

Old Wine in New Skins?
A Critique of Modern Christology

By

Clark M. Williamson
Professor of Theology
Christian Theological Seminary

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Introduction: The Centrality of Christology

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the structure of modern revisionist Christology (that theological position that revises traditional Christology in the light of the crisis of modernity) in order to address the question whether that Christological model is at all available as a resource for the reconstruction of Christology after the Holocaust. The model will be presented as it appeared in one of the most prominent representatives of Liberal Protestant theology. Its reappearance in subsequent theology will be indicated. The contention of the paper will be that this Christological model is totally unavailable to us after the Shoah. Some outlines of a constructive alternative will be offered at the end of the paper.

The assumption of this paper is that the reconstruction of Christology is indeed central to the theological task after Hitler's attempted Endlösung der Judenfrage. This assumption is shared by other thinkers who have pondered these issues. Rosemary Ruether, toward the conclusion of Faith and Fratricide, contends that the "key issue" in the Christian anti-Judaic myth that needs reconceiving is Christology (Ruether, 246-251). Her now-famous way of asking the question is: "Is it possible to say 'Jesus is the Messiah' without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time, 'and the Jews be damned'?" (Ruether, 246).

John T. Pawlikowski has written extensively in the dialogue between Christians and Jews and has dedicated a volume to the question of Christology. Whereas Ruether proceeds by trying to render proleptic and partial the kind of fulfilment that occurred in Christ, Pawlikowski takes the tack of re-describing the historical Jesus as a Pharisee, albeit a radical Pharisee. Within the context of Pharisaism, Pawlikowski tries to characterize Jesus as enjoying a "degree of intimacy" with God unlike that entertained by the Pharisees and as carrying further than did they his concern with individual worth and the problem of wealth (Pawlikowski, 102-106). Pawlikowski tries to overcome Christian anti-Judaism by re-describing Jesus as a Jew, particularly a Pharisee.

Along with Ruether and Pawlikowski, A. Roy Eckardt also thinks of Christology as at least a key issue for Christian theology today. Whereas Ruether would reinterpret the resurrection experiences of the early church as proleptic and Pawlikowski would base Christology on the historical Jesus (with the implication that the resurrection is optional to Christology), Eckardt would simply deny that the resurrection ever took place. His reason for making this theological decision is that in the adversus Judaeos theological tradition the resurrection functions as God's vindication of an anti-Jewish Jesus against the Jews. In this context it is God's judgment against the Jews and for

the Gentiles. It is the ground and warrant of Christian claims to supersede Judaism and the Jewish people. On the basis of his analysis of such theologians as Pannenberg, Eckardt claims that:

127 it is the teaching of a consummated Resurrection which lies at the foundation of Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism, for only with that teaching does Christian triumphalist ideology reach ultimate fulfillment (Eckardt, 130).

128 With this conclusion and the supplementary argument that there is no third alternative to the literal affirmation or the literal denial of the resurrection (e.g., it makes no sense to demythologize the resurrection), Eckardt then denies the resurrection in order to rid Christianity of its anti-Jewish triumphalism: "there is only one possible ground for denying Pannenberg's vindication--by testifying that Jesus has not yet been raised from the dead" (Eckardt, 133; emphasis mine). Like Ruether, Eckardt claims that fulfillment in Christ is partial, even more so than she affirmed.

129 That young Jewish prophet from Galilee sleeps now. He sleeps with the other Jewish dead, with all the disconsolate and scattered ones of the murder camps, and with the unnumbered dead of the human and the nonhuman family. But Jesus of Nazareth shall be raised. So too shall the small Hungarian children of Auschwitz. Once upon a time, they shall again play and they shall laugh. The little one of Terezin shall see another butterfly. We shall all sing and we shall all dance. And we shall love one another (Eckardt, 150).

130 Hence the assumption of this paper--that the

reconstruction of Christology after the Holocaust is central to the theological task today--is shared by Ruether, Pawlikowski, and Eckardt. At the same time, the radical divergences among their ways of approaching the Christological task indicates that further foundational reflection upon underlying Christological models may be helpful.

131 The Modern Christological Model: Harnack's Jesus of History

Prior to turning directly to Harnack's Christology, it is desirable to list the questions that will be asked of his work as we seek for clues to the reconstruction of Christology. Specifically, (1) we want to know what role this Christology assigns to Jesus with regard to the relationship between the synagogue and the church. Is he the wall of partition that separates the one from the other? Is he the sign of the election of the church and the rejection of the synagogue? Is he the proof of the superiority of the church and everything Christian to the synagogue and everything Jewish? Is he Jesus the displacer?

132 We want to know (2) whether this Christology falls into the trap of works-righteousness. Does it claim that Jesus' work of overcoming Judaism is what, in effect, makes him the Christ? Does it allege that Jesus, by his intense piety or his perfect knowledge of God or his intimacy with God or by

the way his personhood was constituted or whatever, did the work of liberating us from Judaism?

Other questions to be asked are: (3) Does this Christology claim to know more about the historical Jesus than, by its own admission, we can critically establish? (4) Is what it claims of Jesus, particularly of his significance, appropriate to the gospel? Assuming the gospel to be, in nuce, the proclamation of God's universally gracious love offered to each and all and, therefore, also God's command that justice be done to each and all, is what is asserted of Jesus' significance appropriate to that gospel which the church proclaims as Jesus' own? (5) Is what is claimed in this Christology intelligible? Can it be understood?

The Christology of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) is quintessential to Liberal Protestantism. Its influence, however, far outlived and outlives the career of Liberalism in theology. In its fundamental outlines, Harnack's Christological reflections are in basic agreement with all those other theologians who may fairly be called "Liberal." This is particularly so with respect to his appeal to the "historical Jesus" as the ground and warrant of his Christological claims. No other theologian had the extensive influence on Protestant Christianity in the first third of this century that Harnack had (Glick, 323; Tillich, 1967: 222). The underlying model of Christological

reflection that he articulated remains dominant in
? theology, protestant + Catholic.

That core conviction which more than anything else made Harnack a Liberal was his belief that the exercise of historical responsibility required the present liberation of Christian faith from an infallible authoritarianism that Harnack and others of his generation knew in the altprotestantische Theologie of Protestant Orthodoxy. Modern people should not be expected to live in the house that authority built. Harnack summoned all Christians to accept the obligation to appropriate their religious heritage critically and thereby make it their own.

Implied in assuming this historical responsibility was the use of the historical method to interpret Christianity. Convinced that Christianity could only be understood by historical method, Harnack said:

136 We study history in order to intervene in the course of history and we have a right and duty to do so: . . . To intervene in history--this means that we must reject the past when it reaches into the present only in order to block us. . . . in order to decide what of the past shall continue to be in effect and what must be done away with or transformed, the historian must judge like a King. Everything must be designed to furnish a preparation for the future, for only the discipline of learning has a right to exist which lays the foundation for what is to be (cited in Livingston, 258).

137 That part of the Christian past which to Harnack's mind served only to block the present and with which he was determined to do away was the dogma. If the gospel is to

remain vital and dynamic in the modern era, it (and we) must be liberated from the dogma. He produced his History of Dogma in order to relativize the dogma; "the 'history of dogma' furnishes the most suitable means for the liberation of the Church from dogmatic Christianity" (cited in Pauck, 97).

The Mission and Expansion of Christianity

In his The Mission and Expansion of Christianity, Harnack deals with the figure of Jesus in order to account historically for the rise of the universal mission of the church. He observed that Jesus addressed his gospel "to his fellow countrymen. He preached only to Jews" (Harnack, 1961:36). His message was right out of the heart of Judaism. "Not a syllable shows that he detached this message from its national soil, or set aside the traditional religion as of no value. Upon the contrary, his preaching could be taken as the most powerful corroboration of that religion." For Harnack, Jesus "took his stand upon the soil of Jewish rights, i.e., of the piety maintained by Pharisaism." Yet these selfsame Pharisees who were preserving the best in Judaism were also, for Harnack, debasing and distorting it.

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Against the "selfish, self-righteous temper" of the Pharisees, Jesus "waged war." In battling against the "loveless and godless" Pharisees, Jesus made "a break with the national religion, for the Pharisaic position passed for

that of the nation; indeed, it represented the national religion" (Harnack, 1961:36).

Harnack argues that the church's later universalism was founded on the universalism of Jesus' message, evident in his prediction of "the rejection of the nation and the overthrow of the temple." Jesus "shattered Judaism, and brought out the kernel of the religion of Israel. Thereby--i.e., by his preaching of God as the Father, and by his own death--he founded the universal religion, which at the same time was the religion of the Son" (Harnack, 1961:43).

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Harnack knew well the anti-Judaism of the apostolic fathers. He saw clearly that Paul's view that the "church did not abrogate the special promises made [by God] to the Jews" was nothing more than "a Pauline idiosyncrasy" (Harnack, 1961:65). He characterized theological anti-Judaism as having the following traits: (1) insisting that the Jews never were the chosen people, (2) that the Old Testament has nothing to do with the Jews but belonged from the outset to the church, and (3) that the Jews are punished by the burning of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem for having crucified Christ (Harnack, 1961:66-67). Then Harnack wrote a paragraph that is difficult to believe:

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Such an injustice as that done by the Gentile church to Judaism is almost unprecedented in the annals of history. The Gentile church stripped it of everything; she took away its sacred book;

herself but a transformation of Judaism, she cut off all connection with the parent religion. The daughter first robbed her mother, and then repudiated her! But, one may ask, is this view really correct? Undoubtedly it is, to some extent, and it is perhaps impossible to force anyone to give it up. But viewed from a higher standpoint, the facts acquire a different complexion. By their rejection of Jesus, the Jewish people disowned their calling and dealt the death-blow to their existence; their place was taken by Christians as the new People, who appropriated the whole tradition of Judaism, giving a fresh interpretation to any unserviceable materials in it, or else allowing them to drop . . . All that Gentile Christianity did was to complete a process which had in fact commenced long ago within Judaism itself, viz., the process by which the Jewish religion was being emancipated and transformed into a religion for the world (Harnack, 1961:69-70).

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This is all legitimated, for Harnack, by the work of Jesus in shattering and overcoming Judaism. Indeed, the significance of Jesus seems to lie, for him, right here: the pay-off statement of his theological anti-Judaism is that the Jews' place "was taken by Christians as the new people." An ostensibly critical-historical approach to Jesus is used to re-state this ancient ideological claim. Jesus the Pharisee is appealed to for this result. The "historical Jesus" is already less than promising as the ground and warrant for Christological claims.

What Is Christianity?

In Harnack's What Is Christianity?, he claims to employ "only the methods of historical science" and to leave entirely to one side apologetics. Mixing them would bring historical research "into complete discredit" (Harnack,

1957:7). Whether Harnack falls under his own ban is a question to which we will be alert.

Harnack tried to get at both the "main features" of Jesus' message and at his "character" or "person" by way of the synoptic gospels (Harnack, 1957:19). Clearly aware of the difficulties of using the synoptics as sources of historical knowledge, he knew that "we are unable to write any life of Jesus," that "our materials are insufficient for a 'biography,'" (Harnack, 1957:30-31). Nor, with all his writing, did he ever produce a life of Jesus. Yet he was convinced that the tradition in the synoptics had been fixed relatively early and that in spite of all the problems we could discern three matters: the main features of Jesus' teaching, how his life issued in the service of his vocation, and the impression he made on his disciples (Harnack, 1957:31). He was also convinced, as the most recent advocates of a historical-Jesus Christology remain, that Jesus "himself was what he taught" (Harnack, 1957:11).

This conviction is an empirical truth-claim that conflicts with Harnack's other statement that we have insufficient materials for a life of Jesus. How then can he assert of Jesus that: "He lived in religion, and it was breath to him in the fear of God; his whole life, all his thoughts and feelings, were absorbed in the relation to God" (Harnack, 1957:35; emphases mine)? How do we know that Jesus never had a feeling not absorbed in the relation

to God? What could conceivably warrant the claim that Jesus "lived in the continual consciousness of God's presence" (Harnack, 1957:38)? Would God love us less if Jesus' mind had occasionally wandered?

Yet to make this claim was important to Harnack because he recognized that there was nothing in Jesus' teachings not already there in Judaism (Harnack, 1957:47-48). What counts, he said, is not novelty of teaching: "Words affect nothing; it is the power of the personality that stands behind them" (Harnack, 1957:48). Teaching alone does not constitute the gospel; "the personal life which awakens life around it as the fire of one torch kindles another" is the heart of the matter (Glick, 187).

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Harnack acknowledges that what Jesus proclaimed "was also to be found in the prophets, and even in the Jewish tradition of their time. The Pharisees themselves were in possession of it . . ." (Harnack, 1957:47). They were, unfortunately, in possession of much else: "As regards purity, the spring of holiness had, indeed, long been opened; but it was choked with sand and dirt, and its water was polluted. For rabbis and theologians to come afterwards and distil this water, even if they were successful, makes no difference. But now the spring broke forth afresh, and broke a new way for itself through the rubbish . . ." (Harnack, 1957:48). Jesus compares favorably to the rubbish.

Consequently, Jesus' preaching of the acceptable year of the Lord to the poor, the broken-hearted, and the captives was "a definite signal for contradiction" of the prevailing religious system. It brought him into "immediate opposition with the official leaders of the people . . .", who were aware of God's presence only in the law; Jesus "saw and felt Him everywhere" (Harnack, 1957:50-51).

Jesus sifted the elements of the tradition that he inherited, discarding everything particularistic and Jewish in it and keeping everything genuinely religious and universal. He kept all the current ideas of the Kingdom of God in which there was a spark of moral force and "accepted none which encouraged the selfish expectations of his nation . . ." (Harnack, 1957:56). The gospel, declares Harnack, "is in nowise a positive religion like the rest; . . . it contains no statutory or particularistic elements; . . . it is, therefore, religion itself" (Harnack, 1957:63). It is superior to and dominates both Judaism and Hellenism (Harnack, 1957:63).

Throughout Harnack's text runs inexorably and ruthlessly a pejorative characterization of Jews and Judaism at Jesus' time. He affirms that the Pharisees and priests "had little feeling for the needs of the people" (Harnack, 1957:91). As religio-political leaders they "held the nation in bondage and murdered its soul" (Harnack, 1957:103). The result of Harnack's setting Jesus in total

contravention to everything Jewish is to allow him to say:
"After all, then, the truth was something new . . ."
(Harnack, 1957:72). Never before had it been expressed so
consistently and with such "claims to supremacy." Jesus'
ethic embodies a higher righteousness and a new commandment.
Jesus' overcoming of Judaism is Harnack's revisionist
version of the doctrine of the work of Christ.

The other aspect of Harnack's Christology is his
revised doctrine of the person of Christ. For Harnack this
becomes the person of the historical Jesus, the one "who
himself was what he taught," all of whose life and feelings
were absorbed in the relation to God, who lived in the
continual consciousness of God's presence. We have earlier
commented on the impossibility of critically establishing
these comments as the true empirical-historical propositions
Harnack claims them to be. What is important about them is
that they indicate why, for Harnack, it is true to say that
Jesus is the Christ: because he was the perfect believer.
"No one had ever yet known the Father in the way in which
Jesus knew Him . . ." (Harnack, 1957:144).

In Matthew 11:27, there is attributed to Jesus the
statement that "no one knows the Father except the Son . .
. ", which Harnack interprets to mean that "it is 'knowledge
of God' that makes the sphere of Divine Sonship" and that
Jesus became aware of having the consciousness of a unique
relation to God as a Son (Harnack, 1957:128). In classical

Christology the Logos was held to be subjectively incarnate
7 in Jesus; hence Jesus had two natures and two wills, one
human and one divine. For Harnack, following in the train
of Schleiermacher, God is objectively incarnate in Jesus'
consciousness, i.e., as an object of knowledge. His
knowledge of God, so superior to anyone else's as to be
categorically different, made him the Christ and constituted
his person. It is Jesus' self-knowledge that warrants his
teaching that freed religion from Judaism. In both
respects, his teaching and his person, Harnack's approach to
Christology "from below" sets Jesus in opposition to
Judaism. Harnack's Christ supplants the synagogue with the
church and the Jews with the Gentiles. The pay-off of
Harnack's anti-Judaism shows up in his interpretation of
Paul: "Someone had to stand up and say 'The old is done away
with'; he had to brand any further pursuit of it as a sin;
he had to show that all things were become new" (Harnack,
1957:175).

The Revisionist Model: Summary

(1) The "work of Christ," as Harnack understood it, was
accomplished by Jesus in overcoming Judaism. (2) Jesus'
right to do this work is warranted by Harnack's doctrine of
him as the perfect believer. Here works-righteousness gains
its most deadly triumph. (3) The putative
empirical-historical claims made by Harnack about Jesus (his
knowledge of God was unique) are incapable of historical

verification. (4) As claims that are intended to be empirical-historical they are unintelligible. The point of an empirical-historical claim that can be neither verified nor falsified is somewhat mysterious. (5) Harnack's claims are inappropriate to the gospel of God's love for each and all and God's command of justice to each and all. As an historian he does not bother to do justice to Judaism or to Jews. The commandment against bearing false witness remains in effect. It is the scholar's commandment.

The Reappearance of the Model

The Liberal era in modern theology is usually said by the textbooks to have ended in 1919, with the appearance of Karl Barth's The Epistle to the Romans. In Christology, to be sure, neither Barth nor Bultmann appealed to the historical Jesus as the warrant for their Christological statements. Nonetheless the legacy of late 19th and early 20th-century Liberalism continues to thrive, having skipped over the intermediate generation and, with the aid of the so-called "new quest of the historical Jesus," reigns again in Christological work today.

A group of thinkers more radically different from those of the Liberal era than the Liberation theologians of Latin America can hardly be imagined, yet precisely in the work of the latter we find striking evidence that the modern revisionist model of Christology is alive if not well.

by analyzing the concrete religious praxis of the church and popular religion. They find the Christology practiced there to be inauthentic and corrupt. Joao Dias de Araujo classifies the images of Jesus in the culture of the Brazilian people into five types: the dead Christ (defeated by the forces of evil), the distant Christ (far away while personal piety is directed to a more available saint or personage--some not accorded official recognition by the church), the powerless Christ (who is less important than others, particularly than Mary), the Christ who inspires no respect (the crucifix displayed in the bordello), and the disincarnate Christ (a pallid, waxy figure, estranged from daily life) (Dias de Araujo, 32-37).

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Saul Trinidad and Juan Stam characterize the Christs of Latin American Protestant preaching in slightly different ways: the Santa Claus Christ (dispensing cheap grace), the beggar Christ (pleading for acceptance), the magic-potion Christ (the automatic solution to every problem), the passport Christ (one's ticket to heaven), the asocial Christ (who separates the convert from the world of social responsibility), the cosmic Christ of glory (above the battles of history), the Christ of Calvary alone (the Protestant answer to the crucifix, defeated by the forces of evil), the guerilla Christ (a Latin American zealot), and the middle-class Christ (who converts people from socialist labor unions) (Trinidad and Stam, 40-43).

The socio-economic function of this defeated Christ is to form the people of Latin America "by a pedagogy of submission and passivity" (Casalis, 73). In the dolorous Christ Latin American peasants see their own condition reflected back to them and worship it. "Indeed this Abject Jesus is nothing but the image of the conquered Amerindian, the poorest of the poor, for whom nothing has changed since Cortes, the miserable denizen of the immense barrios that fringe the great cities," (Casalis, 73). This religious praxis celebrates passivity as the response to oppression. The defeated Christ is the Christ of "established impotence" (Casalis, 74).

The role of Christology in Latin American piety has been to baptize and sacralize the conquista and the oppression that it produced, as well as to make a virtue of resignation and suffering. The helpless and harmless "baby" Christ and the humiliated, defeated Christ reflect "eight centuries of struggle, agony, and suffering under the oppressor" (Trinidad, 50). One sees the major thrust of Liberation Christology most clearly as a response to these inauthentic Christs who sanction oppression: It attacks the Christ who moves from infancy to death without ever having lived.

The move that most Liberation theologians make is back to what was Harnack's starting-point: "Today more than ever before it is simply absurd to pretend to construct a

Christology in which the actual, historical course of the life of Jesus is not the decisive element" (Ellacuria, 81). In his Being and the Messiah, Jose Miranda deals "with the historical Jesus and not the Jesus of some heavenly world nor the Christ of the ecclesiastical Eucharist." Miranda reasons that chronological, dateable time "does not allow of manipulation" (Miranda, 1977:53). Only the historical Jesus "can judge our differences and be measure of our theologies" (Miranda, 1977:80). Furthermore, claims Miranda, "New Testament 'truths' are historical facts" (Miranda, 1977:81). The content of faith is "a fact, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, man among men, is the very same Messiah anxiously awaited for generations" (Miranda, 1977:84). The claim to base Christological assertions on an empirical-historical foundation, indeed that Christological truths themselves are empirical-historical facts, could hardly be more evident.

Similarly, Jon Sobrino says of his Christology that its "fundamental goal . . . is to reevaluate the historical Jesus, specifically his status as Son of God, that is, as the one who is historically related to the Father and dependent on his own historical situation" (Sobrino, 128). Sobrino restates his fundamental goal as that of reevaluating "Jesus' own faith: to let Jesus become not only the primary content of our faith, but also a structural model for that faith, that is, to let him emerge 'as

extraordinary believer,' the one who first lived the fullness of faith" (Sobrino, 128).

Sobrino not only makes the same move that Harnack made, back to the historical Jesus, but makes for this Jesus the same claim: that he was an "extraordinary believer." The problems here are several: (1) How can we know, in a critical-historical sense, anything about Jesus as a believer? (2) If we could, what warrants the assumption that his being such a believer constitutes his significance? Is he the first of the believers, the one with whom we believe, or is he the Christ in whom we believe? And is he not therefore more than any mere believer?

The purpose in citing these three Liberation theologians is to show that in making their turn to the historical Jesus they are, indeed, following the model articulated by Harnack. The models and the warrant-structures of the two are the same. The difference is that the Liberation theologians ask a question shaped by a Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion applied to the situation and answer it with a Christology also shaped (or at least intended to be shaped) by a Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion exercised on the Christian tradition. To show how this Christological move works out in Liberation Christologies, we will look at the work of one thinker.

J. Severino Croatto

Croatto's Christology gives us a clearly anti-Jewish