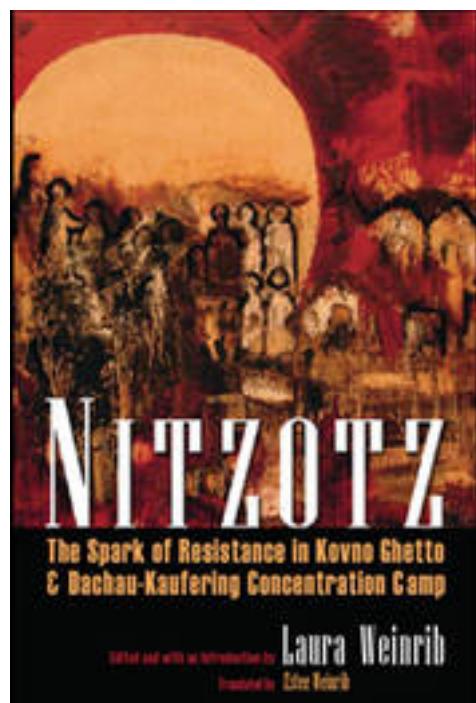




Boyarin, Daniel. A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity

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When I graduated, in 1951, from the Marist Brothers-run St. Francis Xavier College in

Shanghai, I left with a powerful impression of St. Paul, as then taught in the catechism and

Church History classes. Whilst St. Peter and his fellow Apostles were portrayed as basically

religious idealists, it was St. Paul who was clearly the visionary and dynamic figure who

possessed the courage to break away from Judaism in order to found a new religion based on

the teachings of Jesus Christ. It was Paul to whom the accolade "The First Christian"

seemed to fit most aptly. Whatever one's religious orientation, there was no doubt that

one could not but have immense respect for Paul's towering intellect, energy and

leadership.

It was not until sometime later, after having arrived in Australia, and in the course of

further reading and discussions with friends – Christians, as well as Jews – that I came

across a more troubling dimension about him. These related to his perceived total rejection

of Judaism, particularly the basic tenets of Torah, circumcision, and the prohibition of

eating certain foods. This, in turn, fuelled the notion of anti-semitism with which he

became associated. Although it was the Lutheran movement which was most identified with this

virulent view of Judaism, other Christian teachings can also not escape the accusation that

the establishment of Christianity is very much intertwined with a feeling of disdain and

even hatred of Judaism and the Jews.

As a result, Pauline theology and Rabbinic Judaism grew apart from each other and the two

faiths progressively had less and less to say to each other. Saul, the Jew from Tarsus,

appeared to have orchestrated a chasm which lasted for centuries.

However, as Father Brendan Byrne, S. J. said in his address at a seminar recently

conducted by the Council of Christians and Jews in Melbourne, a “roll-back” of the

traditional interpretations of Paul's influence on Christianity's negative view of

Judaism started to occur at the beginning of this century. This mainly took the form of

either questioning the reliability of Paul's understanding of the teachings of the Torah,

upon which his own view of Christ's teaching is based, or whether Christian theology had,

in fact, developed a mistaken interpretation of what Paul actually thought and said.

This process of Questioning gained momentum with the general recognition of some form of

Christian responsibility for the Holocaust, stemming from the largely anti-Jewish bias of

Christian Scripture.

It is against this background that considerable interest was generated by the publication

of Daniel Boyarin's book as it was perceived to be traversing new ground in the

understanding of the teachings of Paul. For, rather than again question as to what Paul is

meant to have said, or if we understood him correctly, Boyarin explores whether, despite of

the unattractive baggage associated with him, Paul still does have a relevant message in today's world.

Daniel Boyarin is an Orthodox Jew, the Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture at the

University of California, and is generally respected as a post-modern cultural critic. The

fact that a scholar of Boyarin's standing should turn his attention to Paul's letters

and epistles is a testimony to the remarkable changes which have taken place in the world of

Pauline studies. In tackling Paul, he taught himself Greek, and carried out an extensive

study of the immense amount of writings which Paul generated. Boyarin's scholarship has

earned him a respected place among Pauline scholars. His book on Paul has been extensively,

and intensively, reviewed in nearly all the serious theological journals. They comment

favourably on his scholarship, but have reservations, like myself, in regard to his

conclusions.

Boyarin ascribes to Paul's opposition to the Judaic Law because of Paul's understanding that the Law insists on the "priority and importance of the flesh". He begins his book by sketching Paul's background as a 'Hellenistic Jewish cultural clone" characterised by a "dualistic system which preceeds and is primary over body". Central to Paul's resentments against the "Law" is its carnality, as symbolised by circumcision, as a literal act "which should not mark off the body as ethically distinct from other human bodies". He also deals fully with Paul's attitude for sexuality, arguing that first-century Judaism had become thoroughly anxiety-ridden about it, ea. the Torah commandment to procreate, but also to avoid sexual desire.

The main interest in Boyarin's book lies, in my opinion in its dissertation on identity, more particularly, the reconciliation between universality, on the one hand, and particularisation, on the other. Boyarin has, I believe, identified this as the critical issue of our times. He proposes that Paul, as a radical thinker, is as relevant today, in

this respect, as he was two thousand years ago.

Paul, as a sophisticated Diaspora Jew, sensed the mood of his times. The known world was

then seething with a large number of sects and religious beliefs. Despite this high degree

of fragmentation of society, of which the Jews were just one part, there was a strong

striving for some form of unification of thought. All these various ideas yearned for a

universal God who would make sense of the meaning of human existence on earth. But only the

Jews really possessed a single God and a seemingly coherent view of the cosmos and the place

of mankind in it. However, entry into this faith was difficult; circumcision, the

prohibition against eating certain foods and the necessity to observe numerous commandments,

were real deterrents to vast numbers of Gentiles. Although the more Hellenised Jews of the

Diaspora took a more “wordly” and elastic approach to observance, the Rabbis, who were

the guardians of the faith, based in Jerusalem, were unwilling to “bend the rules” to

accommodate these Gentiles, whose entry into Judaism in substantial numbers would have

allowed it to be the basis of a more universal religion.

The famous “apparition” or conversion which struck him on the road to Damascus was

apparently the realisation that it would have to be through Christ’s message of faith and

grace that this universal salvation could be attained. Once possessed of this belief, his

zeal knew no bounds. In defence of Paul, it would be fair to state that he did strive to

achieve his objective of universality via Judaism. He argued that strict observance of the

basic tenets of Judaism may not be as critical as hitherto believed to be. He proposed that

they should be considered as no more than allegories for something more spiritual and

meaningful than the observance itself.

Paul’s universalism is enshrined in that most famous of statements from Galatians 3:28,

which Boyarin uses as the centrepiece of the cover of his book. ‘*There is neither Jew*

nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for ye are all one

in Jesus Christ.'

This message of universalism exerted an extremely powerful appeal to the Gentiles who

sensed an opportunity for acceptance and inclusiveness in a hitherto exclusive monotheistic

society. But to the Jews the spirituality of Judaism had the effect of destroying the

tangibility of their world, revolving around the Torah, Temple and the land of Israel. In

the end, as we know it, the pull of Paul's universalism overcame the central gravity of

Judaism, and Christianity established itself as a separate universal religion.

It is in this final chapter of the book that Boyarin is at his most interesting and

controversial. It is entitled "Answering the mail – Toward a radical Jewishness". For

Boyarin, too, has an obsession, and that is with Jewish identity today. He attempts to draw

on Paul as a resource for cultural critique and renewal. He proposes that Paul be viewed as

not only a Hellenised Jew who believed in universal sameness, but as a radical social

thinker, a quasi Marxist universalist, even a Jewish thinker, whose thoughts could make an

important contribution to the important Jewish issues of today.

To understand Boyarin's pre-occupation with Jewish identity, one has to appreciate that

he is writing in the context of the state of American Jewry, where the issues of its

identity and continuity are now of paramount concerns. These concerns are also relevant to

us in Australia, as they are also, in varying degrees, to all Diaspora communities in open

societies, where the forces which have traditionally sustained Jewish identity are

disappearing.

American statistics disclose and ever increasing rate of marriages of Jews to non-Jewish

partners, which in turn leads to a reduction of community size. This gradual erosion is not

due to conscious decisions to quit Judaism, but is, in fact, the result of a process of

drift. The anxious question being increasingly asked is, whether Diaspora Jewry, as a

distinct ethnic, cultural and political entity has a future! In the flurry of an intensive

process of self-analysis, the basic question has even been asked: Does God want Jewish

people to continue?

Whilst there is general consensus that the continuity of Judaism, and the Jewish people,

must ultimately depend on an inner belief as a distinct religious community, based on the

centrality of Torah, there is no doubt that there must be a much clearer conception of what

is so special about Judaism, its religion and its way of life. This has led to calls to

appreciate that the Talmudic tradition is not as monolithic as many believe it to be, that

it does respect and preserves in the commentaries opposing views. Quite obviously, Jewish

education must be taught in a more professional and imaginative manner, particularly in ways

to appeal to the younger generation. In addition, there have been calls to ameliorate the

exclusiveness of Judaism by a greater acceptance of secular Jews, as well as those from

“mixed” marriages. After half a century of existence, even the place of Israel in the

Jewish world is part of this analysis.

Against this backdrop, Boyarin, in his final chapter, tries to reconcile the Rabbinic

emphasis of distinctness with Paul's vision of universality. In doing so, he expresses his

concerns with developments in Israel, which he associates with (mistakenly, in my opinion)

racist tendencies as examples of extreme forms of Jewish particularism. He sees territory

and power as promoting intolerance, and therefore argues for a de-territorialised Jewish

Diaspora existence, which, in his opinion, would more comfortably thrive in a multi-cultural

environment. Only thus, he suggests, could a meaningful balance be maintained between a

particularist cultural and religious existence within a universalist environment of

interaction with other cultures.

I find his arguments for a de-territorialised Diaspora identity, entailing a conscious

abdication of power to be unconvincing, and I very much doubt that the Jewish people would

want to see again a Jewish world without a Jewish state. Jewish helplessness would be an

aspect of Jewish existence which Jews would not wish to see return.

It seems clear that the world does not appear ready for a truly universal existence, and

recent events in Europe and Africa, tragically demonstrate that, given the opportunity,

peoples will opt for ethnic particularity. Unfortunately, particularity is invariably

accompanied by intolerance of other particular identities, leading to strife and bloodshed.

Paul's idealist vision of universality is still probably too sophisticated a concept for

universal acceptance. Particularity still rules the day and is likely to continue for the

foreseeable future. What still eludes us is the social mechanism whereby differences, when

living side by side, can enjoy mutual respect and flourish in a harmonious atmosphere.

Despite the above reservations of Boyarin's conclusions and prescriptions, the concept of

the book is both informative and challenging. Informative because the author has made a

significant contribution to a better understanding of Paul and his philosophy. To the extent

that he has succeeded in correcting the mistaken anti-Jewish bias associated with this

towering figure of Christian religious ideology, Boyarin will have played a significant and

worthwhile part in reducing religious tensions between Christians and Jews. The book is also

very challenging because in using Paul's belief in universality, we are enjoined to think

about, and work for, that most elusive aspect of human existence – to respect our fellow

human beings and to live in peace with them.