

Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter

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GOSPEL, CULTURE, CHURCH

As much as anyone else during the past 100 years, the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch has shaped contemporary thinking on gospel and culture. To give just one example, probably the most important book on the topic in the English-speaking world, H. Richard Niebuhr's classic historical and theological study *Christ and Culture*, "in one sense undertakes no more than to supplement and in part to correct" Troeltsch's work on *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. [1] Why did Troeltsch earn such a wide hearing?

Following in the footsteps of sociologist Max Weber, Troeltsch developed a very influential distinction between "church" and "sect" (and added his own third category of "mystic," which I will leave aside here because my interest is in Christian community). As Weber suggested, the distinction runs something like this: you get born into the church; you join a sect; like a good mother, the church will embrace you irrespective of your behavior; like a stern father, the sect will make you follow a strict ethical code. [2]

Weber's distinction between church and sect was supposed to be a strictly sociological distinction that provided models of how religious groups relate to the larger world. Going beyond Weber, Troeltsch made the simple but astute observation that one cannot separate theology from sociology. The church, which wishes to embrace all its sons and daughters, will invariably proclaim "grace"; the sect, to which only an elite number belong, will stress "law." The church will affirm the "world"; the sect will deny the "world" by retreating from it or occasionally attacking it. The church will seek power in the world, and to achieve it, make the

necessary compromises; the sect will insist on undiluted purity and remain on the margins.

The church will stress sacraments and education; the sect will value conversion and commitment.

By analyzing the teachings of church and sect through the centuries, in his magisterial *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* Troeltsch concluded that “the whole Christian world of thought and dogma” depends “on the fundamental sociological conditions, on the idea of fellowship which was dominant at any given time.” [3] Troeltsch was no social determinist; after all he believed that the “idea” of Christianity gave rise to all three social forms — church, sect, and mystic — in which the Christian faith was lived out through the centuries. Yet these social forms in turn shaped Christian doctrine, the very center of it. For instance, the Christ of a church is different from the Christ of a sect: the first is a gracious “Redeemer,” the second is a commanding “Lord.” Similar kinds of differences between church and sect can be observed with respect to other doctrines too. One might disagree with Troeltsch on particular points, but his thesis as a whole makes sense. The beliefs and practices of a Christian community are inextricably bound to its character as a social reality; when you change one, sooner or later you will change the other too.

Notice the implications of Troeltsch’s thesis about the interrelation of Christian communities’ social forms and their doctrines and practices for the topic of gospel and culture. “Gospel” is never simply “the good news,” not even the good news supported by a web of beliefs and practices. “Gospel” always involves a way of living in a given social environment as a Christian community (in a broad sense, including various degrees of commitment). To ask about how the gospel relates to culture is to ask how to live as a Christian community in a particular cultural context. Reflection on gospel and culture will be truncated without reflection on church and culture. Indeed, there is no other way to reflect adequately on gospel and culture except by reflecting on how the social embodiments of the gospel relate to a given culture.

Church and culture is the topic I wish to address. I want to explore the nature of Christian communal presence in contemporary societies and the character of Christian identity and difference. To that end I will engage in what might be called “theological and sociological exegesis” of one key biblical book on the topic — 1 Peter. Methodologically, I will neither examine simply the text of 1 Peter nor simply the situation of the addressees, the Petrine community. Rather, I am interested in the reactions of the author to the situation. I am assuming, however, that, though absent from the community, in a profound sense the author of 1 Peter is still a part of it.

But why 1 Peter? In *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr seeks to indicate how the various types of relation between Christ and culture which he finds in the history of the church are exemplified in various texts produced by the early Christian communities. “Christ against culture” is best expressed in 1 John, “the Christ of culture” in Gnostic writings, “Christ above culture” in some motifs in Matthew’s gospel (such as rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s), “Christ and culture in paradox” in the Pauline writings, and “Christ the transformer of culture” in the Fourth Gospel.

I should say that I find Niebuhr’s typology enticing but unpersuasive, and his treatment of the NT texts is skewed. But this is not the point I wish to dwell on here. What interests me more is the observation that the one text which speaks more pointedly and comprehensively to the problem of “Christ and culture” than any other in the NT is conspicuously absent from Niebuhr’s account. I am referring to 1 Peter, the epistle whose main theme is Christian life in a non-Christian environment. [4] I am not sure about reasons for this omission on Niebuhr’s part. But I am quite sure that 1 Peter bursts not only Niebuhr’s five neat models of how Christ relates to culture, but also Troeltsch’s distinction between church and sect.

ALIENS AND SOJOURNERS

As Reinhard Feldmeier has argued recently, the key metaphor which 1 Peter employs to express the Christian relationship to culture is the metaphor of “aliens” (*paroikos* and *parepidemos*). [5] It takes only a brief glance through the history of the church to see its potency. By the second century being “alien” had become central to the self-understanding of Christians. Later it was essential to monastic and Anabaptist movements alike, to Augustine and Zinzendorf, and, in our own time, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship*) no less than to Jim Wallis (*Sojourners*) or Stanley Hauerwas (*Resident Aliens*).

The metaphor “aliens” had such a powerful influence because it sums up central themes from the OT and expresses some fundamental perspectives from the whole NT about the problem of Christian identity and difference. Abraham was called to go from his country, his kindred, and his father’s house (Gen 12:1). His grandchildren and the children of his grandchildren became “aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:34), and the nation of which he and Sarah were parents lived as exiles in the Babylonian captivity. And even when they were secure in their own land, Yahweh their God demanded of them to be different from surrounding nations.

The root of Christian self-understanding as aliens and sojourners lies not so much in the story of Abraham and Sarah and the nation of Israel as it does in the destiny of Jesus Christ, his mission and his rejection which ultimately brought him to the cross. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:11). He was a stranger to the world because the world into which he came was estranged from God. And so it is with his followers. “When a person becomes a believer, then he (or she) moves from the far country to the vicinity of God.... There now arises a relation of reciprocal foreignness and estrangement between Christians and the world.” [6] Christians are born of the Spirit (John 3:8) and are therefore not “from the world” but, like Jesus Christ, “from God” (John 15:19).

There is no need here to give a detailed analysis of the trajectory from Abraham and the people of Israel to Jesus Christ and his church. It will suffice to take a careful look at the metaphor

“aliens” in 1 Peter. Yet to understand the metaphor, an analysis of the terms *paroikos* and *parepidemos*, say of an etymological or even sociological kind, will not do. In 1 Peter these terms mean not more and not less than what the epistle as a whole teaches about the relation of Christians to the surrounding culture. To unpack “aliens” we need to broaden our vision and look at what the epistle as a whole says about the nature of Christian presence in a given culture. On the matter of Christians living in a non-Christian environment 1 Peter is not simply one little voice among other NT voices. Though the epistle is marginal within the NT as a whole, it pulls together “essential social-ethical traditions” of the NT as a whole. [7] A careful reader will, however, discover in 1 Peter not only a “compiler,” but a creative thinker in his own right, capable of integrating the social features which Troeltsch tells us we should find clearly separated and assigned to different social types of religious communities.

ESCHATOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

The designation of Christians as *paroikoi* and *parepidemoi* (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11) implies, without a doubt, a “clear distance in relation to society, a distance from its values and ideals, from its institutions and politics.” [8] What does the distance mean, however? Distance in what sense and for what reason?

In his well known sociological and exegetical study, John H. Elliott advocated a thesis that the term *paroikoi* describes the social marginalization which Christians experienced before conversion. In the church they then found a protective *oikos* and were provided with an ideological self-understanding as the new eschatological people of God. [9] The “homeless” found the warmth of an ecclesial home. That may well have been the case — provided one understands ideology in a purely functional manner, without reference to the truth content of the claims it contains. [10]

This helpful sociological perspective is, however, one-sided in a crucial respect. While it rightly perceives the estrangement which a Christian way of life — or Christian “ideology” — might

help overcome, it underestimates a new estrangement which a Christian way of life creates. [11] That the members of the Petrine community might have become Christians because many of them were socially marginalized seems an intelligent hypothesis. That they became alienated from their social environment in a new way when they became Christians is what the epistle explicitly states. [12] Before conversion, they were much like their neighbors (see 4:3ff.); after conversion they became different, and this was the cause of their persecution. [13] Since our topic here is not the psycho-sociology of conversion, but the nature of Christian presence in the world, I will concentrate on this new distance, which arises from becoming a Christian.

It would be a mistake, however, to describe this new distance as simply religious. In that case, the terms “aliens” and “sojourners” would have been used purely metaphorically and would indicate “no actual social condition of the addressees.” [14] Such a view would presume that religion is essentially a strictly private affair, touching only the deep region of a person’s heart. Surely this is a mistaken view. That religion takes place simply between a naked soul and its divinity is a prejudice, one which is nourished today by the fact that in modern societies religion has been pushed outside of the public arena. Yet even in the so-called private sphere — such as the personal life, family or friendships — religion continues to be a social force. [15] Religion is essentially a way of thinking and of living within a larger social context. Religious distance from the world is therefore always social distance. At least this holds true for Christian faith.

How does this Christian distance from society that is religious and social come about? 1 Peter answers: through the new birth into the living hope. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). The new birth, whose subject is the merciful and electing God (1:2), creates a two-fold distance. First, it is a new birth. It distances one from the old way of life, inherited from one’s ancestors (1:18) and transmitted by the culture at large — a way of life characterized by the lack of knowledge of God and by misguided desires (1:14).

Second, it is a birth into a living hope. It distances one from the transitoriness of the present world, in which all human efforts ultimately end in death. In more abstract theological terms, the new birth into the living hope frees people from the meaninglessness of sin and hopelessness of death.

This process of distancing by rebirth takes place through redemption by the blood of the Lamb (1:19) and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1:3). People who are born into the living hope take part in the eschatological process which started with the coming of Jesus Christ into this world, with his ministry of word and deed and with his death and his resurrection. Christian difference from the social environment is therefore an eschatological one. In the midst of the world in which they live, they are given a new home that comes from God's future. The new birth commences a journey to this home.

Notice the significance of the new birth for Christian social identity. Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the insiders who have diverted from their culture by being born again. They are by definition those who are not what they used to be, those who do not live like they used to live. Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new precisely within the proper space of the old.

The question of how to live in a non-Christian environment, then, does not translate simply into the question of whether one adopts or rejects the social practices of the environment. This is the question outsiders ask, who have the luxury of observing a culture from a vantage point that is external to that culture. Christians do not have such a vantage point since they have experienced

a new birth as inhabitants of a particular culture. Hence they are in an important sense insiders. As those who are a part of the environment from which they have diverted by having been born again and whose difference is therefore internal to that environment, Christians ask, “Which beliefs and practices of the culture that is ours must we reject now that our self has been reconstituted by new birth? Which can we retain? What must we reshape to reflect better the values of God’s new creation?”

ECCLESIAL DIFFERENCE

Talk about “new birth” could suggest a purely individual process of distancing from the culture — a soul takes flight from the world, and seeks refuge with the eternal God, and becomes a stranger to the world of sin and death in that it migrates (*metoikizo*) into its undefiled and imperishable inheritance (1:4) [16] In a modern version of such individualistic faith a person would not depart from the world but would, like Sheila Larson in *Habits of the Heart*, says, “I believe in God.... My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilism. Just my own little voice.” [17] If this were what was meant by “new birth,” Christian difference would be strictly private; gnosticism and mysticism would thrive under the name-brand “Christianity.” Does the text of 1 Peter support such understandings of new birth, however?

The new birth “of the imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (1:23) is not simply an internal and private event. Think of its inextricable connection with baptism. Some exegetes surmise that the whole epistle is a baptismal liturgy. [18] Be that as it may, a connection between new birth and baptism is undeniable — a fact with momentous consequences. No one can baptize himself or herself; everyone must be baptized by another person into a given Christian community. Baptism is an incorporation into the body of Christ, a doorway into a Christian community. Baptism will not do the distancing for you, but it will tell you that genuine Christian distance has ecclesial shape. It is lived in a community that lives as “aliens” in a larger social environment.

The new birth is neither a conversion to our authentic inner self nor a migration (*metoikesia*) of the soul into a heavenly realm, but a translation of a person into the house of God (oikos tou theou) erected in the midst of the world. It comes as no surprise, then, to find in 1 Peter that OT collective designations for the people of God are applied to the Christian church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2:9). The distance from the social environment in 1 Peter is not simply eschatological; it is also essentially ecclesiological. [19] Its correlate is the eschatological people of God, who live in the world hoping for God’s new creation, not “our own authentic little voice” nor some “heavenly home” separated from this world by an unbridgeable gulf.

Correspondingly, one must understand the “walk” (*anastrophe*) of Christians which 1 Peter so strongly emphasizes (1:15, 17, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16) not as private morality instructing how to purify the soul from an evil world nor how to “love yourself and be gentle with yourself ... take care of each other,” [20] but as an ecclesial way of being that is distinct from the way of being of the society at large. “Walk” is the way the Christian community lives in the world. Wherever Christians find themselves — alone or with other believers — a Christian social difference is manifested there. Communities of those who are born anew and follow Christ live an alternative way of life within the political, ethnic, religious, and cultural institutions of the larger society.

We get no sense from 1 Peter, however, that the church should strive to regulate all domains of social life and reshape society in the image of the heavenly Jerusalem. One could argue, of course, that it would be anachronistic to expect such a thought even to occur in the Petrine community. Were they not discriminated against, a minority living in premodern times? Does that invalidate or compromise their stance, however? Why would it? Whatever the reason, the Petrine community was no aggressive sect in the sense of Ernst Troeltsch. It did not wish to impose itself or the kingdom of God on the world, but to live in faithfulness to God and to the values of God’s kingdom, inviting others to do the same. It had no desire to do for others what

they did not want done for them. They had no covert totalitarian agenda. Rather, the community was to live an alternative way of life in the present social setting, transforming it, as it could, from within. In any case, the community did not seek to exert social or political pressure, but to give public witness to a new way of life.

DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY

Celsus, the most significant critic of Christianity in the second century, wrote: “If all men wanted to be Christians, the Christians would no longer want them.” [\[21\]](#) In fact he insisted that Christians were so fascinated with rejecting what is common to all people that they themselves would no longer want to be Christians if everyone decided to become one. In his view, the primary point of reference for Christian identity was the non-Christian world. Christian identity is established through the negative activity of setting oneself apart from others. Christian distance from society is a spiteful difference for the sake of difference, nourished by a deep-seated resentment against the dominant social order which rejected them. Is this what we find in 1 Peter?

There is no doubt that 1 Peter stresses the church’s difference from its social environment. This is what the metaphor “aliens” suggests and this is what surfaces repeatedly throughout the epistle. [\[22\]](#) But what is the significance of this observation for the nature of Christian identity? I suggest that the crucial question is not to what degree one stresses difference, but rather on what basis Christian identity is established. Identity can be forged through two related but clearly distinct processes: either through a negative process of rejecting the beliefs and practices of others, or through a positive process of giving allegiance to something distinctive. It is significant that 1 Peter consistently establishes the difference positively, not negatively. There are no direct injunctions not to behave as non-Christians do. Rather, the exhortation to be different centers primarily on the positive example of a holy God (1:15f.) and of the suffering Christ (2:21ff.). This is surprising, especially given the situation of social conflict in which the Petrine

community was engaged. We expect injunctions to reject the ways of the world; instead we find admonitions to follow the path of Christ.

Let me reinforce this point by looking at two images of evil in 1 Peter: the devil and fleshly desires. 1 Peter does not warn in totalizing discourse against an evil world, but calls his community to resist the devil that prowls around, looking for someone to devour (5:8). The image of a prowling devil suggests that evil is not some impenetrable darkness outside the walls of the church, equally thick in all places; rather, evil is a mobile force, something one always has to deal with but is never quite sure where and how one will encounter it. The statements that celebrate Christian calling “out of darkness into his marvelous light” notwithstanding (2:9), 1 Peter does not operate with the stark black-and-white opposition between “divine community” and “satanic world.” Correspondingly, the author seems less interested in hurling threats against the unbelieving and aggressive non-Christian neighbors, [23] than in celebrating Christians’ special status before God (see 2:9f.). Christian hope, not the damnation of non-Christians, figures centrally in the letter (see 1:3; 3:15). [24]

When we encounter negative examples of how Christians should not behave, then our attention is drawn not so much to the life-style of non-Christians as to “the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (2:11). These are, as 1 Peter points out explicitly, the former desires of Christians themselves. [25] The force of the injunction is not “Do not be as your neighbors are!” but “Do not be as you were!” [26] This fits with the observation that the new birth distances people first of all from their old culturally shaped self and in this way from the world. This is what the logic of the metaphor of new birth suggests, but this is also what 1 Peter explicitly states: “you were ransomed from your futile ways inherited from your ancestors” (1:18). What permeates the epistle is not a fixation on distance from the world, but enthusiasm about the eschatological future.

It is Christian identity that creates difference from the social environment, not the other way around. The faith of the Petrine community is nourished more on its own intrinsic vision than on the deprecatory stories about others. [27] Let me reinforce this point by an observation. When identity is forged primarily through the negative process of the rejection of the beliefs and practices of others, violence seems unavoidable, especially in situations of conflict. We have to push others away from ourselves and keep them at a distance, and we have to close ourselves off from others to keep ourselves pure of their taint. The violence of pushing and keeping away can express itself in subdued resentment, or it can break out in aggressive and destructive behavior. The Petrine community was discriminated against and were even a persecuted minority. Feelings of rage and thoughts of revenge must have been lurking as a threat, ready to rise up either in aggression toward their enemies or at least in relishing the thought of their future damnation. But what do we find in 1 Peter? Exhortation is given not to repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but to repay evil with a blessing (3:9)! From the perspective of pop psychology or quasi-revolutionary rhetoric, such a refusal to vent the rage and actuate the mechanism of revenge would be at best described as unhealthy and at worst thought of as worthy only of “despicable rubble.” [28] In fact, it speaks of sovereign serenity and sets a profound revolution in motion. When blessing replaces rage and revenge, the one who suffers violence refuses to retaliate in kind and chooses instead to encounter violence with an embrace. But how can people give up violence in the midst of a life-threatening conflict if their identity is wrapped up in rejecting the beliefs and practices of their enemies? Only those who refuse to be defined by their enemies can bless them.

DIFFERENCE AND ACCULTURATION

There is a strange tension in 1 Peter between the stress on difference and attempts at acculturation. This tension has given rise to opposing interpretations of the purpose of the letter as a whole. The dominant metaphor, “aliens,” clearly underlines the difference. John H. Elliott

latches onto the metaphor and argues that the main purpose of 1 Peter is to protect Christian identity in an unfriendly environment. “The Petrine strategy was,” he writes, “to avert ... forces of social disintegration through a reinforcement of the distinctive identity of the Christian community.” [29] On the other hand, if one looks at the so-called “household codes” and compares them with similar material from the Hellenistic tradition, then it seems that interest in difference gives way to attempts at acculturation. David L. Balch argues that the household codes unmistakably manifest 1 Peter’s interest in accommodation. He concludes: “The author of 1 Peter wrote to advise Christians who were being persecuted about how they might become socially-politically acceptable to their society.” [30]

Elliott’s and Balch’s thought moves within the framework of the alternative: either difference or acculturation (though both are aware that both processes were going on at the same time). Behind such a stance seems to be the persuasion that the community of 1 Peter was a “sect” which, in order to survive, either had to assert itself under pressure to assimilate or accommodate under the threat of persecution. Yet why focus on alternatives? If both difference and accommodation were taking place at the same time, would it not be more fruitful to ask how the processes were combined? The focus on the combination of difference and acculturation would assume on the part of the Petrine community, however, a nonsectarian distance from their social environment: one is free from the pressure either simply to reject or simply affirm the surrounding culture. [31] Indeed, if I am right that the distance from the social environment is in 1 Peter primarily a positive one resulting less from the rejection of the world than from the experience of the new birth to a living hope, then we can expect the epistle to transcend these unhelpful alternatives. We would have to take into account the possibility of either rejecting or accommodating to particular aspects of the surrounding culture in a piece-meal fashion. This is, I think, what we actually find in 1 Peter.

In order to support this claim, I want to look at the so-called “household codes,” the material which according to David L. Balch, clearly demonstrates a Petrine strategy of accommodation. I want to argue that the “household codes” in 1 Peter are in fact an example of differentiated acceptance and rejection of the surrounding culture.

If one considers only the repeated injunctions to “subordinate oneself” (2:13; 2:18; 3:1), to suffer injustice (2:19), or to be gentle and tender (3:4; 3:8), then it could seem that in 1 Peter “Greek politics” is indeed celebrating victory over “the Mosaic story of salvation,” the prophetic tradition, and the teachings of Jesus, as Balch claims. [32] One should not forget, however, the social and theological context of these statements. First, in 1 Peter the conservative “Hellenistic” instructions do not pertain to the relationships within the church (as do the household codes proper in Ephesians and Colossians), but to the relationship of Christians to non-Christians. [33] Second, Christians were involved in a conflict that they did not provoke, that they could not avoid, and in which they were the oppressed party. Third, an inalienable dimension of their communal identity was a commitment to love of enemies and to nonviolence. Taken together, these three considerations place the “conservative” exhortation in a new light. To be “subject” means to act in the freedom of the slaves of God (2:16) and, instead of provoking additional acts of violence, to curb violence by doing good (knowing all along that suffering will be one’s lot, because one cannot count on the victory of good over evil in this world). To be “subject” in a situation of conflict means to follow in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah and to refuse to take part in the automatism of revenge [34] — “evil for evil or abuse for abuse” (3:9) — and to break the vicious circle of violence by suffering violence. If the injunction to be subject appears at first to function as a religious legitimization of oppression, it turns out, in fact, to be a call to struggle against the politics of violence in the name of the politics of the crucified Messiah. How blinded must one be by the prejudices of one’s own liberal culture to see in this demanding way of suffering only accommodation to the dominant norms of the Hellenistic world!

Yet even when we are ready to accept that “subjection” — in politics, economics, and in the home — can be an expression of radical Christianity rather than denial of Christian faith, we are still deeply troubled about how natural it seems for 1 Peter to accept the oppressive rule of the powerful — of the emperor and his governors (2:13ff.), of the slave master (2:18ff.), and of the husband (3:1ff.). True, 1 Peter provides them with no theological legitimation; we read nowhere in the epistle that the powerful were placed in their positions by God and that they are doing God’s work (see Rom 13:1–7). Moreover, 1 Peter is sensitive to the possible injustice of the existing order. [35] Contrary to Aristotle who believed that “there can be no injustice” toward slaves, [36] 1 Peter explicitly states that Christian slaves were suffering unjustly (2:19). Still, we sense no desire to call into question the hierarchical and oppressive social order. Why? Is this because of the minority status of the first Christians? (How could we change anything!?) Is it because of the expectation of Jesus’ imminent coming (4:7)? (Why should we bother, when God’s new creation is around the corner!?) Is it because of a premodern understanding of social realities? (This is how things always were and how they always will be!) Possibly all three factors are relevant. In any case, it seems clear that 1 Peter accommodates to the existing social realities as well as calling them into question. We should keep in mind, however, that the call to follow the crucified Messiah was, in the long run, much more effective in changing the unjust political, economic, and familial structures than direct exhortations to revolutionize them would ever have been. For an allegiance to the crucified Messiah — indeed, worship of a crucified God — is an eminently political act that subverts a politics of dominion at its very core. [37]

Today, we might reason, in contemporary democratic societies we must engage the structures of oppression directly. Social structures are made by human beings and, if unjust, must be unmade by them. That we are ready to act is admirable; that we have an urge to reshape and reconfigure everything might be dangerous. Stephen Toulmin has noted in *Cosmopolis* a feature of modernity that he called “The Myth of the Clean Slate.” [38] Just like one can be rational only if one

“demolishes all that was there before and starts from scratch,” so one can be revolutionary only if one refashions the political situation from the ground up. [39] For example, the French Revolution “reached into everything. For example, it re-created time and space.... [T]he revolutionaries divided time into units that they took to be rational and natural. There were ten days to a week, three weeks to a month, and twelve months to a year.” [40] For modernity social change is enactment of a master narrative that the prophets of the new age have written on a clean sheet of paper.

But the notion of “the clean slate” has proven a dangerous myth. During the French Revolution and in particular later in this century we have learned by bitter experience that the slate cannot be cleaned and that in the process of trying a good deal of new dirt is generated — in fact, rivers of blood and mountains of corpses. Those lessons of history make us wonder whether some wisdom, in addition to accommodation, may be contained in 1 Peter’s failure to challenge the oppressive structures of his day. What we should learn from the text is not, of course, to keep our mouths shut and hands folded, but to make our rhetoric and action more modest so that they can be more effective. As we strive for social change, 1 Peter nudges us to drop the pen that scripts master narratives and instead give account of the living hope in God and God’s future (3:15; 1:5), [41] to abandon the project of reshaping society from the ground up and instead do as much good as we can from where we are at the time we are there (2:11), to suffer injustice and bless the unjust rather than perpetrating violence by repaying “evil for evil or abuse for abuse” (3:9), and to replace the anger of frustration with the joy of expectation (4:13).

SOFT DIFFERENCE

Though 1 Peter does not envisage changing social structures, Christians nevertheless have a mission in the world. They should conduct themselves “honorably among the Gentiles ... so that they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (2:12; cf. 3:1f.). Indeed, the purpose of Christian existence as a whole is to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who

called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). The distance from society that comes from the new birth into a living hope does not isolate from society. For hope in God, the Creator and Savior of the whole world, knows no boundaries. Instead of leading to isolation, this distance is a presupposition of mission. Without distance, churches can only give speeches that others have written for them and only go places where others lead them. To make a difference, one must be different. [\[42\]](#)

The key question is how churches should think and live out their difference and their mission — both inalienable and mutually dependent dimensions of their identity. In one of the central passages in 1 Peter about the mission of the church, we come across a word that has today fallen somewhat into disrepute — the word “gentleness” or “meekness” (3:16; 3:4). As is well-known, a certain kind of meekness is a weapon of the weak. They get their way by avoiding direct confrontations and by seemingly going with the flow. One might be tempted to interpret “gentleness” in 1 Peter as a debasing strategy of the powerless — i.e., be gentle because this is the only way to achieve what you desire in a hostile world.

One can only strike the enemy with the weapon of meekness, however, if one holds in the other hand a weapon called guile. This is precisely the weapon 1 Peter takes out of the hands of his community (2:1f.; 2:22). In place of guile, which tries to confuse the enemy by pretext (2:16), 1 Peter calls for the transparency of a pure heart (1:22). A gentleness that refuses to help itself with guile is no strategy of the weak. It is the open life-stance of the strong, who feel no need to support their own uncertainty by aggression toward others. Gentleness is the flip-side of respect for the other. It is not an accident that both are mentioned together in 3:16, where Christians are told to give an account of the hope that is in them “with gentleness and reverence.” [\[43\]](#)

It might be appropriate to call the missionary distance that 1 Peter stresses soft difference. I do not mean a weak difference, for in 1 Peter the difference is anything but weak. It is strong, but it is not hard. Fear for oneself and one’s identity creates hardness. The difference that joins itself

with hardness always presents the other with a choice: either submit or be rejected, either “become like me or get away from me.” In the mission to the world, hard difference operates with open or hidden pressures, manipulation, and threats. A decision for a soft difference, on the other hand, presupposes a fearlessness which 1 Peter repeatedly encourages his readers to assume (3:14; 3:6). People who are secure in themselves — more accurately, who are secure in their God — are able to live the soft difference without fear. They have no need either to subordinate or damn others, but can allow others space to be themselves. For people who live the soft difference, mission fundamentally takes the form of witness and invitation. They seek to win others without pressure or manipulation, sometimes even “without a word” (3:1).

Whether it takes place gently or not, colonization is colonization. This is how Tzvetan Todorov might react to the pursuit of mission through soft difference. “Is there not already a violence in the conviction that one possesses the truth oneself, whereas this is not the case for others,” he asks rhetorically, commenting on the missionary efforts of such a friend of the Indians as Las Casas. [44] Instead of asserting the universal truth, one should strive to make the otherness of others blossom. Yet even “heightening of the other’s differences” must be “guided by an emancipatory praxis that keeps the other empowered to be other,” [45] as Mark Taylor puts it. But when we ask what actually keeps others empowered to be authentically themselves, judgments about truth and error, freedom and slavery, darkness and light rush in. For unless you are willing to tolerate everything except intolerance toward everything, any notion of “emancipative praxis that keeps the other empowered to be other” involves often abstracting an authentic other from a concrete other and then affirming your abstraction while condemning the concrete other. You must abstract, for instance, from the fact that women are circumcised in a given culture before you can affirm that culture. But when you affirm the other in this way, you have not affirmed them, but your own construction of their authentic identity, a construction which entails making judgments about truth and value. And so we are back at proclaiming the

truth that others do not possess. The difference is that we now do it clandestinely, whereas 1 Peter would want us to do it openly. Truth will be spoken, value judgments will be made. The question is only how — upfront or surreptitiously, with harshness or with gentleness, from a position of power or from a position of “weakness.” Just as gentleness is not a mere survival strategy, so the soft difference is not simply a missionary method. Rather, the soft difference is the missionary side of following in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah. It is not an optional extra, but part and parcel of Christian identity itself. To be a Christian means to live one’s own identity in the face of others in such a way that one joins inseparably the belief in the truth of one’s own convictions with a respect for the convictions of others. The softness which should characterize the very being of Christians — I am tempted to call it “ontic gentleness” — must not be given up even when we are (from our own perspective) persuaded that others are either wrong or evil. To give up the softness of our difference would be to sacrifice our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

DIFFERENCE AND COMMENSURABILITY

One is immediately struck in 1 Peter with two contrary reactions of outsiders to the soft missionary difference. On the one hand, there is angered surprise and blaspheming from non-Christians that Christians are no longer joining them “in the same excesses of dissipation” (4:4). The Christian difference is the cause of discrimination and persecution. Moreover, 1 Peter tells us, such negative reaction is to be expected from non-Christians. Christians should not be surprised by the “fiery ordeal” which they have to endure (4:12). The negative reactions of non-Christians do not rest on misunderstanding, but are rooted in the inner logic of the non-Christian constellation of values which seem incompatible with the values of Christians. On the other hand, one of the central passages in 1 Peter entertains a lively hope that precisely the Christian difference — outwardly visible in their good deeds — will cause non-Christians to see the truth and eventually convert (2:12,15; 3:1; 3:16). This expectation presupposes overlap between

Christian and non-Christian constellations of values. The good works of Christians can be appreciated by non-Christians and look attractive to them.

Commensurability and incommensurability between Christian and non-Christian value patterns are so intertwined in 1 Peter that they can appear in one and the same sentence: “Conduct yourself honorably among the Gentiles, so that, through that for which they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (2:11). The very actions which the Gentiles malign as evil deeds, will ultimately be recognized by them as good deeds if Christians do consistently what non-Christians malign. Non-Christians will even convert on account of these good deeds. Two seemingly contradictory reactions exist side by side! Can one reconcile them?

One way to resolve the problem is to invoke the miracle of seeing. Non-Christians look at the same phenomenon, but they are no longer provoked to anger because they come to it from a different perspective — the perspective of faith. Yet the miracle of seeing can happen only when one has already come to faith. [46] Consequently, coming to faith would not be the result of observing good works, but perceiving good works would be the result of coming to faith. Moreover, the presupposition of this solution is that value patterns of Christians and non-Christians are incommensurable. There are no bridges or overlaps. The only thing one can do is jump from one value system into another for no apparent reason or, possibly, out of dissatisfaction. But what is significant in 1 Peter is that commensurability and incommensurability are taking place at one and the same time, that good works themselves are both the cause of blaspheming (4:4) and the cause for glorifying God (2:12). [47] How is this possible?

The stress on Christian difference notwithstanding, the “world” does not seem a monolithic place in 1 Peter. We encounter evil people who persecute Christians and who will continue to do the same, blaspheming what is most holy to Christians (4:4,12). We come across ignorant and

foolish people who will be silenced by Christian good behavior (2:15). We meet people who know what is wrong and what is right and are ready to relate to Christians accordingly (2:14). Finally, we encounter people who see, appreciate, and are finally won over to the Christian faith (2:12; 3:1). [\[48\]](#) Thus, the picture is more complex than just the two extreme and contrary reactions. This testifies to a sensitivity in 1 Peter for the complexity of the social environment.

Let me try to explicate the implicit understanding of the social world. The world consists of a plurality of “worlds.” The values of these worlds do not form tight and comprehensive systems; they are not like balls that touch but do not connect. Rather, each of these worlds consists of a mixture of partly self-consistent and partly disparate practices and thought patterns. In addition, the worlds are in a permanent social interchange which shapes values that are partly common to the interacting social worlds, partly merely compatible, and partly contrary. An essential dimension of the interchange is the struggle for social power. In this struggle, ethical persuasions and various interests collide, not only between various parties, but also within one party or even within a single person. Jean-François Lyotard paints a similar picture when he writes:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules. [\[49\]](#)

If we do not take too seriously the talk about the dissolution of the subject, [\[50\]](#) Lyotard’s description of the complex social interaction seems right on target.

Notice the consequences of such a picture of the social world for the question of commensurability between value systems of discrete social groups (such as a Christian church). In such a world, one cannot speak either of the principled commensurability or of the principled incommensurability of value systems. Of course, one can imagine situations in which value

systems of communities are fully commensurable or are completely incommensurable. But this is theory, not reality. As a rule, however, they are partly commensurable and partly incommensurable. They can even be commensurable and incommensurable at the same time, insofar as the values within one community or within one single person can be contradictory. Thus when we find commensurability and incommensurability at one and the same time in 1 Peter, we should not be too quick to accuse 1 Peter of inconsistency, but rather ask whether our urge for consistency does not skew our perception of social reality. The epistle shows remarkable and refreshing sensibility for the complexity of social realities, bursting a black and white way of thinking.

In addition to explaining the different ways in which non-Christians relate to the gospel, the complex interplay of commensurability and incommensurability suggests also that there is no single proper way for Christians to relate to a given culture as a whole. Instead, there are numerous ways of accepting, rejecting, subverting or transforming various aspects of a culture which itself is a complex pattern of symbols, beliefs, values, practices and organizations that are partly congruent with one another and partly contradictory. It seems obvious, but is in no way trite, to note that 1 Peter does not speak abstractly about the relation between gospel and culture. Much like other NT writings, the epistle does not deal explicitly with “culture” as the place of Christian presence, nor with “society” as a field of Christian responsibility. [\[51\]](#) But it does provide some overarching perspectives about how particular Christians in Asia Minor at a particular time should relate to their diverse neighbors. Even if we find abstractions necessary and models of relating to a culture useful, we should not lose sight of the rich diversity within any given culture and therefore of the multiple ways in which the gospel relates to it, such as being “against the culture” and “converting the culture,” “subverting the culture” and in some sense being even “of the culture” — all at the same time.

CONCLUSION: CHURCH, SECT, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

After the foregoing exegetical and theological analysis of Christian identity and difference in 1 Peter, let us revisit in our conclusion the church-sect typology and ask about the nature of the Petrine community as it is portrayed in 1 Peter. It seems that, through the new birth into a living hope, a “sect” was born. And indeed, before the newborn child could take her first breath, her difference, her foreignness, was manifest. As she was growing up, there was no question that she did not quite fit into her environment.

Soon, however, she began to confuse observers by provoking uncertainty about her sectarian identity. It looked as if she did not forge her identity through rejection of her social environment, but through the acceptance of God’s gift of salvation and its values. She refused to operate within the alternative “affirmation of the world” versus “denial of the world,” but surprised people with strange combinations of difference and acculturation. She was sure of her mission to proclaim the mighty deeds of God for the salvation of the world, but refused to use either pressure or manipulation. Rather, she lived fearlessly her soft difference. She was not surprised by the various reactions of individuals and communities among whom she lived because she was aware of the bewildering complexity of social worlds in which values are partly the same, partly different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory. And so it gradually became clear that the child who was born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into a living hope was not a sect at all. The unusual child who looked like a sect, but did not act like a sect, was a Christian community — a church that can serve as a model even for us today as we reflect on the nature of Christian presence in modern, rapidly changing, pluralistic societies that resist being shaped by moral norms.

NOTES

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), x.
2. See Max Weber, “Die protestantischen Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus,” *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1963), 207–36.
3. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (trans. Olive Wyon; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), II, 994.
4. See Leonard Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (KEK XII/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 41.
5. Reinhard Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde. Die Metapher der Fremde in der Antiken Welt, im Urchristentum und im 1. Petrusbrief* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992).
6. Gustaf Stählin, “Xenos,” TDNT V, 29.
7. Leonard Goppelt, “Prinzipien neutestamentlicher und systematischer Sozialethik heute,” *Die Verantwortung der Kirche in der Gesellschaft*, ed. Jörg Baur et al. (Stuttgart: Calver Verlag, 1973), 16.
8. Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde*, 22.
9. John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless. A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 21–58, 129–132. Cf. John H. Elliott, “1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy: A Discussion with David Balch,” *Perspectives on 1 Peter*, ed. C. H. Talbert (Macon: Mercer, 1986), 67f.
10. So Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 268.

11. This is a systemic one-sidedness, endemic to functionalist sociological explanations; they are unable to perceive religious beliefs and practices as independent social forces. For a critique of sociological functionalism in exegesis see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 111–121.

12. Elliott recognizes this but underplays its importance. See Elliott, “1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy....”

13. In persecution both the issue of difference and of justice is involved. In 1 Peter persecution is first of all a problem of difference — they became Christians and as a consequence encountered “blaspheming” and were subjected to “fiery ordeal” (4:4, 12). Injustice here seems secondary to the difference, a result of the intolerance toward “the other” and of the attempt to suppress its difference.

14. A view rightly criticized by Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 131. Elliott seems to assume, however, that if the terms “aliens” and “sojourners” are not meant metaphorically, they must describe the social situation of Christians before conversion. But there is no reason why they could not describe their social situation after conversion.

15. For a brief analysis of the discussion on privatization of religion see Hubert Knoblauch, “Die Verflüchtigung der Religion ins Religiöse: Thomas Luckmans Unsichtbare Religion,” in Thomas Luckmann, *Die Unsichtbare Religion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 19ff.

16. For “migration” as a philosophical category see Peter Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 80ff.

17. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 221.

18. For a discussion see J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 15ff.

19. So also Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde*, 188.

20. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 221.

21. Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3,5.7.9

22. See Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 120.

23. Talk about judgment in 4:17 is not a proof to the contrary. Peter writes: “For the time has come for the judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” Notice, however, that the church as the house of God is not spared judgment. Judgment is here an inclusive, not an exclusive, category. It is interesting to observe in this context that 1 Peter comes closest of all NT writings to entertaining the possibility that deceased non-Christians might be able to make a decision for Christ after death (4:6; Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 277f.).

24. See Norbert Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (EKK 21; Zürich/Neukirchen Vluyn: Benzinger/Neukirchener, 1979), 16. The cryptic passage in which we are told that non-Christians were “destined” to disobey the word points, however, in a different direction (2:8).

25. See Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 117.

26. One can read 1 Peter 4:2 as an exhortation not to live like the non-Christians: “...so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.” The text speaks, however, about “human desires” inclusively, not of the desires of the “world” or of the non-Christians, though these desires are “the desires of the flesh” (2:11) and therefore the desires that Christians “formerly had” (1:14). Moreover, not living by human desires depends on the

positive injunction to arm “yourself also with the same intention” as Christ (4:1). First Peter transcends the simple schema of “pure church” versus “sinful world”; the desires do not simply reign among non-Christians, but also wage war against the souls of Christians (see 2: 11).

[27.](#) On this distinction see the brief (and somewhat too stark) comments of Charles Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” *Myth and Philosophy*, ed. F. Reynolds and David Tracy (New York: SUNY, 1990), 54.

[28.](#) See Karl Marx, *Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978), IV, 200.

[29.](#) Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 217.

[30.](#) David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive. The Domestic Code in I Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 88. Balch later qualifies his position to mean that acculturation is the purpose of the household codes only, not of the letter as whole (see David L. Balch, “Hellenization/Acculturation in 1 Peter,” *Perspectives on I Peter*, ed. C. H. Talbert [Macon: Mercer, 1986], 82).

[31.](#) In the case of simple rejection one would fall into what psychologists call “negative dependence” and in the case of simple affirmation one would not yet be free from “positive dependence.” In both cases behavioral patterns would be determined from the outside.

[32.](#) Balch, *Hellenization/Acculturation in I Peter*, 97f.

[33.](#) So Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde*, 161.

[34.](#) See Hanah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240f.

[35.](#) Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde*, 162, 166.

[36.](#) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 11134b 9ff.

[37.](#) Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II. Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 1970), 118, n. 3. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologische Kritik der Politischen Religion,” J. B. Metz/J. Moltmann/W. Oelmüller, *Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung. Aspekte einer neuen “politischen Theologie”* (München: Kaiser, 1970), 11–51; Jürgen Moltmann, “Covenant oder Leviathan? Zur Politischen Theologie der Neuzeit,” *ZThK* 90 (1993), 299–317.

[38.](#) Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 175ff.

[39.](#) *Ibid.*, 176.

[40.](#) Robert Darton cited by Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 175f.

[41.](#) For a postmodern critique of master narratives see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 31ff. I am more persuaded by his critique than by his proposal, however.

[42.](#) From the principle “no mission without difference,” does not follow the quantitative principle “the bigger the difference, the more effective mission will be” (so K. H. Schelkle, *Die Petrusbriefe. Der Judasbrief* [HThK XIII/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1961], 72).

[43.](#) Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 237, suggests that *phobos* in 3:16 refers to fear before God and points to other instances in which the word is used with this meaning in 1 Peter (1:17; 2:18; 3:2). Even if one follows his interpretation in these other instances (as I think one should), the context in 3:16 points clearly towards respect for other people rather than reverence before God (see Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 160).

[44.](#) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), 168.

[45.](#) Mark Kline Taylor, “Religion, Cultural Plurality, and Liberating Praxis: In Conversation with the Work of Langdon Gilkey,” *The Journal of Religion* 71 (2, 1992), 162.

[46.](#) So rightly from his perspective Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 160.

[47.](#) It could be suggested that we try to resolve the tension between angered surprise and the embracing of Christian faith by appealing to the passage of time. At first the Gentiles are angry and then, after longer observation of honorable Christian living, they have to admit their error. But if the tension could be resolved in this way, then Christians could not see discrimination and persecution as something natural, but would have to be surprised at its persistence. But according to 1 Peter Christians should consider persecution natural (see 4:12).

[48.](#) Elliott seems to want to harmonize all these reactions and ascribe them to non-Christians monolithically understood (see “1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy”, 69).

[49.](#) Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 40.

[50.](#) For a critique of the postmodern dissolution of the subject see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 196ff.