CHAPTER 25

To Incline Another’s Heart: The Role of Attitude in Reader Positioning

James D. Dvorak

1 Introduction

In 1993, Wayne Meeks published The Origins of Christian Morality, in which he set out “to describe the moral dimensions”—the dimensions of life comprised of a “pervasive and, often, only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits”—“of the subcultures of several varieties of the early Christian movement, seen within the larger complex culture of the Roman Empire.” Because of the socially and culturally bounded nature of what he was investigating, he adopted an “ethnographic approach,” which made available to him the etic, descriptive methodologies common to...
ethnography and cultural anthropology. Of course, one cannot do field work among people who are long dead, as Meeks admits, so he focused his attention on the texts that serve as the primary sources of the history of the early Christians, namely the New Testament and other Christian documents from the first and second centuries. His intent was not so much to point to this or that specific moral boundary but to describe as clearly as possible the ways in which the early Christians “developed something like a moral common sense, a set of moral intuitions.” These intuitions are not given by nature; rather, they are formed within communities through the interpersonal interactions of the community members. In sociological terms, the initial formation of morals and the values and behaviors attached to them is called “socialization.” If someone in the group violates the group’s core values or transgresses its moral boundaries—or if someone undergoes conversion and leaves one group to join another—then processes of “resocialization” are enacted.

It is not surprising that resources from any number of semiotic systems may be marshaled for the purposes of socialization and/or resocialization, such as somatic and exo-somatic systems. Yet the primary semiotic system upon which humans draw is language. Part of the ethnographer’s work is to “look at the language [the subjects] use[d] to provide explicit action guides for one another.” Meeks’s inspection along these lines gleans a decent harvest, especially in chapters bearing headings like “The Language of Obligation” and “The Grammar of Christian Practice” (though this latter chapter focuses more on social practices [e.g., rituals] than on language per se).

From the slate of linguistic genres/forms put to work by the early Christians, Meeks discusses the following (from “simpler” to “more complex”): virtue and

6 Ibid., 3, 10.
7 Ibid., 11.
8 Ibid., 8.
9 Ibid., 18–36. See also Nock’s now classic work Conversion.
10 Resocialization refers to the processes whereby a person willingly sets aside or alters certain beliefs, value positions, and behaviors and accepts new or modified ones as part of some form of social transformation or conversion. See Shaefer and Lamm, Sociology, 113; Brim, “Adult Socialization,” 556.
11 I.e., systems using some aspect of the body as expression plane, such as gesturing, embracing/hugging, shaking or nodding of the head.
12 I.e., systems using things outside of the body as expression planes, such as art, architecture, various forms of dress.
13 Meeks, Origins, 14.
14 See also Meeks, First Urban Christians, 85 (“The Language of Belonging”) and 94 (“The Language of Separation”).