

# Reviews

**THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD: Insights from Cultural Anthropology**  
by Bruce J Malina. SCM Press, London, 1983. pp vi + 169.

I am a Catholic missionary, who does not know as much about the New Testament as he should; I have also worked full time as a social anthropologist. Professor Malina is theologically a reasonably orthodox Protestant, by profession a biblical scholar, who has read a certain amount of social anthropology. The major use he finds for it is to show that the New Testament world must be understood in the context of the cultures of the time, and that fundamentalism, by ignoring this, is objectively dishonest. This is not exactly news, even among conservative evangelicals; for instance, Nida and Taber in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969) recognise the need for awareness of the cultural context. Malina does not claim to be producing any work of particular scholarly originality. The audience for which the book is evidently intended is that of first-year undergraduates at American universities. The author has an evident talent for clear and simple exposition and the questions he sets at the end of each chapter except the first are frequently stimulating.

Unfortunately, even at the level of an introductory text this book is largely a failure, because Malina has not really mastered the method of social anthropology.

He does not attempt to produce a study of Palestinian Jewish society and show us how it seems to have worked. Instead, in successive chapters, a particular anthropological perspective is applied to Biblical society. This is a decidedly unsatisfactory method, partly because we are never given even a tentative overall account of the social worlds of either Jesus or Paul,

but partly also because Malina does not realise that the method of social anthropology is to see societies as processes and to describe their working. Instead, he assumes that anthropologists try to find terms with which to label societies, and, when the correct label has been applied, they can then discourse on the specificities of that society. For instance, (and this is a major argument of the book), the society in which Jesus grew up can be labelled a Mediterranean peasant society and therefore whatever anthropologists have said in general about peasant or Mediterranean societies can be applied to it. He does not seem to realise that the very concept of "peasant society" is open to question (are the peasantry a class, a mode of production, or a culturally defined status group?) and that so large a geographical and historical span is covered by the term "Mediterranean society" that it is difficult to find many universal traits.

In practice, Malina takes particular generalizations by anthropologists without looking at their context and then applies them to Palestinian Jewish society without trying to see if they fit the context or not. Thus we have the assertion that "There is no such thing as a 'grass roots' movement in peasant societies", (p 74), which he justifies by arguing that a peasant society is one completely dominated by urban elites. This is simply tautological, apart from being factually untrue. Indeed, on the next page, we are cheerfully told that "The Zealot or guerilla movement would be typical of ordinary village life" which, if true, would surely upset his argument. Similarly, the claim that all peasant risings

are in defence of subsistence levels of existence (p 75) would seem particularly questionable in first-century Palestine, given the circulation of apocalyptic literature.

Again, the idea that in peasant societies resources are thought to be static, so that any gain by an individual must be assumed to be at somebody else's expense (the so-called "perception of limited good") has been a fashionable opinion among anthropologists, but it would be rash to take it as an axiom. Certainly the parable of the talents suggests that Palestinian villagers had a reasonably sophisticated understanding of investment and capital growth. Because anthropologists say peasant societies have "dyadic contracts" (agreements between two individuals for reciprocal co-operation), Bruce Malina looks for examples in the gospels and comes up with the call of Matthew (pp 80-81). But even a naive reading of the passage tells us that it is about a sudden conversion and a farewell to a former way of life.

The same unfortunate method is applied to the categorization of Palestine as a Mediterranean society. Anthropologists studying Mediterranean societies have certainly tended to concentrate on the ideology of honour and shame, but it would be a mistake to see this as the primary concern of Mediterranean studies. To say that a particular society has concepts of honour and shame is not really saying very much; what we need to know is how they are related to economic and political power and how they can be manipulated by individuals and groups. Malina tries to fit the debates between Jesus and his opponents, which take up so much space in the gospels, into conflicts for honour (p 49) without taking into account the importance for Jewish society not only of correct behaviour but also of correct knowledge of the law. The discussion by Jack Goody and Kathleen Gough of the significance of limited literacy in pre-industrial societies would have been relevant here.

The last two chapters, "Kinship and Marriage" and "Clean and Unclean: Understanding Rules of Purity" are better than the rest of the book, but even here there are things that read very unsatisfactorily. For instance, the assertion (p 103) "in all

societies that exalt bonds between males and masculine lines of rights, the new wife will not be integrated into her husband's family" is misleading. "Clean and Unclean" draws very heavily on the work of Mary Douglas and Sir Edmund Leach on local and cognitive boundaries in the Old Testament and stresses the role of the Temple as the visible sign of the Jewish understanding of holiness. This approach is not sufficiently related to the political and social realities of first-century Palestine.

The particularly tragic situation of first-century Palestine was not simply alien political hegemony, but the fact that two of the nation's most sacred institutions, the Temple and the monarchy, were controlled by groups whose loyalty to Judaism was very questionable. A particularly heavy responsibility for maintaining the national identity therefore fell on the third pillar of Jewish existence, the law; and it was naturally accepted by the Pharisees as the group most strongly committed to the law. If this was so, it is easy to see that the extreme concern for the maintenance of ritual and social boundaries which marked the Pharisees inspired their failure to welcome the teaching of Jesus was the understandable, if not particularly intelligent, response of a group which acted as the legal and moral guide to a nation experiencing heavy pressure from outside and serious internal tensions.

The aims of Phariseism, the maintenance of national identity and individual morality by adherence to the law, were to a considerable degree negated by Pharisee praxis which classified a number of occupational categories (not only prostitutes and tax collectors) as unclean and which failed to provide forms of religious activities suitable for the poorer Palestinian Jews. The aims of Christianity in its very first form, the Galilean ministry of Jesus, were the same as those of the Pharisees, the personal and national regeneration of the Jewish people; but the concern of Jesus for the sinners and demoniacs meant that he was entering a social space where the Pharisees were ineffective and was changing not the theoretical but the operative boundaries of Jewish purity. The more

high-minded we suppose the Pharisees to be, the more intelligible their alarm becomes.

Mention of the exorcisms, hardly referred to by Malina, brings us to something that was a key feature of the synoptic portrait of Jesus and which for an anthropologist offers fascinating pointers to the world of the New Testament. Possession by spirits seems to have been a fairly evident feature of Palestinian society. Most recent studies of spirit possession have tended to see it as a means by which the deprived obtain some kind of leverage in society, but it is also possible to see it as a dramatization of an experience of irresistible domination. The episode of the possessing spirit which called itself "Legion" suggests that an experience of political powerlessness might combine with purely personal frustrations. This line of argument would suggest that the exorcisms were not simply cures of the mentally sick, as a liberal exegesis would embarrassingly claim, but a delivery of the poorer Palestinians from

social alienation and passivity.

There are other points in *The New Testament World* at which to niggle might be justifiable. Bruce Malina seems (p 147) to underplay the early Christian understanding of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, and, more generally, to under-rate the importance of Jewish tradition for the Christians of the Pauline churches. However, my main criticism is that this book fails even at the level for which it is intended, because of the author's inadequate grasp of the method (as distinct from the jargon) of social anthropology. Theologians interested in the possibilities of social anthropology for biblical studies should consult the admirable *Sacrifice*, edited by Meyer Fortes and Michael Bourdillon (Cambridge University Press, 1980); social anthropologists whom faith or curiosity have interested in the world of the Gospels should work through Joachim Jeremias' books.

ADRIAN EDWARDS

**YESTERDAY AND TODAY: A Study of Continuities in Christology by  
Colin E Gunton, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983. pp xi + 228 £9.50.**

This is a well-written and well-argued book, showing evidence of considerable intellectual power. It is not an easy book, but any difficulty is due to its subject matter and to the level at which it is treated and not to any incompetence on the part of the author. Its primary concern is conveyed by its subtitle and reiterated in more extreme form in the Preface, which speaks of 'the great divide in modern theology. . . between those who regard modernity as throwing an impassable barrier between ourselves and our Christian past and those who would attempt to see the development of Christian thinking as an unbroken and generally developing process, albeit one which is uneven, episodic and sometimes disrupted' (p ix). That is an uncharacteristically exaggerated statement, apparently allowing any nuanced assessment of the relation of past and present to one side of the divide only. It would probably involve putting the author and the reviewer on the same side of the

divide, thus rendering it a not very helpful typology. Certainly one of the features I most appreciated in the book is its delineation of the complex pattern of similarities and differences between our own age and that of the patristic period. The accounts on pp 53 and 97, for example, are extremely perceptive and helpful. In view of all this it is perhaps a little surprising that Gunton is so ready to endorse Grillmeier's claim that there is 'a straight line of development from the Bible through the Fathers to the Councils' (p 64; cf p 48). No unevenness or disruption at that stage? But the point is not crucial to the argument, since Gunton allows that Chalcedon is not of primary significance to the Christologist, 'because it must remain an open question whether the Definition is itself true to the biblical Christ' (p 30).

The book begins with an analysis of some recent work in Christology, and particularly of the popular classification of Christologies into those 'from below' and