil; 3) final cosmic conflict; and 4) order in the present existence of Israel.²⁴ As Kee develops, the theme of creation underwent adaptation from the older creation account — it stresses God's participation in creation through his creative words, the order in the creation, and observance of Sabbath and cultic purity as human obligation

— to the wisdom tradition: the word of God as creative instrument has been replaced by Wisdom. The theme of the problem of evil was modified from human and snake's pride as the responsibility for the evil to that of real ethical dualism — God's chief adversary, Satan acts out to thwart the divine purpose. The celestial battle between angels and demon is coordinated with the earthly struggle of God's people for victory and vindication over their enemies. The theme of final cosmic conflict is adapted progressively for the Jewish national expectation. As Israel's post Maccabean period was switched from the movement of religious purification to the political power, there came increasing attention to the future and the aspiration to fulfillment in a new age. And thus, a very important sense of obligation to achieve and maintain the integrity of the covenant people, for God's intervention and vindication in the eschaton. And finally, the theme of order in the present existence of Israel also underwent adaptation from the law of Moses — the true law and itself the eternal archetype for human society — to the conception of natural law in Stoic conception.

Under such cultural pressures to force adaptation, Jewish community's attitude was open to several options: "(1) going along with the Romans and their culture, (2) withdrawing completely from society to live a life of pure obedience in seclusion, (3) organizing a nationalistic revolt, or (4) redefining God's purpose for his covenant people."²⁵ In other words, "the perennial problem becomes how to maintain Jewish identity in the midst of cultural pressures toward adaptation."²⁶

1.2.2. Jesus' transformation of old tradition

We have figured out how Jesus is seen as a charismatic leader in the sociological term. And as we have noted earlier, one of the roles of the charismatic leader is that he is functioning as a crucial agent for initiating the break with the past by giving new meanings to that of the old tradition. Jesus' activities as reflected in Gospels manifest the fact that he combines the criticism of the old with a vision of the new. With Pharisees, his polemic attack against nearly every point of their sensitive issues particularly on the problem of their identity as the covenant people. On the issue of authority and rules for interpretation of the scriptures, Jesus reacts in prophetic fashion by dismissing the established criteria of his contemporary competitors.

And he does so not by rejecting the basic source of authority, the law of Moses, but by interpreting it in quite different fashion than his competitors. The evidences for Jesus' attack against the priestly aristocracy and the temple cult are also affluent. The central message in the scene of Jesus' overturning tables in the temple and expelling the money-changers (Mk 11: 15-19) is that the purification of the temple could only be done through a radical act of destruction of the old pattern of cultic system and establishment of the new pattern in terms of internal purity conditioned by faith-principle.

Jesus is seen as the Messiah in a radical way, not political or priestly Messiah, but Messiah, redeeming his people from sin and initiating the new age and order. He comprehends the present crisis and proclaims the promise of the new order of coming kingdom of God. He also sets new criteria to enter into the new covenant people: he transcends old tradition established for the criteria and regulations for remaining as covenant people by observance of purification system, which is limited only to the people with the Mosaic law, into the new system of faith in him, which is open to everybody.

Particularly, his suffering and humiliation and even to death do not cope with traditional expectation of a redeemer which were directed toward a powerful earthly king. He proclaims that authority is given to him, but he is rejected. However, this dichotomy is soon transcended: as the eschatological judge — he will suddenly and unexpectedly appear with a new role (Mk 14:62; Mt 24:27ff), and will gather together his elected (Mt 13:41; Mk 13:27). By then, the outcast will become the judge, the powerless will become the ruler and the outsider will be given general recognition (Mt 19:28).

The old system of ritual is also transformed into baptismal and communal ceremonies. With such activities of Jesus the old tradition which has been adapted and transmitted down to the time of Jesus is transformed. The four options among which Jewish community should choose are narrowed down radically by Jesus movement to the final fourth option of Kee's suggestion, namely, "redefining God's purpose for his covenant people." This conclusion leads us to consider the problem of the new community which is composed of his followers. What Jesus, the charismatic leader, has taught and proclaimed needs the community through which the institutionalization can take place — this is the final process of world-building of the new religious movement.

II. New Community

In our discussion of the rise of charismatic leadership, we touched the preconditions which appear to be prerequisite for a charismatic leader of a religious movement to emerge: 1) cosmic anxiety as a consequence of the shattering of traditional social structures, which is state of anomie; 2) a group of followers ready to rally around the leader. This readiness may be called conversion or alternation.

A very important conception in social study, namely, marginality should relate to the preconditions. The sense of marginality, according to Kee, “was widespread in the early years of the Roman Empire when Christianity was coming into being and beginning its worldwide spread.”⁽²⁷⁾ The political crisis was severe and seemingly chronic. There was helplessness among the masses from the tides of unpredictable change, no meaning in the chaotic process, and thus a new religious movement that offered identity, meaning, means for controlling one’s destiny could easily find prospective adherents.⁽²⁸⁾

Hans J. Mol has outlined the process of conversion in an enlightening way.⁽²⁹⁾ The first stage is what he calls “detachment from former patterns of identity” which he means “the stripping process always involves loosening of previous allegiances and a mortification of self.” The next step is “the situation of meaninglessness and anomie.” The third step is “the attachment to the new focus of identity.” Weber’s discussion is helpful for determining the status of the followers of Jesus: “. . . the lowest and the most econo-politically unstable class is far easier for emotional rather than rational.”⁽³⁰⁾ Most of the Jewish people except few aristocratic groups felt themselves as disprivileged class, religiously and econo-politically, or as socially rootless class.⁽³¹⁾ They may easily put themselves in state of ‘anomie’. In this respect, we may be able to discern how Jesus appeals and calls to his followers. Jesus’ call to his followers including a break with the past — detachment from the past — is easily stirring their emotion by the charisma of Jesus’ personal gifts, or by his promise of a new order and meaning, and also by his revelatory and authoritative message followed by signs through his extraordinary power.

Such charismatic figure of Jesus began to draw attention from various strata of the Jewish society. On the one hand, the ruling class manifests hostile against him, and,

on the other hand, lower and disprivileged class becomes adherent to him. Among the adherents, some are probably rich or in the higher rank, but most of them are farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, formerly the demon-possessed, the uneducated, women, the poor, tax collectors, sinners, harlots, and even politically antagonistic persons such as members of Zealots. The fact that majority of his followers is of the homogeneously disprivileged may become a factor to explain socio-psychologically why or how this movement, at first, spreads so rapidly among the lower classes. Such a condition of homogeneity may form a social base for building the world view on the same horizon and consequently a plausibility structure³² of the Christian movement.

III. Transmission of the Christian movement

According to Weber, the question of legitimate succession of a charismatic movement arises inevitably with the disappearance of the original charismatic leader. Weber is correct when he states that “in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exit only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized . . .”³³ Various manifestations of attenuated charisma may survive the period of transition from no rules to new rules, but if a movement is to survive and flourish, it must reach a settled state of one kind or another. The primitive expectation of the end must be modified and the energies associated with it must be channeled in different directions, for example, martyrdom, asceticism, bureaucracy, anti-heretical activities, and etc. In this transition from one stage to another one the key for survival of any religious movement depends upon the appropriate maintenance mechanism, which we may call “institutionalization.”³⁴

For the institutionalization of the charismatic movement of Christianity, various forms of mechanism were adopted by his followers, but mostly by Paul: 1) followers’ missionary activities with preaching followed by charismatic wonder workings — that form a broader world wide social base; 2) subsequently establishing Christian communities spreaded over wide region of the Roman Empire; 3) appointment leaders of the local churches — that form a hierarchical order of the movement; 4) preserving narrative myths of the charismatic leader and its successors — collecting stock of knowledge which is medium of institutionalization; 5) strengthening group identity and role by

installing disciplinary instructions and ethical teachings—that is the ultimate goal of institutionalization; 6) instituting rituals by which the members constantly remind themselves of their belonging; 7) modeling Jesus' death and resurrection as their example for the persecution and hardships for the sake of their belief.⁽³⁵⁾

Conclusion

We have discussed briefly three stages of the origin of the Christian movement in sociological perspective. During this discussion we have noted that 1) the Christian movement was originated by the charismatic figure, Jesus whose activities and proclamation were enough to stir emotion of the masses of mostly disprivileged to become adherent to himself; 2) social condition of his contemporary palestine provided a kind of social base for the masses to rally around him and ultimately plausibility structure for this movement's success; 3) after the death of the charismatic leader Jesus, his followers immediately adopted various mechanisms in order to survive the movement and subsequently to institutionalize it in the transmittable fashion at the local communities throughout the Roman Empire.

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- (2) Ibid., 3.
- (3) Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 129-183.
- (4) Berger, 1-9.
- (5) Ibid., 25.
- (6) Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life World*, trans. by R. M. Zaner and H. T. Englehardt, Jr. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1973), 250.
- (7) John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1975), 11.
- (8) H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills trans. and eds., *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 250.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, trans. by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 60ff.
- (11) Weber, 59.
- (12) Ibid., 139.
- (13) Gerth and Wright, 245.
- (14) Ibid., 246-7.
- (15) Ibid., 247.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Ibid., 249.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Ibid., 248.
- (20) Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 28.
- (21) Following claims except few instances are not necessary to be documented every time, for they are accepted by all as in the Gospels.
- (22) Schutz and Luckmann, 296.
- (23) Ibid., 299.
- (24) Howard Clark Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective: Methods and Resources* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 35-40.
- (25) Ibid., 42.
- (26) Ibid., 40.

- (27) Ibid., 42.
- (28) Kee, 75-76.
- (29) Hans J. Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 52-53.
- (30) Weber, 95.
- (31) Theissen, 37.
- (32) According to Berger and Luckmann, 154-55 plausibility structure is “the specific social base and social processes required for its [subjective reality] maintenance. One can maintain one’s self-identification as a man of importance only in a milieu that confirms this identity.”
- (33) Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1957), 364 quoted by Gager, 67.
- (34) Refer to Berger and Luckmann, 47-52 for details of institutionalization.
- (35) Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: the Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 74 ff.