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The Religious (Jewish) Other in Christianity: Some Theological Considerations



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When a Christian – and, particularly, Protestant – theologian, like myself, explores the question of what Christianity says about the religious, and particularly Jewish, other, she or he needs to consider various challenges implied by scripture, tradition, and history. One challenge represents the fact that the New Testament (like the Hebrew Bible) does not reflect the dynamics of religious relations as we know them today. First of all, no religious traditions that are part of our everyday life were around at the times when scripture were written and canonized. The religious practices of various nations that are mentioned – one should add, very often with obvious disapproval – in scripture are no longer part of our contemporary religious landscape. Furthermore, there is no single word there about the religions that we know today, including major world religions. And, perhaps surprisingly but importantly for the purposes of this paper, not even references to Judaism and Christianity as we know them now are to be

found in scripture. Actually, the very concept of religion as we understand it is rather alien to the biblical mindset. For us, religion is by and large closely connected with the concept of secular and pluralist society, in which one can or else does not have to be religious. Since modernity, religion has come to be understood as “compartmentalized”; it is but one category of human identity. Religion has become a matter of choice. In the biblical times, in contrast, worshipping a certain deity implied belonging to a particular ethnic (or perhaps social) group. As a result, the religious other was also an ethnic, cultural, social or political other. There is a major difference when compared with our situation. Today, citizens of the same country, neighbors, colleagues, and even members of the same family may well be religious others for one another. This makes us think about the nature of otherness. It seems that there are different facets of otherness. The other can be – and is – both similar to and different from oneself. We will return to this observation later in this presentation.

Acknowledging the hermeneutic gap with respect to religion as it exists between the world of scripture and our own world helps us better understand the task we are facing when dealing with the biblical passages that are relevant for our understanding of the religious other. This task consists in constructively and legitimately interpreting the texts that were originally addressed to particular communities and/or individuals at particular times, so that we do not manipulate the other. This process involves what I would call re-contextualization that is, inquiring what these texts have to tell us in our situations, shaped by our understanding of religion and society. While such re-contextualization is no easy endeavor and individual Christians and churches might not agree on what it should look like, it is for sure that it is simply wrong to put an equation mark between the images of the religious other spread in the world of scripture and in our own world.

Looking back into the history of Christianity in search for a constructive image of the religious other is no easier task than turning to scripture for the same purpose. For the most part, Christians would historically view the religious – and particularly Jewish – other as something obsolete, undesirable, and even dangerous. The religious other was to be tolerated at best, and annihilated at worst. To be sure, this attitude was not restricted to non-Christian others but also included those who were regarded as “heretics,” that is, “religious others” within the Christian body. Perhaps we could say that there was a certain obsession with sameness, a stance that could not bear any type of otherness. The idea was a society that is homogenous in terms of political rule, culture, language – and also in terms of religion. There even is a term for this: Christendom. It refers to Christian civilization, the Christian world that represents a geopolitical and cultural power and is juxtaposed with both the pagan and especially the Muslim world. There was very little space for the religious other in this concept.

Although I have so far painted a rather bleak picture of how Christians understand the religious, and specifically Jewish, other, I believe there is a constructive way forward. And indeed, I would like to understand my role here as constructive, rather than descriptive. In other words, I do not think that the main objective for us is to describe how Christians have perceived and behaved toward the religious (Jewish) other, even though the latter surely represents an important duty. Rather, the main objective as I understand it is to reinvent such an image of the religious other that would be respectful, affirmative, and life-giving. While there is much insight to be gained from scripture, tradition, and history, one needs to be careful when drawing from these wells of wisdom. I would suggest that a Christian theologian should not approach them as an “archaeologist” but rather as a “creative artist.” The artist does not begin from scratch, but creatively shapes and mixes the colors she has, using a palette and brushes, to create something new, fresh, appealing, and aesthetic. What I mean by the contraposition of these metaphors is that a Christian theologian cannot simply find such an affirmative image of the Jewish/religious other that would be relevant for the 21st century if she or “digs” long enough in these resources. The Christian theological pursuit of a positive image of the Jewish/religious other is a relatively new project that calls for new resources, while appreciating the old ones as well.

Some of those more recent resources can be found within the school of thought that is referred to as philosophy of dialogue. Here, Christians can gratefully benefit from Jewish philosophers, such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig or Emmanuel Levinas. In addition, the hermeneutic phenomenology of Protestant Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur is helpful for our purposes. In the framework of this brief presentation, there is no space for me to discuss the ideas of these philosophers in any detail, therefore I only refer to them here. What I do want to highlight here though is their emphasis on the positive dimension of otherness. Otherness is seen as welcome and desirable. The other does not represent a mere negative background against which the “radiance” of one’s own identity is to shine brightly. Rather, the other is the necessary counterpart of the self. Without the other one cannot become truly oneself. It is the otherness of the other that is to be appreciated and cherished as it helps one to come to terms and pursue one’s own self more fully. However, it is no less important that one relating to the other recognize how much they both have in common. To put it in other words, my neighbor who might differ from me in terms of gender, education, profession, political views, religion, etc. illuminates – through their otherness – my understanding of the various facets of my own identity. At the same time, the encounter with this other makes me aware that we might share common habitat, values, and, ultimately, common humanity. Thus, we share a common story, albeit perhaps partially only, and have a common task. As a result, the other is a gift – maybe even the most precious gift that we as human beings can receive in our lives.

This argument is based on the understanding of human identity in terms of the fundamental interconnectedness of self and other. I am because you are; I am because we are. These ideas give rise to a relational theological anthropology that view human existence as inseparably connected with a complex and multilayered web of relationships that includes human beings, non-human beings, creation at large, and the reality that transcends. In biblical tradition, such reality is referred to as God. One needs to be part of this web in order to become truly oneself.

At this point, I would like to offer two passages from the New Testament to inspire our reflection on what I have just said about relational anthropology. The first passage is found in the Gospel of Mark in 7:24–30:

²⁴And from thence he arose, and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and entered into an house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid.

²⁵For a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet:

²⁶The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter.

²⁷But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.

²⁸And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.

²⁹And he said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter.

³⁰And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed.¹

This text is known as the Exorcism of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter.¹ In this story, Jesus encounters a human being, a woman, who represents his other in many respects, including gender, ethnicity, culture, social status, and religion, among others. Now, I have suggested earlier that there is

¹ The Syrophenician is also referred to as a Canaanite woman in the telling of the story in the Gospel of Matthew 15:21–28.

little value in trying to search in scripture for ready-made “facts” and advice regarding contemporary religious landscape. What is important in this story as Mark writes it, though, is the dynamics of encounter between two human beings. It is due to this encounter with his other, represented by the Syrophenician woman, that Jesus comes to reconfigure his self-understanding. Although we do not know what actually or historically happened, we can infer from the Markan portrait that Jesus becomes more himself thanks to this encounter. His story is thereby made richer and more complex. We need others to become ourselves.

The other scriptural passage is from the First Epistle to the Corinthians 10:23–33:

²³ All things are lawful for me, but all things are not

expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.

²⁴ Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.

²⁵ Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake:

²⁶ For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.

²⁷ If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.

²⁸ But if any man say unto you, this is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof:

²⁹ Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?

³⁰ For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?

³¹ Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

³² Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:

³³ Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Seeking to respond to the challenges posed by religious practices of that time (i.e., meals offered in sacrifice), there is much to discuss in this text. However, I would only like to point out one aspect, namely, that freedom is not interpreted as an absolute value. Here, self is inseparably related to the other. Moreover, the other is postulated as the leading ethical imperative. To be sure, verse 24 (“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other”) gives an impression that it might have well be written by Emmanuel Levinas. Being human means being in relationships. Self and other belong together so that they can build sustainable communities that would be both inclusive and diverse – and thus life-fostering.

What I have suggested about relational anthropology, about self and other relating together, and thereby creating something life-sustaining, goes beyond the realm of Jewish-Christian relations. And yet, I am convinced that it is relevant for the theme of our consultation. Zooming in to the theme, nevertheless, what can then be said with regard to the subject of the Christian perception of the *Jewish* other? I believe that Black American theologian Willie James Jennings can provide us with helpful insight here. Using the concept of story, Jennings argues that it was through a particular people of Israel that humankind got to know who God is and what God has done. In this sense, Christianity is part of Israel's story. The problem was, however, that Christians quite early on came to think that they were not a mere part of someone else's story. They sought to usurp the story for themselves. Thus, they started to push Israel out of its own story to claim it for themselves. This “colonizing moment” has had a profound

impact on the subsequent history of Christianity, as Jennings shows. Today, many Christians do not even realize that they brought into another people's story. Jennings's proposal for Christians to address this situation is as follows: "What's supposed to come with that is a sense of humility, a sense of having been brought inside by grace through love. Our job is not to take the story over. It's like being invited to somebody's house, someone whom you love, and being introduced to the family. You hope they will accept you, but you're there in vulnerability because this is not yours. You are there hoping to be a part."²

Jennings's proposal is in line with my reflection on relational anthropology. As human beings, we need to relate to the other to pursue our humanity, to become truly ourselves. It goes without saying that such relating also goes on between Jews and Christians. Given both the nature of the foundational story and the history of Christianity, however, Christians are to relate to their Jewish others with humility and willingness to be vulnerable. Indeed, learning to become humble and vulnerable vis-à-vis the Jewish other might be one of the greatest tasks for Christians today.

The Quotations from Bible were taken from the King James Version

² "Whiteness rooted in place: Matthew Vega interviews Willie James Jennings," *The Christian Century*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/whiteness-rooted-place>.