

STUMP, KRETZMANN, AND HISTORICAL BLINDNESS

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Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have argued, against Gordon Kaufman, that they are skeptical as to the possibility of constructing an argument that will lend plausibility to the claim that Christianity bears some significant responsibility for any of the major systemic evils of the twentieth century, including the holocaust. This note presents a counter-argument, of a historical kind, which suggests that a significant causal connection does in fact obtain between the classical Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism and the occurrence of the holocaust.

Philosophers of religion are sometimes accused by theologians of being historically blind and (therefore) ethically insensitive. These are harsh words, but they are sometimes justified. A case in point is to be found in a recent essay in this journal by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann.¹ This piece is a critique of a meditation by the theologian Gordon Kaufman on the differences between philosophers of religion and theologians.² On almost every point of difference discussed Stump and Kretzmann seem to me correct. They are lucid where Kaufman is muddy; they are clear-sighted where he is only well-meaning; and they are coherent where he is confused. But there is one point on which they seem to me wrong and he right, a point which illustrates splendidly a vitally important difference between most theologians and many philosophers of religion. It is to the clarification of this point that this note is devoted.

Kaufman claims in his piece that "it now seems that Christian faith, Christian ways of understanding the world and the human place within the world...bear some significant responsibility for most of the evils I have just mentioned," where the evils in question include "two horrible world wars, the Nazi holocaust and other instances of genocide, the ecological crisis, the use of atomic bombs in World War II..." (pp. 41-42). Given these assertions, I suppose that Kaufman would be likely to assent to the following particularization of his more general claims: *Christian ideas about Jews have contributed directly and in significant measure to the occurrence of the holocaust.* Such assent is certainly suggested by his mention of the "Nazi holocaust"; and this claim—let's call it *H*—is common currency among almost all theologians and his-



torians who have thought at all about the phenomenon of antisemitism and its connections with the occurrence of the holocaust. Further, the truth of *H* seems to me blindingly obvious.

And yet I suspect that Stump and Kretzmann would reject it. They claim, in their discussion of Kaufman's essay, that in order to show—or even to suggest—that *H* and its like have plausibility, one would have to do more than show that many individual Christians have held views about Jews that contributed causally to the occurrence of the holocaust. One would have to show also, they suggest, that there is something about “[the] religion itself” as distinct from adherents to “some versions of it” (p. 334) that contributes to antisemitism and so, causally, to the occurrence of the holocaust. If one could show this, they think, then *H* might have plausibility. But one can't, and so *H* and its like have little or no plausibility. The strategy is to drive a wedge between Christianity and (some of) its adherents, and to suggest that while one may easily be able to show that some adherents of Christianity have held antisemitic views, one cannot show that there is anything about Christianity itself that suggests, requires, or makes plausible such views.

More specifically, in order to show that *H* and its like are true (or at least plausible) Stump and Kretzmann think that the following desiderata must be met. *First*, one must have an essentialist reading of the term ‘Christianity’ such that one can distinguish between it and “the distortions added by individual Christians” (p. 334); *second*, one must then be able to show that there is something about Christianity so understood that entails antisemitism, or, more weakly, warrants it or makes it plausible. And, say Stump and Kretzmann, “we are skeptical about the possibility of anyone's producing a sound argument that would achieve that result” (p. 334).

The first point to be made about this is that it's not at all obvious why one needs an essentialist reading of the referent of the term ‘Christianity’ in order to ground *H* and its like. One could, for example, think that the term has no precisely delimitable referent, that it refers instead to an extraordinarily complex set of beliefs, practices, and so forth, and that there will often be no obviously right or wrong answer to the question ‘is this belief/practice/institution Christian?’ Even on such a fuzzy view of what ‘Christianity’ refers to, one could properly judge that there are some common themes, connecting threads, and widely evident phenomena to which it would be very odd, historically speaking, to deny the name ‘Christian.’ Candidates might be: the belief that *Jesus Christ is the Son of God*; eucharistic practice; the celebration of Easter. Not all Christians have always held this belief or engaged in these practices; but they have been very commonly in evidence among those who would call themselves Christian, and they are related in important ways—indeed in part are constitutive of—the Christian identity of those who use this label for themselves. That is, they are not accidentally related to Christian

identity, though neither are they simply and exhaustively identical with it. They are, rather, Christian phenomena.

Now, if one could show that some such Christian phenomena, some such common themes or connecting threads, contain elements (beliefs or practices) which warrant antisemitism or make it plausible, then one would have the beginnings of the kind of grounding for *H* about the existence of which Stump and Kretzmann are skeptical—and one would have it without resorting to an essentialist view of Christianity. And, of course, it is very easy to show that there are indeed such common threads and connecting themes which do warrant antisemitism and make it plausible.

I suggest that the following are examples of such phenomena, and that they have made a significant causal contribution to the occurrence of the holocaust precisely because they have made antisemitism plausible. *First*, there is the view that the Jewish people are, collectively and by inheritance, bearers of moral responsibility for and blood-guilt issuing from the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Let's call this the *blood-guilt theory*. *Second*, there is the view that God's covenant with the Jewish people has been superseded, made null and without effect, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; from which the conclusion is drawn that the Jewish people since the time of Christ have no more reason for being. Let's call this the *supersessionist theory*. Both theories taken together, I suggest, constitute the classical Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism.

This classical Christian understanding is, in large part, grounded upon Christian exegesis of Christian sacred texts. There is no space to document this fully here; I can point only to Matthew 27:25 and its usual (dominant, statistically most frequent) interpretations in Christian history—the verse in which the Jewish people at Jesus's trial are represented as taking upon their heads and upon those of their children responsibility for the shedding of Christ's blood—as one of the more important texts grounding the blood-guilt theory; and to the usual (dominant, statistically most frequent) interpretations given by Christians to the parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-43/Mark 12:1-9), and to the theorizing about law and grace and the continuing validity of the law since the coming of Christ scattered throughout the Pauline corpus (especially in Romans 1-4 and Galatians 3-5), as some among many of the more important texts grounding the supersessionist theory.³

This classical Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism is potently antisemitic. I would argue that the blood-guilt theory and the supersessionist theory have in fact been, throughout most of Christian history, the theories held and expressed by most Christian theologians and exegetes who have thought at all about what the properly Christian view on Jews and Judaism might be, and who have thus been prepared to articulate a theoretical position on the matter. I would argue also that these theories have entered deeply into

the tacit assumptions about Jews held by many Christians who could articulate no such theoretical position, and that such tacit assumptions have been a controlling factor in the ways that Christians have treated Jews. Finally, I would argue that without this classical Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism, and without its deep effects upon the tacit assumptions and actions of faithful Christians, the holocaust could not have happened. The fact of the classical Christian understanding was, I think, a necessary condition for the holocaust's occurrence; though it was certainly not a sufficient one.

The claims made in the preceding paragraph are historical ones, and so are more or less probabilistic. Full documentation and argument would require a large monograph. I can here offer only anecdotal evidence in support of them, as well as pointing to other sources in which the evidence is set out more fully.

Let's begin with St. John Chrysostom (349-407). In 386-7 Chrysostom, then a priest in Antioch, delivered a series of eight sermons on the Jews—or, more precisely, against the work of judaizing Christians in Antioch.⁴ His proximate goal was to discourage Christians from taking part in Jewish festivals, but his remarks reveal also a great deal about then-current Christian perceptions of and reactions to the Jews. Chrysostom begins by adopting supersessionism: the Jewish covenant is at an end, and this means that the Jewish people have no more reason to exist: “The sun of righteousness rose on them [sc. the Jews] first, but they turned their back on its beams and sat in darkness...the Jews were branches of the holy root but they were lopped off” (p. 87). The conclusion drawn, dramatically, is that the Jews are “suited only for slaughter” (p. 89).

Chrysostom also adopts the blood-guilt theory (pp. 90, 100, 118-19), and makes explicit use of Matthew 27:25 to support it (p. 94). He expresses this classical Christian understanding of Jews with a powerful and, to twentieth century ears, shocking rhetoric of abuse:

If they are ignorant of the Father, if they crucified the son, and spurned the aid of the Spirit, can one not declare with confidence that the synagogue is a dwelling place of demons? God is not worshipped there. Far from it! Rather the synagogue is a temple of idolatry (p. 90).

It is true that to understand this kind of thing properly we have to know a good deal about the rhetorical conventions of the fourth century; it is true also that what strikes me as violent and revolting rhetoric probably did not so strike fourth century hearers. But the rhetoric is there, as is the theology that undergirds it; and both have been appropriated and used by later Christians who have not shared Chrysostom's passionate delight in the rhetoric of abuse for its own sake, but who have made real efforts to put into practice his view that the Jews are fit only for slaughter.

Chrysostom is an important and influential figure in the history of Christian

thought; Martin Luther, my next example, is considerably more so. In 1543 he wrote a treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies*.⁵ In this work, once again, the classical Christian understanding is expressed with great rhetorical force. The Jews are no longer God's people, and are therefore subject, collectively, to continual punishment by God and to eternal damnation (p. 139 & passim). They are Christ-killers (pp. 230-33), being fully responsible for and guilty of Jesus's death. Here Luther is simply expressing standard-issue Christian theology on this matter, but he goes on to give explicit commendation to anti-Jewish policies that sound all too familiar in the light of twentieth century experience:

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? ...I shall give you my sincere advice. *First*, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn...this is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom. ...*Second*, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ...*Third*, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them (pp. 268-9).

These words should need little comment. In fact, most of the anti-Jewish laws passed by the Nazis during the 1930s have their parallels and foreshadowings in explicitly theological writings of this kind, and many of them (including the ghettoization of the Jews) had exact parallels in the canon law of the Roman Church.⁶

All of this supports *H*: historically speaking, the blood-guilt theory and the supersessionist theory, coupled with almost two thousand years of Christian attempts to enshrine their implications in law and social practice, contributed causally in significant measure to the occurrence of the holocaust. These theories ground active antisemitism and make it plausible, and they are specifically Christian phenomena. *H* is therefore true.

Stump and Kretzmann might still object that these antisemitic beliefs, though they were and are often held by those who call themselves Christians, are neither the entailment nor the outflow of the Christian identity of their holders, but rather an accidental and noxious accretion, much like the Puritan belief that being Christian requires abstention from kissing one's spouse on Sunday. If this means only that one can have Christian identity and not hold antisemitic beliefs, then I would agree (though rather few Christians seem historically to have managed this). But if it means that such beliefs and the practices that flow from them are not warranted and made plausible by recognisably and obviously Christian phenomena, then I would not.

One could support such a dubious conclusion only by constructing some entirely ahistorical and essentialist reading of the referent of the term 'Christianity,' and I suspect that some such reading underlies Stump and Kretzmann's offhand way with Kaufman's mention of Christian responsibility

for systemic evils of the kind discussed in this note. But the trouble with such ahistorical essentialisms is precisely that they are ahistorical. Being cognitively secure in one's possession of some view of what the expression 'essence of Christianity' means (to borrow a phrase from Ernst Troeltsch,⁷ a thorough reading of whom would greatly benefit both Stump and Kretzmann), means that one can remain happily untroubled by (even unaware of?) what most Christians have believed about important matters such as the status of the Jewish people before God and the modes of behavior toward Jews justified by this supposed status. One can, it seems, remain untroubled even when, as in this case, Christians have believed what they have believed upon the basis of what they have taken their own sacred texts to say about the matter.

It is a curious historical blindness on the part of Stump and Kretzmann which makes matters such as this either invisible to or irrelevant for them. And such a historical blindness is far less common among theologians (though they have many vices not commonly found among philosophers, vices distressingly evident in Kaufman's essay). It would be of great interest, then, to hear further discussion, both etiological and systematic, of this blindness among philosophers, and of its effects upon the misunderstandings between philosophers and theologians.

NOTES

1. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 7, number 3 (1990), pp. 329-39.

2. Gordon Kaufman, "'Evidentialism': A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 6, number 1 (1989), pp. 35-46.

3. For a recent thorough review of early Christian antisemitism and of the role played by the New Testament therein see the two-volume study *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 1 (*Paul and the Gospels*) edited by Peter Richardson and David Granskou, vol. 2 (*Separation and Polemic*) edited by Stephen G. Wilson (Waterloo, Ontario: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1986). Earlier important studies are Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), and Alan T. Davies' *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

4. For background on this see John C. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 118-21; Marcel Simon, *Versus Israel: Étude sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'empire romain (135-425)* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), pp. 239-63. An English version of two of Chrysostom's homilies on the Jews is available in Wayne Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 85-126. I quote this translation by page number in what follows. A more detailed study of the period and of this particular issue is Robert L. Wilken's *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

5. An English translation is available in *Luther's Works*, vol. 47, edited by Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 137-305. Page references in the text are to this translation. Assessments of Luther's theological attitudes to Jews are to be found in: Walter Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982); Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 71-74; Heinz Kremers, ed., *Die Juden und Martin Luther—Martin Luther und die Juden: Geschichte, Wirkungsgeschichte, Herausforderung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985).

6. On this see Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), pp. 5-28.

7. Ernst Troeltsch, "Was heisst 'Wesen des Christentums'?" in Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), pp. 386-451.