

# Christology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

[Published in a festschrift issue of *Encounter* (Vol. 63, Nos. 1-2, 2002, pp. 129-136) in honor of Professor Clark Williamson upon his retirement from Christian Theological Seminary. Used by permission of *Encounter*. Posted here 8/26/03.]

It is a pleasure to write an article in this festschrift issue honoring my friend and colleague of many years, Clark Williamson. We taught systematic theology together for several years at Christian Theological Seminary, and I confess that his passionate concentration on Jewish-Christian dialogue deeply aroused and influenced my awareness of the issues and necessities of engaging in the dialogue in our Post-Holocaust situation. Without his insistent arguments, I might well have neglected issues that have profound implications for how we construe Christian faith. While it has been clear to many over the years that Clark and I disagree over important matters in Christian theology, it may have been overlooked that we also agree on a wide range of Christian concerns. This essay on christology is written in gratitude for the conversations and writings of Clark and for the persistent passion of his theologizing in a way that does not forget the Holocaust. I choose to write on christology because that is an area in which our strongest theological convictions sometimes collide.

I am under the impression that we are now entering a phase in Jewish-Christian dialogue in which Christian guilt is no longer the shared premise of the dialogue. When this premise is given full reign, we often have Christian theologians eager to diminish distinctive Christian claims and to find ways in which the common ground between Jew and Christian can be emphasized. In this situation, the more liberal voices in both traditions can play out the agreements and neglect the differences. In the course of this phase of the dialogue, Christian christology often became the scapegoat for the sins and guilt of the Christian tradition. It was not seldom in this dialogue that it seemed that Christianity had become a slimmed down Judaism for Gentiles with a prophetic Jesus and a Christ idea without the particularities of incarnation.

We are now in a new phase of the discussion, beyond Christian guilt, in which a resolute honesty on both sides is emerging with a new acceptance of both the profound continuities and significant differences that obtain between Jewish traditions and Christian traditions. The recent publication by Jewish scholars, *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (1), is a bold attempt from various Jewish perspectives to characterize Christian faith and to identify those areas of significant agreement and difference. At many points in their essays the issues of christology and incarnation come repeatedly to the fore as a set of beliefs that dramatically differentiate Judaism and Christianity.

I think they are on target in identifying these issues as the deep markers distinguishing Christianity and Judaism, and it is important that the disagreements in christology be discerningly articulated. It is my project in this brief essay to explore a schematic understanding of christology and the doctrine of God that acknowledges the differences without: a) advocating a supersession of Judaism by the church; or b) diminishing an incarnational christology; or c) lapsing into the glib locution that 'Judaism is for Jews and Christianity is for Gentiles.'

From the Christian side there is general agreement that all forms of supersessionism are to be repudiated, but the term 'supersessionism' often gets up and walks around on us. I find there are at least two different meanings attached to the term 'supersessionism'(2):

S1 —the belief that since most Jews during the time of Jesus (and most since) rejected him as Israel's Messiah, God has rejected Israel as God's people, canceled God's covenant with Israel, and replaced or superseded Israel with the church, and therefore only those Jews who accept Jesus as Messiah and Savior will be saved.

S2 —the belief that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's work in Israel and that Jesus Christ therefore has salvific import for the life and destiny of Israel.

I reject S1 as an illegitimate but unfortunate belief of the Christian church through many centuries. But I am concerned about those Christian theologians who would also call S2 a supersessionism to be rejected. With the apostle Paul in Romans chapters 9 through 11, I affirm:

- a. that what God has done in Jesus Christ has been done in the history of Israel, in a Jew, and in fulfillment of God's intent with Israel as covenant people and therefore for Israel;
- b. that God is faithful in God's promises, and God has not rejected Jewish people who have not accepted Jesus as Messiah;
- c. that what God has done in Jesus Christ has been done for all God's children, Jew and Gentile alike;
- d. that a Jewish person is not making a conceptual mistake in believing that Jesus Christ has salvific meaning for Jews; certainly Paul the Pharisee, and all the other NT authors who were Jews, thought Jesus was their Savior and Lord (3);
- e. that it is, therefore, not the case that Jesus Christ is for Gentiles only and Judaism remains theologically untouched by the life and destiny of Jesus.

Of course, a Christian theologian who denies that Jesus is salvifically for Jews and important for Judaism has subverted most of the New Testament and has reduced Jesus to the proportions of an interesting and provocative social prophet carrying the 'universals' of Judaism to the Gentiles. When I say 'universals,' I mean those aspects of Judaism that can be universally held by 'reasonable people,' such as some form of monotheism and a set of social justice principles.

However, when well-intentioned Christians try to diminish Jesus in the interests of defanging a presumably supersessionist Christianity, they also collide directly with the profound Jewish and Christian belief that Israel is a people specially elected by God. To affirm the special election of Israel by God, however, is also what opens the door to affirming that the God of Israel has become a Jew on behalf of the salvation of the whole world, including Jews. Only a God who does special and particular acts in the world, such as specially electing and covenanting with Israel, is a God who can become a human being. Other gods, of which there are many in our day including a vague deistic god, do nothing in particular in the world. Hence, the special election of Israel is a common belief that Jews and Christians should share.

In order to appreciate the realism of this shared belief, it must be not seen as emerging from the modern historical study of religion and democratic theories of pluralism in which a mutual tolerance among religions is appropriately encouraged. But that sort of discourse and perspective could never of itself assert the theological belief that the Creator of the world specially elected and covenanted with Israel. Notice the extraordinary grammatical difference between saying 'Israel believed it was elected by the Creator of the world' and saying 'Israel was elected by the Creator of the world.' The first utterance can be spoken with complete personal detachment and neutrality, pretending to be no more than a verifiable historical belief about Israel's religion. The latter utterance can only be authentically spoken with passion and commitment such as one might find in synagogue or church.

This shared belief in a God who has specially elected and covenanted with Israel is compelling, and no credible theologian, Jew or Christian, should allow it to be neglected or omitted from his discourse. And from a Christian point of view, the particularity of Israel's election and the particularity of Jesus Christ are indissolubly bound together. What distinguishes Christian and Jew theologically is the further Christian belief that the God of Israel acted uniquely and incarnately in Jesus of Nazareth for the salvation of the world, including the ultimate salvation of Israel.

It is, however, one of the appalling tragedies of church history that a crucified Messiah, who was believed to be of the very essence of God and who preached peace, love of enemies, and nonretaliation, was converted into a triumphalist Emperor in whose name it became appropriate to kill and persecute Jews and heretics and all other enemies of the imperial god. The way of the cross, instead of being the way of the Christian disciple, became the despised way of weakness in the face of enemies who are bent on doing harm to one's family, clan, nation, or religion. When attacked and in self-defense, it becomes mandated that

the followers of the Emperor Jesus are justified in killing either in return or in anticipation.

The agenda for a full-bodied Christian Post-Holocaust christology is to recover the crucified Messiah and Son of God as the one who was the definitive self-revelation of God and of the way in which God's people are called to live in the world. There is no reason emerging from the Holocaust to retreat from the belief that the God of Israel became incarnate in a Jew for the salvation of the world. But this incarnate God is not one who is immutably above the fray of life and enmity and is not one who is impassible in the face of human suffering. Instead, such an incarnate God, one who is the very essence and actuality of God, is the one who comes to live in the midst of enmity and suffering, in the midst of oppression and misery, in the midst of the least of those in human social arrangements, and he is brutally slain by the powers that think they are ultimately in control of human life and destiny. The moral/theological character of Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the validation that his life, teaching, ministry, and death are revelatory of the ways of almighty God who created heaven and earth and elected Israel. The divine reality that is claimed for Jesus is a reality that can die a human death and take the sins and evil alienation of the world upon Godself. The sins of the world include the sins of Jews and Gentiles alike. And, we must admit, if the God of Israel has done this incarnate act in Jesus Christ, then that very belief itself begins to transform how we Christians understand the reality of the God who elected Israel. Herein lie the roots of trinitarian belief among Christians: a complex and multi-relational divine Life has crossed the boundaries between Creator and creature to become a creature and take up the cause of the creature and shape the creature's destiny.

For Christians to say, then, 'Jesus is Lord' is not merely to say that he is ruler in their hearts, however much that may also be true. It is boldly to say that Jesus is truly the Lord who reigns over all human life, history, and destiny. And his Lordship is that of peace, self-denial, cross-bearing, agapic love, and resurrection from the dead. Affirming these beliefs is what was at issue at Nicaea and Chalcedon: Jesus' life and destiny, his suffering and cross, is the life and destiny of God and the people of God. And it is appalling how quickly these huge theological claims got sidetracked, even derailed.

Hence, the need today in the church is not a diminished christology but a robust christology that is faithful and truthful about the reality of Jesus and the God of Israel. Such a christology will give no justification for the coercion of anyone in Jesus' name, for it cannot endorse coercion or violence. Such a christology could never be used to warrant persecution, harm, and violent treatment of any human being, for it stands for the dignity of all human life before God and God's suffering solidarity with human life.

If this Jesus is Lord of life and human history and destiny, then a Christian would be irresponsible if she did not affirm that this Jesus is also salvifically for Jews. From this christological perspective, whether any contemporary Jews accept Jesus or not, Jesus is for Jews of all times and places. To say this Jewish Jesus is only for Gentiles is to deny that Jesus is Lord of history. It is to deny that Jesus is of the very essence and actuality of God and is the incarnate work of God on behalf of a rebellious and sinful humanity.

There are, then, some significant differences between Jewish theology and Christian theology. It cannot be true that the God of Israel both did act incarnately in Jesus of Nazareth and did not so act. It cannot be true that the God of Israel both acted for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ and did not so act.

But Christians need to remember as well as that it cannot be true that God in Christ both prohibits violence, retaliation, and killing among humans and sanctions violence and killing on select occasions when some of God's sinful children deserve to die. It cannot be true that Christ is both Emperor like Caesar, ruling by fear behind armies and fortresses, and the slain Lamb of God, the crucified Messiah dying at the hands of the sins of the world. It cannot be true that killing and violence are ever justified by appeal to the name of Jesus.

Do Jews have a right to exist as Jews now that the Messiah has come? Of course. Is a Jew making a conceptual mistake to believe that Jesus is the Messiah? In the times of the apostolic church, when the New Testament was being written by Jews who thought Jesus was Lord and Savior, they could never have thought they were making a conceptual mistake. So we have in New Testament times many Jews believing salvific things about Jesus. Yet it may well be that today a Jew by birth would cease being Jew, in the eyes of some, were he to become a Christian. But these are matters so complex for Jews themselves that I will

say no more. My point is simply that the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews who did not think they were betraying Israel in believing Jesus to be Israel's Messiah. (4)

While Christians must continue to be vigilant in their discourses and practices about Israel and Jews, they are not expected to be endlessly guilty for the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a horrible marker in human history as to the extent and ferocity of human sin, of the human inclination for scapegoating, for retaliating, for revenge, for hatred, and for a demonic will to power over others. The history of the church contributed to these inclinations as they came to expression toward Jews over centuries of contempt and persecution. The most enduring way in which the church can prevent such inclinations from finding habitation in the church's discourses and practices is for the church to be truly and profoundly christological. If Jesus is God incarnate and lived, taught, and died without violent resistance at the hands of the powerful in the world, then his Lordship commands that Christians live in the same way: the way of agapic love and peace. It is a narrow way not often taken. Jews have no reason to fear these Christians, though they might be annoyed at the Christian's insistent confession that Jesus the Jew is the incarnate Lord of history.

I hope, therefore, that I have shown a way in which a genuinely New Testament, Nicene, and Chalcedonian christology might be reclaimed by Christians without fearing they are giving comfort to those who would condemn or eradicate Jews and Judaism. I would also hope that I have shown how those sincere and honest Christians who are valiantly trying to construct a Post-Holocaust theology by evacuating Nicene christology and theology can now desist from those enervating efforts.

Finally, while I have not been able to develop it in the limits of this essay, I think the sort of christology I have outlined is so deeply grounded in the free grace and love of God that it leads directly to the eschatological hope that the triune God, who lived amongst humans, was crucified, and rose from the dead, will ultimately gather all—Jew and Gentile alike—into God's own eternal Life. It is inconceivable that the God who became incarnate in a Jew would have any other future with Jews than that of Ultimate Companionship and Redemption.

(1) *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Singer (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000).

(2) Most of the following and much else in this essay is developed further in my forthcoming two-volume text, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, to be published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

(3) See Gal 2.19-20.

(4) Of course, there are significant differences in what later Jews and later Christians mean by 'Messiah.' These differences are explored further in my *A Grammar of Christian Faith* and in my earlier article, "Jewish and Christian Theology on Election, Covenant, Messiah, and the Future," in *The Church and the Jewish People*, ed. Clark M. Williamson (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1994), 51-58.