REVIEW ESSAY

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A LIBERAL JEW LOOKS AT CHRISTIANITY*

Over the centuries, no idea has separated Jews and Christians more than their antithetical conceptions of the nature and meaning of Jesus. Not surprisingly, the historical confrontations between Jews and Christians on the subject of Jesus have left a rich legacy of literary polemics, primarily in the areas of Biblical exegesis, theological argumentation, and historical interpretation. This kind of debate between Christians and Jews, in print at least, has largely subsided in Western civilization in modern times for reasons both extrinsic and intrinsic to the contemporary Jewish-Christian encounter. The increasing secularization of Western society with its concomitant weakening of organized religion, the rise of nationalism, the gradual separation of church and state and the displacement of religion as the central axis for social-communal association—all these factors have contributed to a public atmosphere of cordiality and tolerance for Judaism in some Western countries which, admittedly, often reflects more disinterest than genuine ecumenism. Moreover, the last hundred years have witnessed in some quarters important doctrinal reformulations of essential Christian religious ideas as Christian theologians grappled with secularism, modernization and the intellectual currents of the sciences. These facts, coupled with a greater frequency of social contact between Jews and Christians, and—of overarching importance—Christian introspection on the Holocaust and its implications for Christianity, have tended in more recent decades to promote expressions of religious brotherhood, respect, and solidarity on the one hand even as it dampened the inclination towards inter-religious debate

**Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response* by EUGENE B. BOROWITZ (New York: Paulist Press), 1980.

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on the other. Certainly, contemporary Jews have neither evinced any desire for theological debate with Christians nor have they taken any steps to initiate it.

This last phenomenon serves as the point of departure for Eugene Borowitz's *Contemporary Christian Christologies: A Jewish Response.* Deeply committed to inter-faith dialogue, Borowitz tries to demonstrate how Jews and Christians can fruitfully engage in what he calls "I-thou polemics" (p. 97). Ever insightful and suggestive, he is concerned with broad issues: Under what circumstances and with what kind of logic are these polemics possible; when can adherents of opposing faiths truly address each other's doctrines and when are such discussions reduced to phenomenological depictions and affirmations of their respective faiths? These broader questions emerge from the book's more specific and essential thrust. It critically analyzes the christologies of eleven modern leading Christian theologians suggested to the author by the American Theological Society as broadly representative of Christian thinking. The eleven span the theological spectrum, save for a right-wing Catholic or Orthodox thinker, and include Protestants and Catholics, liberals, post-liberals, neo-Orthodox and evangelical thinkers. Among the theologians considered are: John Knox, G. C. Berkouwer, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rosemary Ruether, Dorothee Soelle, Piet Schoonenberg, Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann, James Gustafson, and H. Richard Niebuhr.

In each chapter, Borowitz presents his understanding of the theologian's unique and nuanced theological interpretation of the meaning of Christ and interweaves it with his own Jewish assessment of the specific christology and its intellectual foundations. In the course of his appraisal, he delineates either the reasons for Jewish disagreement with the Christian interpretation and/or the extent to which aspects of Christian theological insight can stimulate Jewish thinking on the same issue within the Jewish religious context. Thus, for example, while repudiating the tenability of theological debate with Karl Barth and G. C. Berkouwer in the face of their persistent and clear christological triumphalism, Borowitz nevertheless claims that Jews can learn much, as he himself did, from Niebuhr's application of his christology to culture in articulating their own Torah approach to culture. Indeed, in one of the more stimulating parts of the work, he sketches a Jewish analogue to Niebuhr's paradigm outlined in his *Christ and Culture,* substituting Torah for Niebuhr's Christ in his own Jewish model (pp. 158 ff.). Similarly, he argues that Rahner's theological grappling with the need to explain the uniqueness of Christ could prove instructive for Jews in explicating their own doctrine of uniqueness as a people (pp. 82–83).

Borowitz's analyses of the christologies is generally lucid and

penetrating; his scholarship impressive. If a Jewish apologetic tone sometimes filters through the book, that is only natural and inherent in its very structure, since, like many other works of advocacy, it first presents another's ideas only to explain why the author must demur. To be sure, it would have been fascinating to read some Christian rejoinders both to his assessment of the christologies and to his own Jewish reactions, but that understandably could not have been expected within the framework of this type of work. Although a liberal Jew, many of Borowitz's "Jewish" responses to aspects of the christological ideas with which he dealt are fairly representative, for the most part, of a broad Jewish consensus on messianism and on the impossibility of a god-man, or perfected man, in Judaism. Nonetheless, on occasions when he counterposes a Christian stand with a Jewish one and develops the logic of Jewish-Christian disagreements, it is not always clear why the intellectual encounter is between Christian and Jew. Sometimes, he himself acknowledges the lack of a distinctive "Jewish" response to a given christology such as that of Pannenberg (p. 37). Often, though, the questions with which Borowitz confronts the various christologies even when he speaks on behalf of "Jewish" thinkers on Judaism and cites Jewish sources are of the type that any rational, thinking individual or philosopher or historian of religion might raise (cf. pp. 64–66, 78–79, 92).

Interesting as this book is for its substantive content, its underlying premises and methodological justifications are equally interesting and warrant further critical scrutiny. The book is not merely an academic or scholarly evaluation of representative christologies; rather, in a compelling and personal way, it enunciates Borowitz's impassioned advocacy of doctrinal confrontations. The author not only attempts to show *how* this can occur, but insists that it *must* take place. He asserts that such a confrontation will prove extraordinarily advantageous: it will lead to a better understanding of other people's theological doctrines which in turn will lead to a better understanding of other people, which ultimately, if the existentialists are right, will lead to a better knowledge of God who is best known through persons rather than ideas. Without doubt, Borowitz avers, understanding the theological doctrines of others will enhance the understanding of our own all the more. Hence, he writes: "I do not see that Christians and Jews can come to understand one another better unless they address each others' mature theologies (p. 7). . . . Only by directly confronting our deepest differences can we come to know one another fully" (p. 20). Moreover, understanding the religion of others will aid us to "properly comprehend our own religion" as "we see it in its distinctive divergence from other human faiths" (p. 20). This comprehension, however, will not be derived from maudlin civility which "usurps the

moral mandates of true communication" (p. 19). Rather, Borowitz argues, "we shall not properly understand or respect one another until we move from communication to argument" (p. 18). And such argument should transcend mere phenomenological descriptions of one's faith to others of a different faith and attain the level of "clashing truth claims" (p. 20). Baldly put, Borowitz asserts that "I-thou polemics are what we must aspire to if we are to have true human relationships despite profound religious differences" (p. 97). Even "the risk of conversion is worth taking, for what we are likely to learn from engagement with another religion should speak to us most profoundly about ourselves as well as about them" (p. 34).

This is rather heady material, indeed, which, from one perspective, merely reflects one side of the familiar dispute among Jewish thinkers as to the desirability or non-desirability of inter-faith dialogues. Without rehashing the various viewpoints, suffice it to say that Borowitz's abiding faith in the efficacy and necessity of theological dialogue—and in this case, the stress is on confrontation—is not at all as self-evident as he makes it out to be. It is arguable whether a better appreciation of another person or of one's self and of one's religion, let alone of God, necessarily follows from the understanding of another's theological doctrines; certainly, "true human relationships" between Christians and Jews are quite possible without "I-thou polemics."

But taking Borowitz's asserted premises at face value, it is fascinating to observe that even though his book seeks to demonstrate the tenability of informed rational theological confrontation and to work out its possible logical constructs, the work nevertheless seems to illustrate the problematic nature of doctrinal debate. Despite the author's intentions, it underscores the very limited circumstances in which theological discussions venturing beyond the phenomenological plane can actually take place. Consequently, Borowitz's faith in and urgent call for "I-thou polemics" loses much of its force, appeal, and utility.

First, the potential scope of the theological confrontation is severely restricted. As Borowitz correctly notes, traditionalists of one religion cannot meaningfully discuss theology with liberals of another religion or with liberals of their own religion for that matter. More important than their divergences over content are their mutually contradictory epistemological premises about who is the creator of religion—God or man—and the far-reaching and opposing theological conclusions emerging from this dispute. Hence, there is no common universe of discourse between traditionalists and liberals; Borowitz, for instance, acknowledges that he cannot engage in dialogue with Barth and Berkouwer who see in Christ the standard of all things.

Liberals should therefore talk with liberals and traditionalists with traditionalists, Borowitz suggests, although he shrewdly observes that in the latter case, it is hardly likely that the discussion will advance much beyond a simple phenomenological description of their respective faiths.

The most promising arena for genuine inter-faith confrontation would then seem to be one which features liberal Jewish and liberal Christian thinkers. And yet, here too, the possibilities appear limited and do not necessarily lead to discussions transcending the phenomenological level. For example, Borowitz contends that he cannot really respond to the christology of John Knox, "a paragon of the liberal approach to religion," whose position reflects mainline Protestantism. Knox's christology makes no universal claims for Christ, and consequently assumes validity only for those who already stand within the community of faith. This kind of articulation of religious doctrine makes no attempt to convince or to persuade others and hence does not promote inter-faith discussion. On the other hand, the christologies of liberals like Soelle and Schoonenberg which humanize Christ but do appear to advance universal claims in his name seem to encourage theological responses that go beyond mere phenomenological counter-descriptions. And yet, their forms of religious triumphalism—Christ is the "fulfillment" and the Christian faith is the "climax" of the human search and all should accept these views (pp. 56–58, 61–62, 64–65)—despite their liberal, rational intellectualizing, reflect more personal faith than unassailable rational propositions. And while Borowitz engages their christologies with well-reasoned criticism—his "I-thou polemics"—the discussion seems empty and is not very illuminating. Ultimately, Soelle and Schoonenberg's universal propositions for Christ represent but phenomenological testimony to their religious devotions; indeed, Borowitz cannot discern whether Soelle's willingness for dialogue "does not move beyond phenomenology to mission" (p. 57), while he himself eventually links Schoonenberg with Barth and Berkouwer (p. 69).

Given this analysis, one may surely raise the general questions as to whether or not substantive interfaith dialogue or confrontation is possible between liberal Jews and liberal christological triumphalists any more than with their theologically conservative counterparts, and whether or not triumphalist universalist claims emanating from liberal, seemingly more rational, sources really foster interfaith discussions that go beyond phenomenological descriptions of the respective faiths.[1] There are ample grounds to answer both questions in the negative. Disputing liberal versions of the claim for the finality of Jesus can be done either on general intellectual, historical and philosophical grounds—in which case it would not constitute a specifically Jewish

or interfaith enterprise—or by involving Jewish views against this belief, which Borowitz sometimes does, and which in the final analysis simply appears to pit the unsubstantiable theological claims of one faith against the other. Either it is not a specifically Jewish-Christian discussion, or if it is, it seems to be reduced fundamentally to the phenomenological plane.

But what kind of theological interchange is possible between non-triumphalist Jewish and Christian theologians—can they transcend the phenomenological domain in their doctrinal discussions? Borowitz's brief but very revealing analysis of the implications for Ruether's thought for dialogue with liberal Jews hints at the answer. Theological liberals such as Ruether and her Jewish counterparts cannot easily debate each other since they agree on so many religious and intellectual principles; in fact, Borowitz argues that discussions between them would revolve more around spiritual unity than religious disagreement (p. 63). Hence, the logic of doctrinal differences on Jesus as Christ/ Messiah would be reduced to a discussion of differing symbols and their respective practical utility. Where Ruether, for example, finds the core of Christianity in a symbolically interpreted Jesus—proleptic, paradigmatic not of an already perfected man but of the future perfection and unity of mankind—the liberal Jew adopts the Exodus and the Sinaitic covenant as his central symbolic models. The logic of disagreement between the liberal Jew and Christian as outlined by Borowitz might then find the Jew suggesting that the Jesus model tends to individualism whereas the symbols for Jewish collective religious experience are more appropriate for a social context (pp. 62–63). Beyond that, however, such religious liberals would have a good deal to share: the consequences of their symbols; how each group compensates for the underemphasis in its central symbol; how each deals with symbols of uniqueness in the face of its faith declaring universal truth (p. 63).

A defense of particular theological claims on the basis of preferred symbols, however, represents less theology than it does anthropology,and psychology; at this level, ostensible theological exposition really suggests a phenomenological description of a profound faith commitment and emotional attachment to an ethnic or distinct social-cultural group. Affirmations that "my symbols are better than your symbols" are quite problematic and unsupportable; at best, as Borowitz comments, perhaps a member of one faith can give one of another faith a glimpse as to how the symbol functions in his religion (pp. 67–68). Consequently, whereas rational polemics on doctrine between two religious liberals who can sincerely talk to each other might have appeared at first blush to be most promising, in fact, their kind of theological discussion tends to reflect a type of rational exis-

tentialism justifying their existing religous identity; each seeks to articulate through loyalty to a symbol or a group of symbols a rational case for their respective deeply-felt emotional religious loyalties. Ultimately, therefore, the doctrinal theological affirmations of such liberals—regardless of how logically and persuasively argued—remain phenomenological descriptions of their rational-existentialist faith. One may further contend that in an interfaith confrontation between two such liberal thinkers, there remains only one significant theological question, "the classic difficulty of liberal theologies" (p. 56)—the justification of one's particularism, or why one persists in adhering to his separate religous community despite espousing almost the identical religious ideas and eschatological visions as his theological counterpart.[2] Ironically, the answer has far less to do with theology in the strict sense than with all those other factors which promote feelings of positive group affiliation for the theologian. Borowitz alludes to this kind of analysis (p. 63), but neither gives it the emphasis which it merits nor draws the requisite conclusions for theological interchange which it would seem to suggest.

Contemporary Christologies invites our response on a number of levels. As an academic, scholarly work it is stimulating and instructive. One learns through its analysis how some of the foremost Christian theologians in our day are interpreting and understanding the Christ idea, and some of the possible responses available to Jews, be they strictly "Jewish" or of a more general nature. On the other hand, the clear orientation which permeates the book and serves as its norm—"I-thou polemics" are of paramount importance for contemporary Jewish-Christian understanding and ought to be undertaken—leaves much room for question. In the final analysis, according to Borowitz's own schema, the field for such theological confrontation is confined to a narrow ridge, and even then, it is not clear that theologians are capable of advancing their theological arguments much beyond descriptions of their personal faith.

NOTES

1. The issue of liberal religious triumphalism, a much neglected subject, is discussed within a 19th-century context by my "Judaism Triumphant: Isaac Mayer Wise on Unitarianism and Liberal Christianity," *AJS Review*, 7-8, 1982-1983. Many of the themes of liberal religious triumphalism are apposite here as well.
2. See my unpublished paper delivered at the 1983 Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, "Towards an American Jewish Identity: Reform Judaism and the Unitarian Challenge."