Four Brief Reflections on The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited

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I must begin with several disclaimers in the spirit of Amos’ words, “I am no prophet nor the son of prophets” (Amos 7:14). I am not a theologian, nor a Bible scholar, nor am I a member of the group of scriptural reasoners. I came across John Howard Yoder’s name in the context of friendships with Peace Action (originally Sane/Freeze), an anti-nuclear group based in Washington, D.C. I must admit that Yoder’s name registered in that context alone; I had no idea of his contributions to “Jewish-Christian dialogue” (if this formulation is acceptable in our cosmopolitan 21st century). I have also long admired Peter Ochs, before I knew he was a leading representative of the Scriptural Reasoning community. My obliviousness to the connection between Yoder’s pacifism and his proposed post-supersessionist reorientation toward Jewish-Christian relations is not as embarrassing as it might be; the connection between these positions is not immediately obvious. While certain Christian denominations have practiced pacifism (e.g. Christadelphians, the Amish, Mennonites), others have not. In Imperial Germany, my original area of expertise, many pacifists tended toward the secular. Moreover, pacifism is not obviously connected to Christians, like Yoder, who identify supersessionism as the key problem in Christian-Jewish relations, a view I endorse. Like many Americans whose Jewishness is central to their identity, and arguably like most Jews living in majority Christian societies in most times and places, how Judaism is evaluated by that is a matter of interest and, at times, concern. That note of anxiety bespeaks what I consider to be the first of several comments, I hope in the radical spirit of Yoder and Ochs. Honestly, I intend them to be even more radical.

What Immortal Hand or Eye Dare Frame Thy Fearful Asymmetry?

One asymmetry between Jewish and Christian relationships is rarely acknowledged: Christianity’s default position toward Judaism as fundamentally theological. Whether Marcionist (i.e., there is too much Judaism in Christianity) or Judaizing (i.e., Christianity must embrace and integrate its Jewish roots), the Christian issues at hand with respect to Judaism are theological, running the spectrum of views about law and ritual, Jesus’ and Paul’s own Jewishness, the nature of the Old Testament within a Christian theology, and more. I do not wish to imply that this is the


3 In my teaching experience, a deep-seated supersessionism easily creates a “yes, but” attitude, even among those Christians sympathetic to Judaism who constitute the vast majority of my students at the University of Oklahoma. For instance: “Midrash is great, Rashi is great, but if you had the New Testament, how much pen and paper could have been saved!” Or again: “Maimonides’ steps of repentance (teshuvah) are so sensible, but if you recognized Jesus as the savior, it would be so much simpler without them!” These are very friendly, almost tongue-clucking responses, but supersessionist nonetheless.
whole story, or that this side of this spectrum toward which Christianity inclines is unimportant. Indeed, it is critically important for both Christians and Jews. But, for Christians, this long-fought battle between Marcionist and Judaist impulses is existential and theological, and it began early on in Christianity’s distinct history. When Yoder describes Christianity as “resolutely anti-Jewish” (JCSR, 147), he may be overstating the case in its historical aspect. The various Judaizers excoriated by Epiphanius in the 4th century C.E.; the Christian Hebraists and Sabbatarians of the Reformation; the rabbinic scholar and Protestant missionary Hermann Strack in the nineteenth century who valiantly defended Judaism against the blood libel and antisemitism were always there, and they often issued important minority reports. I would certainly not call these Christians anti-Jewish; indeed, I have argued that Strack and his mentor Franz Delitzsch ought to be considered philosemites. But their motives were essentially religious, and that is my sole contention.

For Jews, by contrast, the relationship with Christianity is fundamentally political. How will Christians act toward us, our children, our original homeland? Christian theological questions such as how desperately the particular individual’s soul is in need of salvation, how close Jesus came to being the Messiah, what precise degree of divinity vis-à-vis humanity Jesus possessed (after all, we are all made “in God’s image and likeness”)—these issues simply do not exorcize Jews. Even Jewish theological questions do not generally interest Jews very much. Some American Jews are indeed concerned with “Jews for Jesus,” but only as it pertains to the latter’s missionizing, especially of their children and grandchildren. My friend and college classmate Sue Katz Miller has long championed the idea of bringing up the children of intermarriages both Jewish and Christian, but this position has not persuaded too many American Jews, who would prefer their intermarried children choose being “just Jewish”—that catch-all category employed by the Council of Jewish Federations’ decadal surveys to capture secular Jews who have little interest in Judaism, but even less in Christianity. (And in this religious indifference, if the Pew Report is correct, American Jews seem to be swimming in the mainstream). Increasingly, American Jews are willing to accept the support which evangelical Protestants lend Israel, but the mention of pre-millennial dispensationalism you will get blank stares. I have no doubt that Christians and Jews have had and still have much to say to each other, but I suspect that what is called “religious dialogue” at the communal level, when it is not soft polemic, often trails into

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4 Of course, these Christian theological tendencies have very real implications for real-life Jews. Christian humanism in the Reformation had a distinctly positive impact on Christian tolerance toward Jews. Contrariwise, Marcionism, especially in its modern German manifestation, from Adolf Harnack to the German Christians (Deutsche Christen) of the Third Reich, had a positively disastrous impact. See Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* (Princeton and Oxford, 2008). I am probably over-influenced by what I see as the overall failure of the German churches in the Third Reich to consider Marcionism Christianity's Achilles' heel and, contrariwise, to applaud Christian “Judaizing” to an extreme degree. If every Christian church in America held a Passover Seder and studied Jewish commentary on the Bible, I would be delighted.

5 The popular Christian perception that Judaism’s “difference” hangs on the latter’s denial of Jesus’s messiahship is wrong, and it would still be wrong even if the *hoi polloi* chose a better a theological crux such as the incarnation. On this point, see the late Alan Segal’s *Rebecca’s Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). In my view, the Jewish “difference” is that it does not fit the category of “religion” alone as developed in the West, but it has always included elements such as language, ethnicity, customs and fictive kinship. Moreover, as religious studies scholars have noted, any definition of a religion that begins with a negative (“Buddhism is not X, Hinduism is not Y”) must be failing to take that religious system on its own terms.

polite, corresponding appreciations without much impact. While I appreciate that the scholarly world transcends this shallow display of good feeling, the distinguished line of Jewish thinkers authentically interested in these religious questions—including Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, David Novak Benjamin Sommer and Peter Ochs—constitutes an impressive but short list.7

If Not Schism, Then What?

John Yoder was way ahead of his time when it comes to arguing that the Jewish-Christian schism need not have happened.8 Since Krister Stendahl, E.P. Sanders, and their successors, it is hard to consider Yoder radical, as Peter Ochs’ excellent survey of the “new” Pauline scholarship indicates (JCSR, 101-103). In a sympathetic but critical appraisal of Yoder, Jonathan Boyarin notes that even Yoder’s later dating of the Jewish-Christian schism to the 2nd-3rd centuries is not late enough. Only well after Constantine, Boyarin contends, was this schism made unbridgeable. In Boyarin’s view, this schism was ultimately realized by the political power of Theodosius II and the theological credalism of the by now profoundly Hellenized Christian Councils from Nicea (325 C.E.) to Chalcedon (451 C.E.). Quite rightly, Boyarin appeals to Michael Andre Bernstein’s idea of “sideshadowing” as a way of restoring awareness of contingency to the past. In the case of the Jewish-Christian schism, Yoder correctly highlighted the role of both contingency and agency. For Yoder (and Boyarin), Paul did not desire to found a new faith community any more than Jesus did. One can only add that Yoder’s work would be even more at home in today’s academy, with its profusion of counterfactual histories on every subject from the American defeat in the Revolutionary War, to Charles Lindberg’s victory over Franklin Roosevelt, and to the threat of persecution of American Jews in World War II.9

This is not the place to assess these counterfactual histories, save by stating the obvious: while the Jewish-Christian schism might have been avoided, something else would have had to have happened. And here the absence of any weighing of the role of Greco-Roman paganism by Yoder is really striking to a historian. How can a discussion of the Jewish-Christian schism take place with hardly a mention of the religion of 90% of the residents of the Roman Empire in the first few centuries C.E., or the political realities it implies? A very compelling presentation of this three-way competition in its “living phase” may be found in Keith Hopkins, A World Full of Gods.10 I am not a historian of this era, but I suspect the scenario plays out like this: if Jews and

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7 To be fair, I am entirely unfamiliar with the younger group of Jewish thinkers and theologians well-represented in the Textual Reasoning and Scriptural Reasoning communities. Nor am I clear as to the difference between these two overlapping groups. I should add, finally, that many of my favorite religious texts happen to be Christian texts. Augustine’s Confessions, however much insight it has given me over the years into the human condition and the struggle of the soul that seeks the good, has not exerted much impact on my praxis as a semi-observant Jew.


Christians had joined forces in 65-70 C.E., or in 113-115 C.E. in Alexandria, or in 132-135 C.E. back in Palestine again with Bar Kochba, the Roman Empire would have triumphed anyway, and it would have punished both groups with its customary severity. Since Yoder—and of course, not only Yoder—thinks the Constantinian turn in Christianity was a tragic error, perhaps one can imagine disgruntled Jewish and Gentile minorities, some of them believers in Jesus’s divinity and others non-believers in it, until the barbarian and Islamic invasions. But his implicit utopianism—the view that had only this one thing (i.e. the Jewish-Christian schism) not gone wrong —cannot be persuasive. Others things would have gone wrong, although we will never know just what they would have been.

A Jeremian Turn or Jeremian Swerve?11

As the author of Jeremiah makes very clear, the prophet from Anatoth was widely hated in his own time by kings, counsellors, priests, and select family members.12 Jeremiah tells us that God told him not marry. (How Jeremiah squared that utterance with the dictum in Gen. 2:24 or Ancient Israelite marital norms remains a mystery.) If Jeremiah had had a wife, I think she would have given him the same advice that Job’s wife did: “Curse God and die”—get it over with already!13 Hatred proves perilous—it certainly did to Jeremiah—but unpopularity does not prove that one’s positions are wrong. The author of Jeremiah also tells us of the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer. 28), an interesting passage precisely because the text presents them both as sincere, respected prophets, utterly convinced that they are vehicles of Yahweh’s words. Although Hananiah is tagged as a purveyor of “lying words” and pays the ultimate price for it, Hananiah is not one of the nameless priests of Ba’al that Elijah humiliates on Mount Carmel. There is another reasonable interpretation of events, and that is even true in Jeremiah’s version, which acknowledges Jeremiah’s initial uncertainty. In this instance, Jeremiah was right; the Babylonian yoke lasted more than two years, but Jeremiah presents lengthier subordination to Babylon as a divine decree, not as a positive good.

Jeremiah’s oft-quoted letter to the exiles (Jer. 29:1-13) does enjoin the Israelites “to pray for the peace of the city,” but the moving passage of Rachel’s tears (Jer. 31) includes the restoration not only of Judah but of Israel and the purchase of the ancestral estate at Anatoth (Jer. 32). This suggest seriously qualifying Yoder’s reading of a Jeremiah as a diasporist (although the Zionist ideologue Eliezer ben Yehuda called him that and much worse). More to the point, it is not obvious that Jeremiah’s acceptance of a foreign yoke prevailed in the course of ancient Israel. The nationalism of the latter prophets seems fairly striking. Zerubavel is portrayed as a hero, and the last paragraphs of the Hebrew Scriptures validate the national return to Zion, albeit with the

11 This sub-chapter title is a nod toward Stephen Greenblatt’s book The Swerve: How The World Became Modern (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). Greenblatt’s treatment is not exactly a counterfactual history, but it does show the surprising flexibility of a thinker’s influence, in this case, Lucretius (99-59 B.C.E).

12 The book of Jeremiah, notoriously varied in its MT and LXX manuscript traditions, may be from the pen of Jeremiah, may be from the pen of his scribe Baruch, may be from both men, or may be from a still later editor or editors.

13 Job’s wife literally states, “Bless God and die” (Job 2:9), but readers have long understood that “bless” is euphemistic for “curse.”
permission of King Cyrus of Persia. Jeremiah seems more like the outstanding exception than the norm. As to Ezra the Scribe, another hero of Yoder’s, while he reconstituted Judaism as a scholar-scribe rather than as a priest or political zealot, his collaboration with Nehemiah (admittedly a sketchy collaboration in terms of chronology or activity) is not as anti-nationalist as Yoder imagines. The founding of the Second Temple, and even the fateful Torah reading at the Water Gate (Nehemiah 8) are surrounded canonically by nationalistic politics and a near Zionist presentation of pioneers (chalutzim) building with one hand and defending themselves with the sword with the other. As Ochs rightly says, Yoder elevates one Jeremian passage, the famous letter to the exiles (Jeremiah 29:4-7), to a very great height. Again relying on Ochs, the injunction “to seek the peace to of the city to which you have been exiled” has been followed, but not at the expense of seeking the peace of Jerusalem—or, for that matter, the rejection of more nationalistic sentiments such as those found in Psalm 137. 14 Finally, Ezra’s emphasis on holy seed is problematic in its own right; anyone who finds the dismissal of foreign women in Ezra 10 palatable has a heartier appetite than I do.

From Peace Activism to BDS? Yoder’s Middle East Legacy

The Mennonite Church has joined the list of those Christian denominations, thankfully still a minority, who support a hostile stance toward Israel. 15 Whether Yoder would have found this development depressing or ironic is speculative, but I find it both. Mennonites peace activists did yeoman work in the Middle East, working for peace in pursuit of two-state solution. The BDS (boycott-divest-sanction) movement, by contrast, singles out Israel—with its parliamentary system, vibrant civil society, and legal protections for women and minorities—for condemnation. That this region is rife with inter-ethnic, sectarian violence and predatory and authoritarian states does excuse Israel’s policies in the West Bank/Occupied Territories, but it certainly deepens the irony of treating this issue as the font of all evil. The BDS movement holds Israel to a standard of behavior completely at odds with any other country in that region. Moreover, the BDS movement, when it is not closing soda-water factories in the West Bank and costing Palestinians jobs, most directly affects Israeli universities which are composed—mirabili dictu—of the highly educated, left-leaning Israelis generally most predisposed to forge peace with Palestinians. (A more dramatic but concrete example: I write this a few months after the terror attack in Tel Aviv which took the life of Michael Feige—exactly the sort of scholar I am talking about.) To add to the insult, many of the proponents of the BDS movement, including some Jewish expatriates, have gone on record calling not for withdrawal to the 1967 borders, but for dismemberment of Israel altogether. Few nations, including our own, could withstand the standard of judgment imposed by the BDS proponents. As Ernest Renan and others noted in the 19th century, when scholars first began to interrogate the nature of nations and nation-states, none of them

14 This famous psalm famously bemoans the inability of Israelites to function away from Jerusalem, and it ends with a blood-curdling hope to dash the heads of the Israelites’ enemies on the rocks. National sentiment can keep a powerless people together effectively; whether that sentiment can be channeled or bridled once that nation is in power is a much more difficult matter.
15 Dexter van Zile, “Key Mennonite Institutions Against Israel,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs 83 (6 July 2009).
were born via immaculate conception.\textsuperscript{16} That a scholar like Yoder, who sought to improve Jewish-Christian relations by striking at the core theological problem between them (i.e., supersessionism), would be invoked by his own Mennonite Church in the service of striking at a major pillar of contemporary Jewish life is a bitter pill. Delegitimizing Israel is not a public relations problem: it is a potentially crippling assault on the future of Jewry and, as such, a repetition of the very supersessionism Yoder aimed at undercutting.