

History and Theology Between Christians and Jews in Germany

Gesine Palmer © 11/2011

We've been hearing a presentation, in which Dr. Dagmar Pruin has positioned herself very clearly on the side of those, to whom history matters: To this view, there is nothing wrong with the fact that Christian interest in any dialogue with Judaism emerged only after the Shoah. All the sentences of repentance and regret, of apology and review of Biblical interpretation that you can read in your hand-outs, are trying to answer to the lessons taught by history itself. Criticism towards these positions has not always been plainly reactionary criticism of another view of history. More often it argued from a purely dogmatic point of view. Such a view would demand to discuss the topics in question only on a systematic level, purified from the traces of historical contingency. Hence, such a view could still insist upon the claim that Christianity is the superior religion and that the Jews as any other religions in the world should – theoretically – be addressees of missionary campaigns.

But, the more historically oriented Christian will say, what could a theology possibly mean to human beings – if it ignored the burning question “where has God been in Auschwitz?” A question raised by Jewish as well as by Christian theologians. The unbelievable yet real mass murder that happened after a long history of abuse and persecution inflicted by Christians on Jews in Europe, must have consequences for a theology at last. It must – so the argument of the dialoguers – affect the systematic grounds on which theology rests because a theology that does not have itself affected by this scandal would be *more* of a scandal than any gesture expressing due shock at the sight of history could possibly be.

The conflict between these two different foundations of theological thought concerning the relation between Christians and Jews, has its roots in the past and stretches its branches into the present. It is one of the reasons for the long time it took - even after the Holocaust, as Dr. Pruin has informed us – to make several sensible points of debate an issue for the leading bodies of our churches. The statement from 1980, that you have in your hand-outs, probably marks the peak of a movement of embracing Judaism and

the Jews.¹ It has experienced a strong repercussion in a 2001 statement of the North Elbian church, and underwent reaffirmation by the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland in September this year. This latter statement, however, is already deeply concerned with the struggle for a fair enough answer not only to the situation of the Jews and the State of Israel, but also to an outcry by the Palestinian Christians.

Having noticed that you will get into intense discussion of the Palestinian Kairos-Paper and the reactions of our churches later on, I decided to focus my own contribution to this conference rather on matters of history and theology between Christians and Jews in general. Heated debates on matters of everyday's politics take strange ways when becoming part of official clerical declarations. According to a modern common place (and, as it were, an ancient philosophical, a Platonist paradigm), theology is not concerned with any statement soever about a political building like a state. Neither is any theological involvement in political matters supposed to be more than accidental, nor is the very essence of a religion able to be affected by political constellations of the day. In Germany, we had become used to take this paradigm for granted, at least in theory, as an outcome of the peace treaties that ended the confessional wars between Protestants and Catholics in early modern times.

Although we have been experiencing a return of theocracies for more than thirty years now, as Christians we still stick to the ideal of a separation between religious and political institutions. But although separated from the beginnings and over time, there has hardly ever been a situation that could be described as one, in which the fate of one institution left the fate of the other unharmed. A nucleus of political concern could always be identified in Christian no less than in Jewish religion. A nucleus of transpolitical concern always drives the political parties and leaders. And only the experience of certain political developments made it possible that scholars of religion no longer think about Christianity as a religion that emerged out of Judaism while Judaism remained the same old religion, supposed to be outdated by the coming of the Messiah Jesus. It is becoming general opinion these years, that early Christianity and the early

1

<http://www.jcrelations.net/Towards+Renovation+of+the+Relationship+of+Christians+and+Jews.2388.0.html?L=3>.

rabbinic movement were sharing a common development by framing their orthodoxies in contradistinction to the orthodoxy of the respective other.

First of all, both religions draw heavily on their fate in history. They relate about their people and/ or their belief a certain historical origin – and step forward by transcending and universalizing this origin, deriving from it normative prescriptions and future expectations. These prescriptions and expectations, however, were more and more shaped by the historical situation of the communities or churches. An important part in this second historical influence of their theological systems plaid, as Dr. Pruin has already pointed out, the state of minority and majority, as it were. As for the situation in Germany in the beginning of the 20th century, nobody has made clearer sense of these matters than the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig.

Being urged to convert to Christianity by his friend Eugen Rosenstock, Rosenzweig found himself in deep troubles and finally renounced his earlier promise to have himself baptized. In a 1913 letter to his cousin Rudolf Ehrenberg, he writes:

„I thought I had Christianized my view of Judaism, but in actual fact I had done the opposite: I had ‚Judaized‘ my view of Christianity. I had considered the year 313 as the beginning of a falling away from true Christianity, since it opened a path for the Christians in the opposite direction to that opened in the year 70 for the Jews. I had begrudged the church its scepter, realizing that the synagogue bears a broken staff. I began to reconstruct my world. In this world (and anything outside the world unrelated to what is inside I did not then or do now recognize) – in this world there seemed to me to be no room for Judaism.”

In his later work, Rosenzweig made history the very starting point of his – predated – reach out for the Christians. He wanted to draw them into a dialogue. In order to survive such a dialogue *as a Jew*, he then had to make a risky move. He did this by saying that history is the very essence of what Judaism or Christianity really are. With him, and due to this move, Christianity as the victorious party in the conflict, as the party that lives in coalition with political power, is in trouble: claiming to be the religion of the suffering

people, it makes, in actual reality, other peoples suffer. While Judaism, in being defeated, has another kind of trouble: It has difficulties to prove that it is God's chosen people.

But precisely this turns out to be an advantage now: Judaism as the suffering people (in actual history) does only have to make a minor move to get over its inner contradiction: its chosenness is a chosenness to special ethical rigor. While Christianity has to work hard in order to prove that it really stands with the suffering, that it really is a religion of modesty and humility. Thus, in actual fact, even the Christian pride of turning weakness into strength before God, would befit Judaism better than Christianity.

These theorems were predated in Rosenzweig's time. History was – in spite of a growing secularization – so much in favor of Christianity that no Christian theologian would have seriously questioned the general Christian claim as if the state of the elect had left Israel and moved to the Christians.

When the Protestant theologian Karl Barth wrote about Romans 9-11, he shifted Protestant attention from the electability of the single soul to the historical election of Israel. Yet he left the outcome of Christian claims to be the heirs of Jewish chosenness unharmed. Israel – to him – has lost God's favour. The Jews' contribution to Christianity comes only in a roundabout way: "Wirkliche Zeugen des Zornes sind indirekt notwendig auch Zeugen des Erbarmens Gottes." [Real witnesses to his wrath are of necessity – indirectly – witnesses to God's mercy too"].

The time for the churches to feel ashamed for such a claim had not yet arrived. Still, when Vol II/2 of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* circulated in Germany under the wittingly deceiving title "Calvin-Studies," in the early 40ies, the entailed interpretation of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11, was understood as encouraging Christians to help their Jewish neighbours in the time of persecution. It was Karl Barth, who had a strong hand in the Barmer Theological Declaration, and Protestants who helped Jews and opposed the regime during the war, were often his students. Also those Protestants who initiated and pressed for a revised theology of Judaism in the aftermath of the Holocaust, were students of dialectical theology. These discovered Jewish partners for dialogue in Franz Rosenzweig and his students – among others.

But how about the State of Israel in this context? Christian sympathies with this State have a history of their own, which again is shaped by history on the one hand, by theological considerations on the other. Of course, if the state of minority or majority, of being politically mighty or not, matters for theology – theologies won't stop with their historical references in front of the borders of the State of Israel. Until 1967 and beyond the mood of regret that had befallen many German Christians, often included an unambiguous sympathy for the young State of the brave survivors. But the longer the occupied territories remained in their comparatively miserable state, Christian sympathies shifted more and more to the Palestinians. This shift of sympathies is also mirrored in formulations of the newer paper of the Church of the Rhineland: Sentences about Israel and Judaism are now carefully tuned to fit together with sentences about Palestines, and you will certainly discuss this issue further in the following sessions.

Let me just make a last remark about one fundamental question: When Christianity was in its full triumph, it had no problem with leaving no room for Judaism, except, in some cases, that of the witness of God's wrath. When Rosenzweig tried to turn these matters around, he had a theoretical price to pay: with him the strength of Judaism was that Judaism by history was better in fulfilling the claim Christianity had made: that its weakness would become strength. This privilege, gained by a double move of inversion, could only be achieved in exile. Hence Rosenzweig advocated exile rather than Zionism. Although he moderated his attitude when feeling the rise of a strong anti-Semitism in the later 20ies of the 20th century, the inherent problem in his systematic victory, which he had achieved by making history the more important factor, remained a systematic problem in his own philosophy and its relationship to history as the latter moved on: If you buy a certain move from your adversary and try to turn his energy into an energy serving your self-defense, then you still have some of his substance in your own thought. Today, this might become a problem in an up-coming Rosenzweig-industry in postmodern philosophy: While claiming a certain kind of superiority for Judaism, a philosophy inspired by Rosenzweig might well be used to delegitimize the Jewish state.

Given that Christian sympathy for Judaism as a religion and for Jews as God's elected people as well as for the State of Israel has been made a cause by the Church establishment by now – we have to see that at the Christian grassroots the State of Israel has sensibly lost sympathies. Being identified as a State that oppresses a people, it can

no longer be appreciated as the achievement gained by former victims of the violence exerted by Christians. To many Christians as well as to many – Jewish and non-Jewish – people in the surrounding of Rosenzweig inspired postmodernism, davka the Jewish state seems to pose a great problem if not in its very existence, at least in the choices its governments make in order to keep it secure. In the eyes of some it seems to have turned from a historical blessing into a historical curse. And it is true: Even in the view of sober and very sympathetic minds Israel's development over the last decades could be described as follows: The dream of the end of exile – ended in the reality of an entire Western and Jewish State that is exiled in the middle of an Arab world that has a strong tendency towards anti-Jewish theocracies.

I would seriously refrain from describing this development in theological terms. A Christian theology of Judaism and the Jewish State should not again make common cause with any history soever, but keep itself informed by an all-over-view on the history of Judaism and the two mighty religions that have come out of it. All over this history the newer religions have turned themselves in wrath against their root.

I am hoping, whatever history may bring about Judaism and Israel in the decades to come, that we Christians won't fall back behind the insights achieved in the document of 1980, as for instance the following ones:

4) We believe the permanent election of the Jewish people as the people of God and realize that through Jesus Christ the church is taken into the covenant of God with his people (cf. Thesis IV).

5) We believe with the Jews that the unity of righteousness and love characterizes God's work of salvation in history. We believe with the Jews that righteousness and love are the commands of God for our whole life. As Christians we see both rooted and grounded in the work of God with Israel and in the work of God through Jesus.

These sentences clearly confess the Christian claim to be part of the covenant, a claim, that might certainly be offensive to Jews. But at least they do not deny the Jewish people the right to believe in their own election and do not try to unjew the Jews. And they do

not provide grounds on which Judaism or a Jewish state could in themselves be offensive.

In taking Judaism comparatively close to heart, there may be sufficient ground to not forsake an exiled friend also on the political level. Even if, as we have seen, there is no telling in advance neither from hindsight, how systematical theology and history really will influence each other in certain situations of crisis.