

Jesus. His Jesus regularly offends "the Jews," attacks "the Jews" and is attacked by "the Jews." He offends them by opposing the "work of liberation" to the "'repose' of a false conscience," which is Croatto's interpretation of Jesus' alleged violation of the Shabbat law (Croatto, 1984:103). Jesus' claim to be God's equal "offends the Jews even more" (Croatto, 1984:103).

167 In striking fashion, Jesus seeks out the sick, the lowly, sinners, children, foreigners. What is special about these categories of persons, or common to them? They all 'lack' something: health, opportunities in life, prestige before the 'just' and the judges, capabilities, acceptance among the Jews. They are all marginalized (Croatto, 1984:104; emphasis mine).

168 Except for the foreigners on his list, one might say that Jesus went to sick Jews, lowly Jews, sinning Jews, Jewish children, marginalized Jews, Jews without prestige in society, and so forth. One might claim, indeed, that he went to all the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). One might question whether he went to foreigners at all. Since the claim that he did obviously squares with the interests of the later first-century church's mission to these very foreigners it would seem to be of questionable authenticity. But Croatto pictures Jesus as going to non-Jews whom "the Jews" did not accept. "The Jews marginalized the sick" (Croatto, 1984:104). Pharisees marginalized those ignorant of the law (Croatto, 1984:104-5). "Even today," claims Croatto, "religious circles in Israel oppose granting residence visas to

non-Jews. The 'Holy Land' is for a particular, chosen race" (Croatto, 1984:105; emphasis mine). Croatto, a biblical scholar, should know the difference between a people, particularly the people of God, and a race. In any event, for Croatto, Jesus, too, was marginalized and plotted against by "the Jews" and "the Pharisees" (Croatto, 1984:106).

170 Croatto's Jesus directs his "conscientizing word" against the Pharisees and "the Jews" on behalf of ^(abstract) human beings. He "empties the very meaning of the legalistic Pharisees' concerns" (Croatto, 1984:107). Croatto repeats the old theme of Pharisaic blindness: "The Pharisees understood the truth but failed to 'see' it. Therefore they plotted against Jesus in order to destroy him" (Croatto, 1984:107). According to Croatto, Jesus was concerned to liberate the oppressed, but not the oppressors: "As a matter of principle, Jesus is not about to conscientize Israel's leaders, but denounces their sin against the light on the occasion of a deed performed among the marginalized" (Croatto, 1984:110; emphasis his).

171 Jesus' conscientizing word and liberating praxis led necessarily to his death at the hands of "the Jews." "There is no doubt, based on the convergence of all four evangelists on this point, that it is the Jews who proceed against Jesus . . ." (Croatto, 1984:113). Jesus "aroused the fury of the power groups--high priests, elders, scribes,

Pharisees--and motivated their decision to eliminate him" because his praxis unmasked "the superstructural and ideological universe that the leaders of Israel controlled, and whose axis of viability was the law understood as 'tradition'" (Croatto, 1984:113). Jesus was therefore condemned to die as a "religious subversive."

172

Croatto's liberating Jesus turns out to be hardly new. He is the Jesus of the adversus Judaeos ideology in slightly new garb--old wine in a new skin. He contradicts "a law that oppresses" (Croatto knows no other kind of law) and seeks to liberate "a people oppressed by Jewish structures and tradition" (Croatto knows no other kind of structures and tradition) (Croatto, 1984:119). Thus, Jesus "brought down on his head all the wrath of the Jewish authorities, rather than that of the Romans" (Croatto, 1984:119). This Jesus needs to be saved from the tradition of oppressive anti-Judaism.

After all the fancy hermeneutical footwork has been done, little has changed. The Jesus of the adversus Judaeos tradition is given a bit of a Marxist tinge, but not much of one: ^{Jesus} ~~his~~ criticism of the prevailing system begins and ends with the criticism of religion. For Marx, the criticism of religion was "the beginning of all criticism" (Marx, 43). It was to lead on to social, economic, and political criticism. Croatto's Jesus does not criticize Roman oppression or foreign domination. Oddly, he was not

opposed to Jewish "dependence" on Roman power; he "did nothing to liberate the Jews from the Roman yoke" (Croatto, 1981:62). Marx's criticism of Croatto would be that he plucks the religious flowers from the chains that bind the oppressed, leaving the chains in place (Marx, 44).

174

Croatto's 1984 essay is exactly the Christological position he took in his Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom. His discussion of the Exodus event in that text never arrives at the revelation of Torah on Sinai, concentrating only on the first fifteen chapters of Exodus (Croatto, 1981:12). Liberation, for him, is from Egypt, not for God's purposes for Israel. To the contrary, said the rabbis, "When Torah came into the world, freedom came into the world" (Genesis Rabbah, cited in Montefiore and Loewe, 128). A biblical scholar who can understand Exodus without Sinai can understand Jesus as superseding Sinai. Jesus' purpose was to "initiate his program of liberation by redeeming human beings from the structural power of the law" (Croatto, 1981:63; emphasis his); he "generates a new symbolical order" (Croatto, 1981:64). Of Jesus' alleged Shabbat argument with the Pharisees, Croatto claims: "Christ is replacing the old; he institutes a new order. What is the point of discussing the old" (Croatto, 1981:52)?

Such a reading of the significance of Jesus is methodologically built into Croatto's work. He thinks that "a hermeneutic reading of the biblical message occurs only

when the reading supersedes the first contextual meaning"
(Croatto, 1981:3).

176

Methodologically, Croatto makes several different moves, any of which might make sense by itself but all of which, taken together, do not. He thinks (1) that a "hermeneutic reading" supersedes the first contextual meaning and, apparently, all prior meanings. He also thinks (2) that in the text there is a "reservoir of meaning not exhausted by previous interpretation" (Croatto, 1981:12-13). He holds (3) that the gospels, beginning with Mark, made precisely such hermeneutic re-readings. "The first Gospel . . . rereads the words of Jesus from a point of departure in which it is being written--a situation characterized by opposition between Christians and Pharisees" (Croatto, 1984:112: cf. 1981:57). He also thinks (4) that we are entitled to do, in our time, what Mark did in his: "We make our own rereading from our viewpoint, from a point of departure in our own real situation" (Croatto, 1984:112). Yet it is also true, he holds, (5) that the four gospels "describe Jesus of Nazareth . . . [and that] we can clearly recognize the contours of this august figure who was Christ, the liberator, from the moment of his prophetic consecration at his baptism in the Jordan to the drama of his own death for the cause of human liberation" (Croatto, 1981:48; emphasis mine).

178

Taken together, these points are incoherent. Is a

reading that supersedes, displaces, a prior reading a re-reading or a brand new reading? Can a supersessionist rereading from a new point of departure also claim to describe what lies behind a text? Can a prior meaning be both re-interpreted and displaced? Does not the metaphor of a reservoir of meaning suggest that there is an infinite or indefinite number of valid (whatever that might mean in this context) interpretations of which Croatto's, like the oppressors', is just one? When the effort to describe Jesus of Nazareth allows its proponent to refer to him as the one who was Christ, has not a fundamental blunder taken place?

179

None of these comments intend to deny the strengths of liberation theology: its desperate attempt to re-discover a living Christ, its determination to make Christian faith an agent for change and liberation, the magnitude of its effort to overcome a legacy of centuries in which the religious heritage has provided Marxists with confirmation that religion is the "opiate of the people," and its effort to give Christianity intellectual and moral credibility. Opposed to oppressive power in any form and called to stand with the poor and oppressed, it proclaim a liberating gospel. I do not disagree with this gospel. I do think we could provide better reasons for it.

180

Post-Holocaust Christology

The relevance of this discussion to the effort to develop a post-Holocaust Christology is clear. Ruether

suggests that the key to a new Christology is the notion of prolepsis, that the fulfilment enacted in Christ was only partial and not complete. Her suggestion calls to mind the work of other theologians, particularly Tillich's idea of a "fragmentary but real Kairos" (Tillich, 1963:140-160). The difficulty with her suggestion is that the Liberation theologians agree so completely with it. They are keenly aware that liberation from oppression received only a proleptic beginning in Jesus. Yet they are not driven beyond traditional Christian anti-Judaism by this awareness. Ruether's suggestion, therefore, while obviously valid, is insufficient.

181

Eckardt's suggestion is to dismiss or deny the resurrection of Jesus, to admit that the Jew from Nazareth still sleeps with all the other Jewish dead. Yet for all Christologies that base themselves on the historical Jesus, the resurrection is already, in principle, dismissed. That is, if Jesus is the Christ because certain empirical statements are true of his life, faith, teachings, and praxis, then strictly speaking we do not need the resurrection in order to say that he is the Christ. It is, at best, optional (Griffin, 12). Yet Christologies that have already accepted Eckardt's suggestion, at least in principle, can still be quite anti-Jewish.

Pawlikowski's effort to reconstruct Christology also works on the basis of the modern model of appeal to

empirical-historical statements about the objective Jesus behind the gospels. Pawlikowski attempts to overcome anti-Judaism by redescribing Jesus as a Jew and particularly as a Pharisee. Yet he pictures Jesus' views as so challenging those of the Pharisees that they increasingly looked upon him "as a potential threat to Jewish communal survival" (Pawlikowski, 103). Further, Pawlikowski "backs up" his claims about Jesus in the same way as do Harnack and Croatto. For Harnack Jesus was "the perfect believer;" for Croatto he was "an extraordinary believer." For Pawlikowski, Jesus' "Abba experience" involved a "degree of intimacy" with God that "no Pharisee of his day would have been willing to grant" (Pawlikowski, 103). The same model here has the same problems: we do not know anything of Jesus' experience of God and we certainly do not know that no Pharisee of his day would grant extreme intimacy with God. We do not know what all Pharisees of his day thought (Cook, 1978). Nor can we.

184

An Alternative Model

The negative conclusion serving as the impetus to search for an alternative Christological model is that Christology cannot be based on, warranted by, putative empirical-historical statements about the historical Jesus without being anti-Jewish. The underlying reason is that for these Christologies what makes Jesus the Christ is his uniqueness. Although they reject the dogma they retain the

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dogma's central affirmation about Jesus--he who was consubstantial with God as to divinity and with us as to humanity, yet without sin, was certainly unique. Yet on an empirical-historical model this uniqueness cannot be shown other than by demonstrating the difference between Jesus and all other Jews. Says Hans Kung: "Jesus is different" (Kung, 1976:212). Kung establishes this difference by setting up a simultaneous, quadrilateral conflict between Jesus and the four ideal types of Judaism of his day, illustrating the point made here.

That Christology apparently cannot be warranted by reference to the empirical-historical Jesus without being anti-Jewish raises the question whether Christology should be so grounded. Assuming that the historical Jesus, whatever else he was, was a relative and finite human being, the question arises: is it theologically appropriate to absolutize the relative in his case? Or is doing so not merely another way of committing idolatry? Is not Christological anti-Judaism the price paid for this idolatry?

186

H. Richard Niebuhr argues that "the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative, which in Christianity takes the form of substituting religion, revelation, church or Christian morality for God" (Niebuhr, /viii-ix). He might well have added Jesus to his list.

Paul Tillich was well acquainted with the difficulties

of gaining warranted empirical knowledge of the historical Jesus. We cannot even be certain, he correctly noted, that his name was "Jesus." "No special trait of this picture [of Jesus] can be verified with certainty" (Tillich, 1957:114). Tillich wrestled inconsistently with this awareness, insisting also that there had to be at least one personal life in which existential estrangement had been overcome (Tillich, 1957:98), a point which could not, on his own admission, be other than probable.

187

Yet Tillich had earlier and better grounds for avoiding this way of arguing. He defined final (i.e., definitive) revelation as: "a revelation is final if it has the power of negating itself without losing itself" (Tillich, 1951:133). Final revelation sacrifices its own finite conditions. The bearer of it surrenders his/her finitude (including all finite perfections, such as being the "perfect believer") and "becomes completely transparent to the mystery" revealed. As Tillich sees it, had Jesus claimed for himself the kind of ultimacy claimed for him by modern Christology, he would have been demonic. The wilderness temptations and Peter's urging him to avoid the cross symbolize attempts "to make him an object of idolatry." "Idolatry . . . is the elevation of the medium of revelation to the dignity of the revelation itself" (Tillich, 1951:133).

This understanding of the revelatory power of the symbol of Jesus Christ and of his cross as lying in their

transparency to God "condemns a Jesus-centered religion and theology" (Tillich, 1951:134). Since Jesus is the Christ because he sacrifices what is merely "Jesus" in him, he can be revelatory without being heteronomous. Not only does no finite being impose itself on other finite beings in the name of God, but Christianity's claim to universality, on Tillich's view, is based on no superiority of its own over other religions.

189 Tillich did not work out this Christology consistently. He wavered between affirming these things to be true of the "biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ," i.e., the receptive pole of the revelatory event, and a desire to make untenable empirical-historical statements about Jesus: "In all his utterances, words, deeds, and sufferings, he is transparent to that which he represents . . ." (Tillich, 1951:135). Nonetheless, he did begin to stake out an alternative that is theologically fruitful and he did, in his own Christology, avoid Christian anti-Judaism.

190 How, then, do we begin to construct an alternative model? First, by abandoning the claim, which virtually all modern Christologies assume, that the historical Jesus is the "measure of our theologies" (Miranda, 80). As long as Jesus is regarded as the norm of appropriateness of our theologies, he will have to function in such a way as to provide what we need. Let us take an example different from Latin American liberation theology, that of feminist

theology. The problem with feminist theology, like liberation theology, is that in its constitutive assertions it is right. But if the only way to warrant being a Christian feminist is by reference to the norm of the historical Jesus, then he will have to turn out to have been a feminist. We will then have significant works showing him to have gathered about himself an inclusive community of equals. Indeed, we do have such works. But here we face several problems: Is this really true of Jesus (what if his community can be strongly argued to have included only Jews??) Is it not anachronistic to think that Jesus held a post-Kantian understanding of feminist liberation as meaning that women have the right to self-determination? If Jesus was not a feminist in the appropriate sense, am I not still free to be one? Is it his role to authorize our conformity to him or is it to author our freedom and creativity? If Jesus is to have any transcendence over us, any freedom from us, do we not have to allow him the right to be wrong?

192

Second, in place of the historical Jesus as the norm of appropriateness, why not have the gospel--the promise of the love of God to each and all and the command of God for justice to each and all of those whom God loves? This is the main structure of all biblical thought--promise and command, proclamation and paranesis--interpreted as the Bible interprets itself when caught in a hermeneutical juncture--by universalizing and monotheizing itself.

Third, we note that the confessional statement "Jesus is the Christ" can only be made in the present tense. Statements about past events and persons (Jesus included) are made in the past tense. Caesar no longer crosses the Rubicon. Hence when Christians today confess their faith in Jesus Christ, they are not talking about the historical Jesus but about the living Christ. Christian faith is contemporary faith, not faith at second-hand. One problem with modern Christology is its assumption that the proposition "Jesus is the Christ" is like the proposition "the wagon is red." That is, for it, whatever it means to be the Christ is tied up with empirically observable characteristics that can be associated with the figure of Jesus. This is positivistic Christology. Rather, the statement "Jesus is the Christ" is a statement triangular in its meaning: it is an assertion about the meaning of Jesus to us now and about who we are given and called to be by the God who is re-presented to us in and through the church's preaching of Jesus (Ogden, passim).

194

Therefore, ^{cum?}~~contra~~ Eckardt, Jesus cannot be dead and be the Christ. Whatever we do with the resurrection, we can neither deny it nor call it optional--neither implicitly nor explicitly. We must do something with it. I am happy enough with saying that Jesus lives in the body of Christ--in the church's proclamation and in its living tradition. Clearly, this is a demythologizing of the

resurrection as an empirical-historical event. Such seems to me required by any norm of intelligibility. The "relevant Jesus," as David Tracy calls him, is the "actual Jesus," the current Jesus:

195 ... the Jesus remembered by the tradition and community as re-presentative of God's own presence among us and as mediated to individuals and community in all the classic words, sacraments and actions expressing the Christ event in the present community, in conformity with the original apostolic witness (Tracy, 239).

196 The church does not have to track down the historical Jesus in order to believe in him. The historical Jesus (fourth point) may provide a ^{necessary?} good, critical check on, a way to criticize, developments in the church's tradition that are unfortunate. To say, e.g., that Jesus was a Jew is a good corrective to anti-Jewish ideology. Knowing that he was precisely this or that kind of Jew, however, (were that possible) is not necessary to believing in him. Nor is it a sufficient reason to do so. Catholics will likely detect that this point is a Catholic one: it is the Christian tradition as a living, creative, self-correcting historical process from the earliest apostolic witness to the present community's "memory" of Jesus that grounds Christian faith.

197 Fifth, when we talk about the living Christ as the subject of the Christological proposition we are talking about God, in more than one sense. It is through the church's preaching of Jesus that we Christians have come to know God and to understand ourselves ultimately in terms of

and only in terms of God's love for all (us included) and God's command of justice to all (Jews included). Through Jesus, the church came to know God and said of Jesus: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus ("Yahweh is salvation") for the church has always been a theologoumenon for God, a fact classically expressed in the doctrine of the incarnation. Christ "names" God for Christians. Traditionally, Christ was a way of naming the Logos. In so naming the Logos its character as creative, dynamic trustworthy love is brought to effective realization. God's creativity graciously grounds our being, yet it is at the same time a threatening creativity, ever calling us forward to novel adventures in realizing the divine purpose in the world. God is, according to Whitehead, "the poet of the world, . . . leading it by . . . [God's] vision of truth, beauty, and goodness" (Whitehead, 1978:346). Such a God is a tremendum (calling what we are into question) as well as a fascinans (calling us forward). To name God Christ is to proclaim that this creative, threatening God can yet be trusted.

199

The preaching of Jesus in and by the church reminds us that we are now related to God who is the creative and gracious ground and end of our being and of our meaning. We now are to understand our lives as arising from the creative matrix of the divine life and as making a difference to that life. Jesus as the living Christ calls us to be open to

that divine call forward which ever seeks to renew and empower us to work for God's basileia. "So long as the Galilean images are but the dreams of an unrealized world, so long they must spread the infection of an uneasy spirit" (Whitehead, 1961:17).

In the providence of God, Jesus of Nazareth became that Jew by whom, through the preaching of the church, Gentile Christians came and still come to understand themselves in relation to the God of Israel as the gracious and creative ground and end of their being. We who sat in darkness have seen a great light in Jesus Christ, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to . . . [the] people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

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