

POLITICAL THEOLOGY: A JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DISPUTE

Christian-Jewish dialogue was born in a time of post-Holocaust horror and shame. Christians were confronted with a history that their Jewish neighbors had been sadly familiar with for centuries. Nazi pagans opened the eyes of some to the truth and the tragedy of Christian triumphalism vis-à-vis the Jews.

The conversation between Church and Israel started in an atmosphere of accusation and confession. The survivors of the Shoah, in their very existence, were a testimony to the past sins of the Church that had contributed to their sufferings.

Some Christians, compelled by inner conviction, began to confess and ask for forgiveness. Yes, we have been guilty of anti-Judaism, despising the heritage of Israel through which salvation has come to the gentiles. Yes, in a terrible spirit of pride we have persecuted the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus. We have not done justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with our God.

The fruit of confession is forgiveness, and the fruit of forgiveness is a new freedom—deliverance from our “guilt trips” and freedom to speak openly to our dialogue partners about the deep things that are in our hearts and on our minds. Without forgetting the past, people long estranged begin to talk about avenues of cooperation to build a new future—perhaps together be a blessing to the world.

But how do we view that world? More specifically, what does the Christian faith teach about worldly realities and how Christian believers ought to relate to them? On that point, some of our dialogue partners offer interpretations that I believe to be based on misperceptions. I also believe that Christians themselves have contributed to the widespread confusion on such matters.

Let me illustrate with a few examples. During the early 1980s, several Jewish authors who were basically opposed to dialogue, portrayed the difference between the two faiths in extreme terms. For instance, Gershon Mamlok argued that Christianity belonged “within the syncretistic orbit of Hellas” (*Midstream*, December, 1982), and Hyam Maccoby II declared that “Pauline Gnosticism” and Christianity’s embrace of “a dualistic religious mystery-cult” caused the break between Judaism and Christianity (*Commentary*, August, 1984).

Briefly put, the claim here is that Christianity viewed the material world as inherently evil and sought salvation in an escape from terrestrial realities. The human body as well

as the body politic were allegedly seen as far inferior to the realm of spiritual realities; and thus an extreme other-worldliness took over.

In the year 2000, more thoughtful Jewish scholars published a work, entitled *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, that brought the dialogue to a whole new level of maturity. Christian theologies of Judaism had appeared before, but Jewish comparative evaluations of Christianity in a series of balanced essays was a true gift to the cause of Jewish-Christian rapprochement.

Yet, in that book too we see a return of the allegedly other-worldly apostle Paul, enemy of Sinai and despiser of the divine commandments. I am referring to the essay by Menachem Kellner, entitled “How ought a Jew view Christian beliefs about redemption?” Paul, we read there, “never connects the faith that makes for righteousness and that leads to salvation to fulfillment of divine commandments.” In truth, the themes of God’s holy law, righteousness, and the fulfillment of the just requirements of the law in us through the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:4) form the heart of Paul’s christology.

In the Fall of 2005, the first issue of *Hebraic Political Studies* appeared. The editors announced that the journal is “devoted to recovering the Hebraic political tradition and evaluating its place in the history of political thought.” As someone who is dedicated to a recovery of the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith, and also very interested in political theology, I enthusiastically welcome this new research venture. However, Abraham Melamed’s article in the first issue, entitled “Is there a Jewish political thought?” once again focuses our attention on the issue under dispute. He answers the question posed in the title affirmatively, and then proceeds to argue that the premises of Judaism (and Islam) as embodied in their textual sources are different in nature from those of Christianity.

“Political theology,” states the author, “deals with the political aspects and implications of revelation as expressed in the holy scriptures of each of the monotheistic religions.” And what does he find in the Christian scriptures? In contrast to the holistic *halachic* and *sharia* traditions of Judaism and Islam, Melamed claims that Christianity, as it emerged in the context of the Pax Romana and its judicial systems, chose as a strategy of survival “a dualistic approach that drew a sharp distinction between the holy and the profane, between the physical and the spiritual realms, between the terrestrial and the heavenly, between this world and the next, between the state and religious faith.” In short, distinctions are once again interpreted in terms of a Gnostic dualism.

In my view, this approach to Christian tradition is contradicted, both by the “New Testament” scriptures and two thousand years of “Christian” history. I, therefore, propose that Christian scholars respond to this portrayal of their faith with an unequivocal ‘No!’ The very soul of our incarnational faith is at stake! And so is our social witness. But, a categorical ‘No’ must not have the final say. Let us talk; study our sacred texts together and submit past history to a critical analysis of the pitfalls of spiritualization *as well as* politicization. What does it mean that the Kingdom of God theme is central in Jesus’ message as well as the proclamation (*kerygma*) of the post-resurrection Christian

community? How can Christians maintain that, as Jesus emphasized, the fulfillment of Torah does not imply its devaluation but its re-affirmation? What about the *halachic* elements in the “New Testament” and the constant pendulum swing between this-worldliness and other-worldliness throughout “Christian” history—to mention only a few of the issues that cry out for mutual clarification.

Am I denying that Christianity has indeed frequently succumbed to the temptation of overly spiritualizing the gospel message? Not at all! The tendency to do so has been one of the most unfortunate results of the de-Judaization of the Christian faith, as lamented by Catholic bishops and Protestant ecumenical councils alike. The churches have done plenty to reinforce misunderstandings that have come to haunt us.

In 2008, Michael Kogan’s book, *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity*, saw the light of day. He states correctly that “Christianity is much more involved in drawing sharp distinctions than is our faith.” We can learn much from our Jewish friends about a more unitary way of thinking. But, let us not turn differences (even profound ones) into dichotomies, nor nuances (even very important ones) into antitheses. I see great potentials for a constructive conversation between Hebraicly oriented Christians and Jews engaged in Hebraic political studies. We may discover common themes that can lead to greater social-political cooperation in the cause of Shalom. The world needs that, and a US in election mode perhaps most of all.