



What we miss about God, when we miss the Jews

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A Catholic systematic theologian discusses 'some inextricable and open questions as they present themselves today within Catholic theology and the Catholic Church'. The 'absence of the Jews' in Christian theology.

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Karl-Heinz Minz

In the context of your conference about "Christian and Jewish Identity After Auschwitz" I would like to discuss some inextricable and open questions as they present themselves today within Catholic theology and the Catholic Church. In a first block I will establish the theme with the aid of the monograph of Paul Petzel with the same name. Then the "absence of the Jews" in Christian theology shall be demonstrated using some exemplary findings. To conclude, in a third part the consequences and predictions of these findings will be reflected.

I. Laying the foundation for the topic

Being a Christian is essentially determined as giving witness to a foundational event. In this case, the basic feature is how the witness community confessing this Jesus as her Christ and her Lord followed his message and how it follows him today. Christian truth is true only and exclusively as witness truth. In this, Christian life and Christian faith receive their identity. Foundational and communication structures of the Easter faith reveal this context from the center of Christian faith. Therefore, identity here means the living connection with the constituting foundation of every Christian existence — the Jew Jesus of Nazareth. In the texture of this communication, the depth psychological definition of identity is certainly of high importance¹. However, here we will not deal with it any further.

At the same time, we have to hold firm that Auschwitz would not have been possible without 2000 years of Christian enmity against Jews. As a result, Auschwitz has radically called into question the entire Christian faith, and this in a twofold way: on the one hand as guilt and sin, and thereby on the other hand also as negation of the identity of the One, who gives witness of his origin. With respect to the foundational basis of their faith and the time association with him "we have today always to see, that through the Jew Jesus of Nazareth the Christian is of necessity involved in this concrete salvation history and self-communication of God to his chosen people Israel. If God promises God-self in and as 'being with' Israel in the history of the covenant, namely as JHWH, in word and spirit, then this concrete fact establishes a unified whole (Einheit) of salvation history."² It is *within* this salvation-historical unified whole of the reality of the covenant that Christian theology has to speak of Jesus and of Christ.

Paul Petzel fully reflected these connections in his landmark dissertation "What we miss about God, when we miss the Jews".³ This title goes back to an observation by the Berlin theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, who in his work *Of Misery and Affliction in Theology: Prolegomena to Dogmatics*⁴ writes: "And if there is at all a commission for theology after Auschwitz, then this one: to reflect on what we miss about God, if we declare Israel as lost." Faced with Christian guilt in regards to Auschwitz and with the resulting loss of identity, there exists for a theology after

Auschwitz the demand for a radical rethinking. "A theology that does not want to deny her own tradition, has to soberly and self-critically admit that any political and legal chasing away of the Jews in history was preceded by their theological disqualification, and that their social exclusion from their contemporary world was preceded by their theological excommunication from salvation-historical life contexts."⁵

Markings and pointers for such a rethinking can be outlined with the help of the present work of Petzel. Accordingly, and beginning with the witness character of Christian existence, Christian "theology has to work on a form, in which the being-in, -with and -for Israel of it's Lord is re-enacted, and which provokes a corresponding life practice of Christians".⁶

In this respect the monstrous event of the Shoah represents itself as a radical calling into question or even falsification of the Christian witness, because Christian Jew-hatred is an abysmal denial of Jesus. Nevertheless, even faced with the *menetekel* "Auschwitz",⁷ Christian grief work is still sorely missing.⁸ Quite the contrary: the reception of already existing theologies of a positive evaluation of the relationship between Christians and Jews, as for example the 1981 "Freiburg guidelines for the learning process Christians Jews",⁹ occurs, if at all, only against strong resistance. At the same time however, remarkable negative judgments are still felled about Jews and continue to be handed down.

An analysis of Christian theology has to come to the conclusion that everything Christian is permeated by the Jewish. Church, theology and faith remain dependent on Israel and win their identity only because of Israel and from Israel. In regards to Jesus a Lutheran *totaliter aliter* (qualitatively opposite) as definition of the relationship between Old and New Testament has, according to F.-W. Marquardt, to be excluded.¹⁰ Instead, the task remains to search for a "Christologic" — and therein a "Theologic" — "in which, in contrast to prevailing traditions, Christological statements not function as motif for the theological liquidation of the Jews, but proximity and attachment to the Jews are actually recognized and initiated."¹¹ Positive: according to the Council declaration *Nostra aetate* no. 4, which has been emphasized by Pope John Paul II as decisive turn in the relations between Christians and Jews, "Israel stands irrevocably in the covenant. Only within the space that the arch of this covenant covers, can Christian theology search for the Jews and their importance for its own speaking about God".¹² The permanent dependence "of Christians on the Jews in *standing* before God, repeats itself in *speaking* about God".¹³ If Christians deny or distort this permanent vocation of Israel, they deny or ideologically misrepresent at the same time God's saving action.

II. The actual state of the description of the relationship

In view of the numerous activities within the Catholic Church one may get the impression that — 50 years after Auschwitz — the required new definition of the relationship — also talked about in newer official church pronouncements — might actually be in full operation and would have made substantial headway. Landmark documents have been available for a long time, e.g. the paper of the Conversation Circle "Jews and Christians" of the Central Committee of the German Catholics, dated May 8, 1979, with the title "Theological focuses of the Jewish-Christian dialogue", as well as the "Guidelines for the correct representation of Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis of the Catholic Church", dated June 24, 1985, of the Vatican Commission for the Religious Relations with the Jews within the Office for Christian Unity.

Looking more closely, however, it becomes clear that in most cases these are simply alibi activities which leave the status quo with respect to the Jews unchanged: Jews are not recognized as beings in their own right, but are still subjected to presumptuous Christian definitions. A few examples from the field of scientific theology and from the 1993 Catechism of the Catholic Church may help to elucidate this. A widely circulated Children's Bible of the publisher Herder in

Freiburg/Breisgau provides an impression of the current status of catechesis.

1.) An example from the catechesis

A Bible for children, edited by Elmar Gruber, "The Bible Narrated in 365 Stories", can be seen as a representative random sample from the field of the catechesis..¹⁴ It is a "Selective Bible", in which those narratives are incorporated "that are especially fundamental for the Christian faith and those that are well known and popular. Above all, the selection wants to give a contiguous picture about the history of God with humanity" (so the editor in his introduction). However, this purpose was missed completely since the editor presents a point of view, which depicts Jewry at the time of Jesus as a collective in decline, which can then, with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, be dismissed as negative background. The mistaken harmonizations between the gospels as well as the missing reading aids and theological explanations add to the problem. All narratives are marked by a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible; the drawings of John Haysom can be characterized as *Edelkitsch* similar in style to those in the Watch Tower magazine; they obstruct an understanding of the biblical message.

This "biblical storybook for children and adolescents" (so the reference on the fourth page of the book cover) contains numerous and grave anti-Judaisms, which, according to contemporary official Church statements about proper relations between Christians and Jews, should not be acceptable anymore. Some examples may suffice: Jews are seen as negative foil of Christianity, Pharisee bashing, untenable anti-Jewish polemic, assignment of guilt for the death of Jesus and acquittal for the despot Pilate, anti-Jewish callousness motif, contention of a Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus.

The Church's reasons for giving the imprimatur for this book are unintelligible. This Children's Bible is an example of the way in which anti-Jewish prejudices in catechesis are spread despite better knowledge and in stark contrast to positive Church statements. The majority of readers will not be able to successfully withstand this wave of anti-Jewish prejudices that the book contains.

2.) Examples from scientific theology

In a scientific lecture, in 1995, the Catholic Old Testament scholar, Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, still sticks to his opinion, that the relationship between Old and New Testament/Covenant has to be described as fundamentally *totaliter aliter*, as qualitatively opposite..¹⁵ On the other hand, a covenantal theology in Jewish terms is categorically refused. In this case, he disqualifies the covenantal theology of Rabbi Leo Baeck with the following words: "If the covenant with God and the people is eternal as Baeck says in interpretation of Jewish tradition, then there exists absolutely no reason anymore at all for the conception of a New Covenant." In this way Hossfeld depreciates Baeck's thinking as "theological lyricism". The Jewishness of Jesus is leveled with a — non-valid and senseless — comparison from music history, when he argues: "The fact of Ludwig van Beethoven's birth in Bonn has little to do with the composition of his nine symphonies. The fact of Jesus' Jewishness can, in my opinion, not completely account for his life and work."

In the case of these disqualifications of a *totaliter aliter* the statements of the teaching office of the Church are not at all taken into account. Beyond this, there is in the teachings of Jesus no reason given that would allow Hossfeld to call for a theology of the breaking of the covenant.

However, with this opinion he takes the point of view of Franz Alt, the "hobby theologian" (so his self-appraisal in replication to Micha Brumlik) who in his distinctly anti-Jewish book "Jesus — the First New Man",¹⁶ claims, "Not only the speeches and teachings of Jesus were somehow different; *he* was very different — the greatest contrast to his Jewish environment that one can imagine." One gets the impression that Hossfeld in his expositions and valuations does not use an exegetical method that is as unprejudiced as possible, but that fear played a role — a fear that has its basis in

a claim of Christian absoluteness, fear also to subject his own work to a revision. It is an anti-Jewish ideology, in which Jews are not recognized and paid their respect as people in their own right, but made to serve a very subjective interpretation of Old Testament theology and its presumptuous definitions.

The New Testament scholar Helmut Merklein describes in volume 111 of the *Stuttgart Bible Studies* Israel as *Unheilkollektiv*, (disaster collective). Interpreting Lk 13:3,5 he writes: "Jesus considers it futile to argue over who is a sinner in Israel and who is not. Rather, the divine verdict means all, because all are sinners without exception. All of Israel is a disaster collective. There remains for her only one last chance: her turning around."¹⁷

In the 3rd re-worked edition that appeared in 1989, however, it says on the same page: "Jesus considers it futile to argue over who is a sinner in Israel and who is not. The whole of Israel is confronted with the judgment of divine wrath. There remains for her only one last chance: her turning around." The term *Unheilkollektiv* as such is here indeed deleted and the "prospect" of penalization formulated in a more restrained fashion; in the matter itself, however, nothing has been taken back of the "Christian" prejudice against Israel. The Protestant New Testament scholar Erich Graesser, to whom the present volume is dedicated, is one among others, who represent a similar point of view against the decision of the Synod of the Protestant Church of the Rhineland of January 10, 1980, *For the Renewal of the Relationship between Christians and Jews*, as well as against the theology of the two ways of salvation of Franz Mussner.¹⁸

As already in the case of Adolf Harnack's lectures on *The Essence of Christianity* (Berlin, Winter semester 1899/1900), so also here and today can Christian theologians construct a negative foil that shows a Jesus, who as "the absolute dispenser of salvation" (as for example in the sense of the Dogmatics of Karl Rahner) is used for the exegetical development of a (dogmatic!) atonement theology, and that according to the scheme: disaster collective — collective guilt — Christological atonement theology. The salvation-mediating function of the Tora as grace¹⁹ is thereby left unmentioned or radically re-interpreted in Christological and dogmatic ways at the expense of Israel. In particular the question arises, how such an evaluation of Israel as "disaster collective" can at all be derived from Jesus' understanding of the Torah. It should only be mentioned here that comparable anti-Jewish constructs can be found in other theological disciplines, as for example in dogmatics and moral theology. All considered, Charlotte Klein's study of the situation in 1975, *Theology and anti-Judaism: A study of present-day German theological literature*,²⁰ has not lost its actuality and urgency even so many years after its appearance. Faced with a still prevailing and rejuvenating theological anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish prejudices, a reprint of this book seems a necessity.

3.) The catechism of the Catholic Church

The anti-Judaisms mentioned come from Catholic professors of theology, that is from representatives of the Church's teaching office, so also in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church of 1993 one finds a clearly negative image of Jews and Jewry.

The Conversation Circle: Jews and Christians, of the Central Committee of German Catholics, dated May 18, 1995, decided on a *Zwischenruf* (Vocal Interruption or interrupting call) to this World Catechism. It is indeed a symptom of repression when the Executive of the Central Committee decided not to publish the text of the declaration for the time being. Only after it had been presented to the main editor of the Catechism, Archbishop-Coadjutor Dr. Christoph Schoenborn O.P., Vienna, wanted the Executive deliberate on it again.

The *Zwischenruf* mentions in particular three areas of deficiency.

1. "The relationship between both Testaments of the one Christian Bible appears in an

indistinct twilight. On the one hand the independent revelational character of the 'Old Testament' is repeatedly emphasized (121-123, 129). On the other hand it is generally relativized. The reason for this is, above all, the fact that the 'Old Testament' is usually read according to a 'typological' method of interpretation, as imperfect pre-form (typos), which finds its perfection only in the New Testament, and that against the affirmation of its independent value (121). Whatever God says in the 'Old Testament' is, according to this typology, oriented towards the New Testament and finds its finality only here (140). This shows itself, for example, in the way some important themes are presented, which are here listed shortly:

The prophetic promises of love have been fulfilled in the new and eternal covenant (2787). The execution of Jesus announces the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (586). The old Jewish law is a 'disciplinarian' (Galatians 3:24) to lead Israel towards Christ (708). The Law is the preparation for the Gospel; it offers to the New Testament 'types' to demonstrate the new life according to the Spirit (1964). The Jewish exile stands in the shadow of the cross, and the 'holy remnant', which returns from the exile, is an image of the church (710). The word of Augustin, 'The New Testament is hidden in the Old, the Old is revealed in the New' is cited without a theological reflection (129, 2763). — This kind of typology will of necessity give the impression that the Hebrew Bible is the imperfect pre-cursor of the New Testament. The Catechism holds the two Testaments together through typology. This leads to the danger of dissolving the history of biblical Israel and Judaism's constitutive memory in this history. For this reason the typological approach, as it is applied here, can just be a milder form of the disinheritance of Israel, from which the church in other announcements had already distanced itself.

2. The church's anti-Judaism is not addressed at all. It has its roots in the separation of the early church from Judaism. This in turn led to anti-Jewish polemic already in the New Testament and was disseminated widely in the church through some predecessors of the Catechism. The failure to address this anti-Judaism is hard to understand today. A Catechism after the Shoah should have mentioned the history of guilt of the earlier Catechisms, name their consequences and draw the necessary conclusions.
3. The Catechism misses the opportunity to present the renewed relationship of Jews and Christians as signs of hope amidst a world that appears unredeemed and as challenge to work separately/together for the coming of the kingdom of God."

So far the *Zwischenruf*. Jewish participants in the Conversation Circle criticize especially the discriminatory explanations to "Messiah" and "Mission". The Catechism says in no. 674: "The coming of the glorified Messiah depends in any time of history, that he is recognized by 'all of

Israel' (Rom 11:26) which is now partially 'hardened' (Rom 11:25), 'so that they would not 'believe' Jesus (Rom 11:20) ... the entry of the 'full number' of Jews (Rom 11:12) into the Messianic kingdom, following the 'full number of gentiles' (Rom 11:25) will give to the people of God the possibility to realize the 'full measure of Christ' (Eph 4:13), in which 'God will be all in all' (1 Cor 15:28)."

A Jewish member of the Conversation Circle had the following criticism: "It is the purest anti-Judaism when the Jews are made liable for the fact that the Messiah has not yet come. Israel is robbed of its independence, if everything concerning Israel is only to be seen as preparation for the new covenant (cf. no. 762, 710). Elsewhere a conception of mission is being presented that also includes the Jews, which the Catholic Church seemed not to have done anymore since Vatican II (no. 846, 849). Especially serious are the references to typology, which are almost always presented as the only possible interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (no. 1964, 1094)."

In the background of this anti-Jewish description of the relationship appears — again — a claim to an absoluteness of Christianity, which stands in incommensurable contrast to the numerous positive church announcements. The Catechism does not show any dogmatic consequences from the

speech of Pope John Paul II before Jews in Mainz on November 17, 1980, where he said that Rom 11 is still valid, that the covenant of God with the Jews has not been abrogated.

Out of this ambivalent and negative finding arises the question: how can a dialog between Christians and Jews still occur today at all, if in it the Jews are missing or are still missionized by Christians and theologically monopolized? Do these unambiguous statements in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church not make every real dialog between Christians and Jews impossible? They draw no substantial consequences from the *menetekel* "Auschwitz."

III. The consequences of a missing Christian identity "after Auschwitz"

The demonstrated examples from scientific theology and the field of catechesis have shown that the "absence of the Jews", even 50 years after Auschwitz, still prevent the formation of a Christian identity. Paul Petzel confirms this finding within the framework of his cognitive-theological study. Christian grief work is still missing because "the preconditions for a mourning for the Jews are *realiter* largely nonexistent in church and theology. The maximally possible in this respect appears to be the thinking-out of such grief ... grief work in this respect hardly describes the work of Christian theology, it's rather its slaving away at the *horror vacui*."²¹

"The inability to mourn" (so the known title of A. & M. Mitscherlich) would have as its precondition that the content of grief were a 'loved object' for the mourning ones (so according to the teaching of Sigmund Freud). That, however, is not true with respect to the Jews. It "was indeed the meanness in the preparation of the Holocaust that lasted for years: the political and legal chasing away of the Jews from their contemporary human environment. After that has been destroyed, the demand for grief is now, according to analytical terms, absurd."²² How much more is this true in regards to the anti-Jewish basic sludge in Christian mentalities — right into our time. Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism consist of traditional prejudices. Sociological findings show that anti-Judaism/antisemitism concerns prejudices that are handed down by stereotypical thinking. Handed down prejudices prove themselves always as more powerful vis-a-vis those acquired in the present time. A dismantling of anti-Judaism/antisemitism has to begin with these structures.²³

According to the examples demonstrated above, a dismantling of these anti-Jewish prejudices has certainly not occurred in the Catholic Church and is not now seriously occurring. The historian Jacob Katz evaluates the situation very soberly. In his opinion it is doubtful that "such a revision is theologically possible at all" within the Christian churches today. Critics of such a revision have argued convincingly that the attempt to abolish antisemitic teachings would overturn the entire teaching structure of Christianity. It has also been shown that with the most important modern theologians the development of Christian doctrine includes the thought of Christian superiority, and thereby a negative appraisal of Jews and Judaism."²⁴ Katz therefore, thinks it probable that a rehabilitation of Judaism within the framework of Christianity remains an esoteric enterprise, limited only to a small elite. Reality confirms this finding.

Theologically this means a falsification of the Christian witness and therefore of the Christian truth. After having gone through the previous practice and doctrine of Christians, we are left with an open question — comparable to Émile Zola's *J'accuse*. The Christ witnessed in Christian faith appears as witness for the prosecution. P. Petzel closes his investigation, *What we miss about God, if we miss the Jews*, with the following questions to us Christians: "We have finally to ask, whether the word about God's salvation in Christ, which the 'theology under the word' has to proclaim, does not turn against it as a word of judgment. Does the One who is testified to by theology not come up, *sub signo temporis*, as a counterwitness, as a witness for the prosecution? ... the Jewish *non* signifies that Christian theology knows not to answer these questions sufficiently, if at all. It will have to remain silent to these questions. But with these open questions theology remains itself questionable. Does the One who asks these or similar questions, possibly speak as in Mt 25:41:

'Depart from me' ...?'²⁵

Footnotes:

1. Vgl.dazu etwa A. u. M. Mitscherlich, Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens, München ²³1994, 232-234.
2. K.-H. Minz, Gott ist Einer. Plakat einer Relecture der Gotteslehre, in: M. Böhnke/H. Heinz (Hrsg.), Im Gespräch mit dem dreieinen Gott. Düsseldorf 1985, 399-416, hier 407 f.
3. P. Petzel, Was uns an Gott fehlt, wenn uns die Juden fehlen. Eine erkenntnistheologische Studie, Mainz 1994.
4. F.-W. Marquardt, Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie. Prolegomena zur Dogmatik, München 1988, 145.
5. Petzel, op. cit., 242 f.
6. Petzel, Gott, 56; vgl. auch 165 f.
7. Vgl. op. cit. 19.
8. So op. cit. 30; vgl. 244 f.
9. G. Biemer u. a., Freiburger Leitlinien zum Lernprozeß Christen Juden. Theologische und didaktische Grundlegung, Düsseldorf 1981.
10. Op. cit. 181.
11. Loc. cit.
12. Op. cit. 97.
13. Op. cit. 204.
14. Verlag Herder, Freiburg, ⁶1991.
15. Eine Veröffentlichung des Referats ist in Kürze vorgesehen.
16. F. Alt, Jesus - der erste neue Mann, München ³1989, 34. Hierzu M. Brumlik, Der Anti-Alt. Wider die furchtbare Friedfertigkeit, Frankfurt a. M. 1991.
17. H. Merklein, Jesu Botschaft von der Gottesherrschaft. Eine Skizze, Stuttgart 1983, 34; vgl. auch 143.
18. Z. B. in E. Gräßer, Zwei Heilswege? Zum theologischen Verhältnis von Israel und Kirche, in: Kontinuität und Einheit. Für Franz Mußner. Hrsg. von P.-G. Müller u. W. Stenger, Freiburg 1981, 411-429.
19. Hierzu R. J. Z. Werblowsky, Tora als Gnade, in: Kairos NF 15 (1973), 156-163.
20. München 1975 (Verlag Chr. Kaiser).
21. Petzel, op. cit. 243.244 f.
22. So T. Moser, Die beschimpfte Verdrängung. Über die verfehlte Wirkung von Mitscherlichs "Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern", in: F.A.Z. Nr. 131 vom 6. Juni 1992
23. Hierzu K.-H. Minz, Artikel 'Antijudaismus/Antisemitismus', in: Lexikon der Religionen. Phänomene-Geschichte-Ideen, Freiburg 1992, 27 f.
24. J. Katz, Vom Vorurteil bis zur Vernichtung. Der Antisemitismus 1700-1933, Berlin 1990, 328; vgl. auch die Befunde in Klein, Theologie.
25. Petzel, op. cit., 251 f.

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