Christianity's Original Sin?

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Can the church itself be guilty of sin? In 1994, Pope John Paul II addressed that question.[1] He distinguished between the sins of individuals and that of the church. The church as such does not sin, according to John Paul. Individuals do, and repentance is essential for forgiveness.

But then, what about Christian antisemitism?[2] Christianity's entire identity has been shaped by appropriating Jewish symbols and declaring itself the replacement of Judaism in God's covenant. According to Christians, Jews did not accept Jesus as the hoped-for Messiah, and God has been punishing them ever since. They are a "stiff-necked" people. Their blindness condemns them. Such are the outlines of a supersessionist theology which took hold in the scriptures themselves, was developed by patristic theologians, was assumed by medieval theologians, and was not rejected until the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* at the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

The relationship between Christianity and Judaism is special and will remain so because Jesus was a Jew. Both Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity were developments that took place within Judaism – from the Pharisees and the Jesus Movement until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Yet, for centuries, that relationship has been systematically distorted by Christian antisemitism.

We know today that Christian antisemitism is an ideology of superiority, like racism or sexism. It is worse, though, because it presents its judgments as God's judgments. It presents a caricature of Judaism. Its misunderstandings of Judaism are legion. At the heart of the distortions is the claim that Judaism is legalistic, a religion of "works-righteousness," of thinking one could earn one's salvation by fulfilling the commands of the Torah. Christians demeaned Jewish spirituality and called Judaism an invalid expression of religious faith.

Christian antisemitism is the false fact in which the truth of the gospel has taken form. It is the "root sin," the original sin, of Christianity. As individual Christians, we are, so to speak, born into it. We contribute to it insofar as we continue to promote the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. It is generated not only by individuals but by Christian institutions, their traditions and practices, and it pervades the identity of the church around the world. Supersessionism is a distortion of Judaism that permeates everything in Christianity – its scripture, its liturgy, and its theology. Several brief examples will illustrate how it continues to saturate Christian thought and language in these three areas.

Scripture

Christian scripture itself is tainted by the gospel writers' anti-Judaic polemic engrained in these authoritative narratives. Witness this passage from the gospel of Matthew, in which blame for the suffering and death of Jesus is shifted from the Romans to the "the Jews":

Now Jesus stood before the governor and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was

greatly amazed. Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner to the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him. "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want for me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood! See to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "Let his blood be on us and our children!" (Matt. 27:11-25, NRSV)

This classic text is pure theatre. Only an omniscient narrator would know Pilate's private thoughts and conversation, such as his exchange with his wife. Pilate is a powerful, brutal man. That he would negotiate with a crowd – "What should I do?" – is difficult to imagine. That he would feel any concern for Jesus' fate or ask, "What evil has he done?" is more difficult to imagine. That he "saw that he could do nothing" is impossible to believe. The hand washing effectively shifts the blame for Jesus' death from the Romans to the Jews. By their desire for Jesus' crucifixion and their cry, "Let his blood be on us and our children!" blame was placed on the Jews for the death of Jesus for all eternity. The writer reinforces that they are doing this to the Messiah.

Likewise, many New Testament texts present the Pharisees and scribes negatively. They are polemical texts, intended to turn the reader against these groups, which were perhaps rivals of the Jesus movement in the early generations.[3] Yet, this context is rarely noted in preaching, and lectionary selections in some ways highlight the most polemical passages of the gospels.

The gospel writers have created a distance between Jesus and "*the* Jews" and "*your* traditions," as if Jesus was not one of them. Pharisees and scribes are portrayed as hypocrites, as evil, as waiting to catch Jesus in some wrongdoing, and as giving alms but neglecting justice. The bitterness reflects an intra-Jewish conflict still alive at the time the gospels were composed.

Liturgy

Christian liturgies, Protestant and Catholic, are sprinkled with references to Judaism, but unfortunately most references are negative. The worst assertion is that Jews are guilty of deicide (killing God).[4] It is a product of reading something like the passage quoted above historically, that is, as if it were an unimpeachable historical account.

As the Jesus movement became more and more Gentile in composition, Christians were so busy blaming Jews for Jesus' death that they forgot about the Romans. Yet it was the Romans who had the authority to crucify and used that power frequently as a means of punishing and terrorizing subject peoples. Christians were naturally cautious about referring to them. One also finds in various liturgical forms, such as the liturgy of the hours and propers for the eucharist, the implication that Jesus rejected the law or that he rejected the Temple, both of which, in light of contemporary scholarship, are known to be untrue. But perhaps the most common declaration is the replacement maxim: the church has replaced the synagogue, Jesus has replaced the Torah, Christians have replaced the Jews. Because they refused to believe in Jesus, God took away their place in the covenant and gave it to those who did.

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References to the Jews have not usually been subtle. This prayer was part of the Roman Catholic Good Friday Service until its removal by Pope John XXIII in 1959,[5] before the Second Vatican Council and Nostra Aetate but well after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust:

Let us pray also for the unfaithful Jews, that our God and Lord may remove the veil from their hearts; that they also may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ. Almighty and everlasting God, Who drivest not even the faithless Jews away from Thy mercy, hear our prayers, which we offer for the blindness of that people, that, acknowledging the light of thy truth, which is Christ, they may be rescued from their darkness.

As the prayer suggests, Jews were expected to convert to Christianity, and there is no suggestion of the ongoing validity of their covenant with God.

Theology

We know that the Christologies of the patristic writers were deeply shaped by the classic themes of antisemitism. In one way or another, two themes are dominant: Jewish unbelief and God's choice of the Gentiles to replace the Jews in the covenant.

Melito of Sardis (d.c. 170) was the first to make explicit the accusation of deicide:

He who hung the earth in place is hanged. He who fixed the heavens in place is fixed in place. He who made all things fast is made fast on the tree. The Master is insulted. God is murdered. The King of Israel is murdered by an Israelite.[6]

Three centuries after Melito, John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) also spoke harshly about the Jews. But oddly enough, his goal was to keep Christians out of the synagogue and from adopting Jewish ways: "They killed the son of your Lord, and you dare to gather with them in the same place?" John's complaint offers a clue as to how attractive the synagogue and "works of the law"[7] continued to be to Christians, even in the fifth century.

After the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, with the power of the empire behind them, decrees of church councils over the next few centuries moved beyond the merely polemical. They banned Jews from pubic office, outlawed them from appearing in public on Easter Sunday, stopped marriages between Christians and Jews, and prohibited them from even eating together. All this was prelude to a sad and sorry story of Medieval prohibitions, persecutions, expulsions, and pogroms.

We are saddened but perhaps not surprised by the routinely antisemitic character of early church writers. Scholars of Jewish-Christian relations have recognized the antisemitic nature of their writings for some time.[8] What is more surprising is how present-day theologians, who are so sensitive to oppression in their own context, can shelter such a blindspot for Christian mistreatment of Jews.

The first example is from the father of liberation theology, whose life work has been concerned with injustice and who teaches us how to analyze oppression, exploitation, and the view from the underside of history. Yet Gustavo Gutiérrez repeats a familiar antisemitic theme – the replacement of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant – in his seminal text *A Theology of Liberation* (1973):

The infidelities of the Jewish people made the Old Covenant invalid, the Promise was incarnated both in the proclamation of a New Covenant, which was awaited and sustained by the "remnant" as well as in the promises which prepared and accompanied its advent.[9]

A second example, also from a liberation theology, shows possible depth of such a blindspot. Leonardo Boff writes in *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (1987) that, for him, Christian discipleship shaped by the crucifixion of Jesus means "taking up a solidarity with the crucified of the world –with those who suffer violence, who are impoverished, who are dehumanized, who are offended in their rights."[10] But he writes about Rabbinic Judaism and observation of the law:

Observance of the Mosaic law had become the very essence of postexilic Judaism. Sophistical interpretations and absurd traditions had caused the law to degenerate into a terrible slavery, discriminating between those whom God loved and those whom God did not love, between the pure and the impure, between my neighbor whom I should love and my neighbor whom I may hate ... the law had become a prison with golden bars. Instead of being an aid to human beings in the encounter with their fellows and with God, the law shut them off from both. The Pharisees had a morbid conception of God. Their God no longer spoke to human beings. Their God had left them a Law.[11]

This absurd characterization of Jewish faith exemplifies the contemporary survival of a kind of scotosis deeply and systemically engrained in foundational concepts of Christian theology. It continues not only to poison relations with the Jewish people but also to skew Christians' own reflections on their roots and identity.

Repentance and Exclusivism

To deny that Judaism is an authentic spirituality or to label it "legalistic," implying that a "religion of law" is somehow inferior to a "religion of grace," while maintaining at the same time that Christianity offers the only way to God, is an untenable assertion. We do not have to solve the classic dilemma of "how can Christ be unique if there are other ways of being saved" before we drop exclusivism. Exclusivism leads inevitably to violence. We live in a religiously pluralistic world, and the denial of Judaism as a way to God is also a denial of other ways.

Christian antisemitism is a collective sin that demands collective repentance. We have to live knowing that Christianity has committed a massive fault that has caused incalculable suffering. How can we find forgiveness for our arrogant claim over the centuries that we offer the only means of salvation? How can we address the last vestiges of supersessionism in our church's life and thought and practices? To surrender this claim of exclusivity is, at the very least, both the way of repentance and an affirmation, with the apostle Paul, that the Jews remain God's beloved people. (Rom. 11:28).

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[1] See the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000: *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Nov. 10, 1994, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_10111994_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html.

[2] The original 'Semites" were the Palestinians; but I use the word *antisemitic* to mean "anti-Jewish," in the traditional and routine way it has been used by Christians.

[3] See the recent discussion in Terrence Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, and London: SPCK, 2010), esp. ch. 2 on Matthew.

[4] It was not eliminated until the twentieth century.

[5] Pope John XXIII announced the Council in 1959. A meeting between the Jewish historian, Jules Isaac and Pope John XXIII may have been the direct cause of the church's relationship with Judaism being put on the upcoming Council's agenda. Isaac referred to the church's teaching about Judaism over the centuries as a "teaching of contempt." Mary C. Boys, SNJM, "What *Nostra Aetate* Inaugurated," in David G. Schultenouer, ed., *50 Years On: Probing the Riches of Vatican II* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2015), 235-272; 243.

[6] Cited in Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000); see also more recently, idem, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2013).

[7] "Works of the law" simply means "living as a Jew." Cited in Boys, *One Blessing*, 56. See full text of John Chrysostom's "Against the Jews: Homily 1," in ET at: www.tertullian.org.

[8] The classic exposé of Christian antisemitism is Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Antisemitism* (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1974).

[9] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, A *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, tr. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 161. Cited in John T. Pawlikowski, O.S.M., "The Christ Event and the Jewish People," in Tatha Wiley, ed., *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning* (N.Y.: Continuum, 2003), 105.

[10] Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011 [1987]), 130.

[11]*Ibid*., 13.

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