ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016

**"The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts"**

PLENARY SESSIONS

PLENARY ON PAUL:

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The Understanding of Paul's Theology and Christian Anti-Judaism

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In Rom. 9.4-5, Paul writes this about his kindred "according to the flesh:" "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship [that is, the temple services]. And from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah."

One would not expect the man who wrote this to be strongly opposed to the Jewish religion. Yet many Christians think that the letters of Paul prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that in Paul's day Judaism was a terrible religion and that its adherents were miserable. Naturally, they think that Paul was opposed to his native religion. This interpretation of Paul's letters is the topic of my talk today.

As a warm-up, I should say that it is much easier to find Christian criticism of Jews and Judaism in the non-Pauline parts of the New Testament. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls Pharisees "hypocrites," (Matt. 23.23-33) and Christians, who usually think that the Pharisees dominated Judaism at the time of Jesus, find it easy to think that this means that all Pharisees, and therefore all Jews, were hypocritical all of the time.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to "the Jews": "you are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning…." And so on. (John 8.44).

And, most famously, in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus was on trial before Pilate, Jewish chief priests stirred up the crowd, which urged Pilate to have Jesus crucified (Matt. 27.4-21). When Pilate objected, since he found Jesus innocent, the mob shouted, "his blood be on us and on our children." So when Christians want to find passages that depict "the Jews" as being hostile towards Jesus and his movement, which makes them evil, they have plenty of ammunition in the gospels and don't really need Paul, but Christians in general and Protestants in particular would like to be able to find passages in Paul that show that Judaism was a bad religion and that he was opposed to it.

Why did Christians want to prove that Judaism was a bad religion? The simplest and best explanation, in my view, is proximity. Christians very seldom feel called upon to attack Buddhism or Hinduism. They are too remote. The closer the relationship the bitterer and deeper the

conflict. The relationship, however, was not only close, it was genetic. Because Christians knew that their own religion was derived from Judaism, to justify its split from the mother religion, they had to find something <u>wrong</u> with that religion. The passages from Matthew and John that I just quoted show the deep emotions aroused by the painful separation of daughter from mother.

For these and possibly other reasons Christians wanted Christianity to be superior to Judaism, but they wanted even more. They wished to demonstrate that Judaism was not <u>just</u> inferior, it was a <u>pernicious </u>religion; it was positively harmful.

We have seen that Christians had passages in the Gospels to "prove" that.   How did they attribute the same degree of opposition and animosity to Paul?

The full answer to this question is circuitous and involves a few aspects of Christianity and European history.

I shall start with the fact that early in its life Christianity became a religion of dogmas— propositions that had to be believed. Creeds were written, people were executed, wars were fought over who had the right opinions. Since some of you may never before have run into a Christian creed, I shall read a part of the Chalcedonian formula of 451 CE, which was, in theory at least, binding on all Christians.

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is One and the same Son, Perfect in Godhead, Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man, having a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, co-essential with us according to the Manhood; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person… not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; … etc.

According to this creedal formulation, Christians had to believe that there were two natures in Jesus, one human, one divine, and that these two were inseparable. It was heresy, for example, to say that Jesus' human nature suffered on the cross and that his divine nature allowed him to walk on water.

Christianity was defined by dogmas such as this from about 350 CE to about 1900. The dogmas are still important in some branches of Christianity. People who did not believe certain dogmas, which of course included Jews, were doomed to eternal destruction.

I shall leave out the efforts of church authorities to enforce the right beliefs, which led to Inquisitions, burning at the stake, and so on.

 From the modern point of view, inquisitions were bad and led to needless suffering. But much more blood was shed in the wars of religion, especial the wars of the sixteenth century, which followed the Protestant Reformation and which were in part wars about dogmas. I shall

name just a few of the wars: the 80 years war in the low countries (1568-1648), the French Wars of Religion, 1562-1598 (36 years), and the 30 years War (1618-1648)—among many others.

Europe was in very bad shape. There was a lot of death and a lot of destruction, and the wars settled nothing.

Fortunately, a new intellectual force was rising at the same time, a force that would save Europe from religious wars and bring its culture to a new high. Science had been discovered. Moreover, the work of Isaac Newton, (1643-1727), aided especially by Edmund Halley, proved that science, not religious dogma, could explain such things as the movement of the planets and comets. Human reason, it turned out, could solve nature's secrets. If that was so, surely human Reason could rule humanity. There were natural laws, and natural Rights, and reliance on Reason would produce better governments and better societies. Relying on religious dogma led to mass slaughter. The human brain could do better than that.

This movement, called the Enlightenment, swept Europe and the English colonies in North America. Even dictatorial kings and queens, such as Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great, signed on. The Puritans in Massachusetts stopped persecuting Quakers. In the new world, churches could exist in peace side-by-side, and a new nation arose that was based on the principles of the Enlightenment, not religion.

In Christ's College Cambridge, instead of metaphysical dogmas about the three persons in the Trinity and the two natures in Christ, William Paley taught John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Paley p. 14), plus a bit of Newton. A student studying for the Anglican ministry noted that they did not learn "any rigmarole stories about the Trinity, or such stuff"; "The Thirty-nine Articles [of the Anglican church] were never hinted at; the creed of Calvin ... was never thought of." Paley took as 'his model "Locke on the Reasonableness of Christianity and his comments on the Epistles."

In Germany, Emmanuel Kant wrote a book called *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason.*

Besides relying on reason, Christianity should base itself on the simple gospel of Jesus. Paley wrote, "we should not call any our master in religion but Jesus Christ" (16).   Thomas Jefferson based his religion solely on the teaching of Jesus—as he reconstructed it.

In German Protestantism there was a very strong movement against the traditional Christian Creeds and in favor of getting back to the simple teaching of Jesus. The academic quest for the "historical Jesus" began. One of the greatest historians of Christianity, Adolph von Harnack, wanted to do away with the creed that was recited every Sunday in every Protestant church. He offered as a better "essence" or "core" of Christianity this short paragraph:

"The Christian religion is something simple and sublime; it means one thing and one thing only; eternal life in the midst of time, by the strength and under the eyes of God." To this simple paragraph, of course, he would add the teachings of Jesus in order to define Christianity.

Von Harnack and many others wanted a short theological statement that was appropriate to Christianity and that could be used to lead parishioners towards the right sort of

Christianity, one that was simple, sensible, rational, humane, and not burdened with antique metaphysical dogmas.

A religion that was *humane*. Humanism was intrinsic to the Enlightenment. Science, religion, government, and everything else should be governed by the human brain, and ethics should focus on what is good for humans.

In this bright new world of Humanism, which was received so enthusiastically throughout much of Europe and in the colonies on the east coast of America, surely Christians would begin to look on Judaism more benignly! Alas! There were some animosities that were too deep for the Enlightenment to cure.

Protestants in particular continued to think that Judaism was a bad religion. But now, in the age of Humanism, they thought that they had to prove that Judaism was a bad religion <u>on humanistic grounds</u>. The Jewish religion *must* have made Jews bad people.

To prove this, German Protestant scholars brought out an old Lutheran charge that had once been used against Roman Catholics: the Jews were legalists.

Before I go on with this, let me say something about German scholars in the 19th century. I do not think that they were more racist than their colleagues in France and England. German scholars, however, were the people who had the learning and the perseverance to go through the entirety of Jewish literature in the search of evidence to prove that Jews were all legalists. They produced volume after volume in support of their views. While one might admire their passion, diligence, and sheer effort, one must also admit that, without fail, their grand conclusions rested on systematic misinterpretation. As I showed forty years ago [in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*], they read Rabbinic legal debates and thought that they were reading theology and that every line dealt with individual salvation—that is, that every line had to do with the Lutheran understanding of salvation—of which there are actually no traces in Rabbinic literature.

I think that many Jewish readers do not understand how horrific the charge of legalism was. Everyone knows that there is a Jewish law, and off-hand one would think that following a divine law does not sound like a heinous offence that produces a bad religion. What Protestants mean by "legalism" is this: The only relationship between legalists and God is the counting of deeds. Legalists do not believe in the grace of God, only his decision at the judgment, and that is based only on the balance of good and bad deeds. Thus the legalist is engaged in an attempt at self-salvation. These Protestant scholars actually believed that Jews had consciously rejected the grace of God.

In a religion that consists only of counting good and bad deeds there are only two possible mental states. The individual is either arrogant (because he or she is confident of having tons of good deeds) or anxious (because of not being sure that he or she has done enough.)

While I was on sabbatical leave in Cambridge in 1982, I heard a sermon by Hugh Montefiore, who at that time was the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham. He belonged to a famous and extremely distinguished Jewish family, but he had converted to Christianity, and he achieved great things as an Anglican priest.

His sermon was on the conversion of Paul to Christianity. He described the plight of Paul and other Jews as being an endless effort to climb a wall that they could never surmount. He saw Paul as having escaped that fate by his conversion.

I mention this sermon because it brought home to me how effective the charge of legalism could be. The Bishop's rhetoric and gestures of climbing were powerful, and for a few moments I almost felt sorry for all those Jews striving for what was unattainable—salvation by good deeds without believing in Jesus as the Christ.

Now, at last, to Paul himself. Protestant scholars found "proof" that Jews were legalists who strived to save themselves in a few lines of his letters, especially the letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. I shall not discuss every one of those lines but rather focus on the most important point.

In Galatians (the earlier of the two letters) we meet the phrases "righteousness (or justification) by faith" and "works of law," and these two are opposed to each other. "You who want to be justified (or be made righteous) by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ, you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5.4).

And again, "no one will be justified by works of the law" (Gal. 3.16).

"Ah ha!" said the Lutheran biblical interpreters. Works of law are good deeds, and this proves that Paul's straying converts, led on by his Judaizing opponents, were trying to save themselves by piling up good deeds.

The phrase "justification by faith and not by works of law" was turned into the key point of Paul's message, and, in fact, scholars said that this sentence guides all of Paul's letters.

It is true that "Works of law" in Paul's usage are bad. Paul did not want his converts to do "works of Law." But in his vocabulary "works of law" are not "good deeds." Paul was deeply committed to good deeds. He never said anything against them, and in most of his letters he urges his converts to do good deeds and in fact to do "more and more" (1 Thess. 4.10). Christian life should be shaped by the love commandment of Lev. 19.

Nine verses after the first mention of works of law as being bad ("those who want to be justified by the law are cut off from Christ," Gal. 5.4), Paul admonishes his converts to follow what he calls the whole law, which is summed up as "love your neighbor as yourself."

Thus Paul opposed some practice that he called "works of law," while urging that his converts follow what he called "the whole law," by which he meant the commandment to love the neighbor.

It is perfectly clear that the "works of law" that separate Christians from Christ in Gal. 5.4, and that he opposes, are not the same as the whole law, which consists of good deeds, in Gal. 5.13.

"Works of law" and "good deeds" are two separate categories in Paul's letters. Paul urges good deeds again and again while opposing "works of law."

Paul, probably pacing while fretting over the problem of the Jewish law that had arisen in Galatia, made a distinction that can easily confuse the reader: a total difference between "works

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of law" and "fulfilling the whole law." The first he opposes, the second he supports. This apparent contradiction has puzzled—in fact baffled—Paul's interpreters for hundreds of years. Thus, if it takes the solution (two different categories) a while to soak in, you will be in good company.

To confirm this interpretation of Gal. ch. 5, I turn to Romans ch. 13. In Romans 13:8-10, written some years after Galatians, Paul returns to the love commandment and repeats what he had written to the Galatians:

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom. 13:8). This time Paul specifies some of the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet; and any other commandment; are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (13:9). He tops this off with one more summary: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (13:10).

He still opposes, however, what he calls "works of law": "no one is justified by works of law" (Rom. 3.20); similarly 3:28 and 4:6.

We see quite clearly in both Galatians and Romans that by "works of the law," which Paul opposes, he did not mean the love commandment or any of the other ethical commandments in Scripture. They are in a different category from the "works of law."

Now we must ask, "what are these bad "works of law?"

A little bit of study will reveal that the phrase "works of law" has a very limited meaning. Paul was really concerned with only one "work of the law," namely circumcision, which very few people would regard as being a "good deed."

What was bad about circumcision? Well, in and of itself, nothing. Sometimes Paul regarded circumcision as indifferent (Gal. 6.12-15; 1 Cor. 7.18). BUT in the special circumstances of his argument with the Galatians, he strongly opposed the circumcision of _his_ _Gentile_ _converts_.

Paul' mission was to convert Gentiles to faith in Christ. He thought that Gentiles should come into the people of God _as_ Gentiles. He became furious at his opponents within the Christian movement who wanted to ruin his entire life's work by requiring his Gentile converts to be circumcised and thereby becoming Jews as well as believers in Christ.

The bad works of law are those that make Paul's Gentile converts into Jews. If his converts needed to be circumcised, this meant that faith in Christ was not enough and that Paul's entire career was a failure. If circumcision was necessary, and if Gentiles _had_ to become Jews as well as having faith in Christ, in Paul's view Christ died in vain.

I want to emphasize that in Paul' discussions where the phrase "works of law" appears, he discusses only the circumcision of Gentiles, and there is nothing at all about works righteousness, people saving themselves by the compilation of good deeds, self salvation, or any of the things that Protestant polemics attributes to Jews, which supposedly make them bad people.

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Paul finds one fault and only one fault with his own people: most of them did not put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Son of God. Rom. 10.9 sums it up: "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The vast majority of the Jews did not do this.

In Paul's view the mistake that Jews made was not trying to save themselves by good works, but rather that they did not put their faith in Christ.

Thus the ages-long doctrinal accusation against Jews and Judaism was accurate. Jews did not accept Christian dogma. But the effort of humanistic Christians to prove that Jews were legalists and therefore not good people finds no support in the Pauline letters.

It *is* true, however, that Paul's mission probably helped push ordinary Judaism and the Christian movement apart. It was events on the ground that really changed Christianity from being a Jewish sect to being a Gentile religion. Although not many Jews accepted Jesus as Son of God, over time, a lot of Gentiles did. The little churches that Paul founded, which he insisted must not accept circumcision and other parts of the law that separated Gentile from Jew were harbingers of things to come. Though he may have lost the argument in Galatia, in the long run Paul's position on circumcision eventually triumphed. That work of law, which separated Jew from Gentile, disappeared from the Christian movement.[1]

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[1] For fuller discussion of Paul's use of "works," including "works of law," see my *Paul. The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought,* Fortress Press, 2015, subject index, p. 862