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SLANDER AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

AS AN OVERREACTION TO SHOAH-HOLOCAUST

This Thinksheet is born of a growing worry: The next wave of antisemitism--historically, it's improbable there won't be one, where- & when-ever it may break out--will blame the Jews, & some "Jew-loving" Christian slanderers of Christianity, for using Shoah-Holocaust to incite hatred of the NT & Christianity. Every time I've pointed out the danger of this rising animus, I've been accused of underrating Hitler's "final solution" & depreciating the Holocaust & being "insensitive" to "Jewish feelings" & even "defending antisemitism." Enough, already. It's time for a small backlash from Willis, a mere trifle in comparison with the massive backlash that's abuilding in the gentile populace. (A current parallel: I've been thankful for antiabortionists' fanatical excesses, for they've strengthened the prochoice forces, as in the demonstrations in 150 American cities & towns yesterday.)....In addition to my own research, much of what follows is based on a masterful article in the current JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE (Fall/89, pp.419-441), Luke T. Johnson's "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic."

1. Excess, including rhetorical excess, is a natural response to horror. Historical perspective & fairness demand both that the horror not cease to be felt & that the rhetoric decrease its screechiness to the decibel level where the voice of **reason**, with its mission of **reality**-confrontation, can also be heard. Was S-H unique? So is every historical event. Mysterious in its depth of evil? How then could anyone (eg, Christians) be blamed for it? And isn't it just an instance of German thouroughness in all things good & evil? Incomparable? In size, yes; but everything about WWII was incomparable in size. In success toward genocide? No, it killed a smaller % of Jews than several other genocidal efforts known to history. In the technology of murder? No, it was a straight-line development from the beginning of modern war technology in the Napoleonic era. Am I trying to cut it down to size? Of course: who but hell gains anything by our permitting it to remain outsize?

2. Oppressors love to have **victims blaming each other**. Antisemitic Christians (an oxymoron though the phrase be, ideally) blame Jews for giving Hitler occasion to use them as scapegoats in gaining power: Jews blame Christians for being at least uninterested in what Hitler did to Jews. Neopagan Hitler despised both religions. How historians of the future will account for the Nazi neopagan volcano we can't now know. But we can & do know something of the pernicious effects of continuing to blame "Christianity" for Hitler.

3. This continuing blaming is supported by increasing **hatred of the NT**, which is fed both by this blaming & by our culture's increasingly aggressive secularism, which hates both Christianity & Judaism (as Hitler, on a neopagan religious basis, did). Adding to this hatred are various liberationisms based on sex, race, class, & nation. As I love the NT more than any other literature (the OT being for me the second love, far above all the competition in the world's literature), I rise to its defense when I believe it's being unfairly attacked (though I've often been attacked for my radical modern methods of interpreting it). Sometimes this hatred is overt, as in the Jew H.Bloom (LTJ 423): "I am an enemy of the NT. My enmity is life long, and intensifies as I study its text more closely." To whatever extent HB connects S-H & Christianity, to that extent his hatred of the NT is greater; & Jewish hatred of the NT & Christianity cannot be good news for the future of Jews, who will remain minority islands (even as Israel!) in gentile oceans. And sometimes this hatred is covert, as in Christian unqualified condemnation of "the antisemitism in the NT," a condemnation that underlies my own church's (UCC) Synod '87 resolution entitled "The Relationship between the UCC and the Jewish Community"--on which my 9p. Thinksheet #2353.

4. Through the decades I've maintained, & still do, that my religion's birth literature exhibits no more **separation language**--child from parent--than was necessary for the dual task of separation & identity: the NT is necessarily antiJewish, as the parallel Jewish literature is antiChristian. An important difference: Whereas the Jews need not, & don't, make continuous public use of that Jewish literature, we Christian do, & must, make continuous use of the NT. We need not, & should not, emphasize the antiJewish passages, such as Mt.23, L.7^{30} 16^{14}, Jn.8^{44-47} 12^{42f}, IThes.2^{15f}, Ro.11^{28}, 2Cor.4^{3}, Phil.3^{18f}, Rev.3^{9}. But we cannot (though some insist we must) dispense with the glorious Letter to the Hebrews, which happens to use the Platonic substance/shadow analogy in its birth-of-Christianity story. (I will not protest when Jewish apologists

allege that the earliest Christians abandoned the Jewish substance & went chasing off into Greeky shadows. Why shouldn't the analogy be used on both sides?)

5. LTJ is even stronger than I here. He says (441) that the NT's antiJewish language is (my boldface) "**remarkably mild**" "by the measure of Hellenistic conventions, and certainly by the measure of contemporary Jewish polemic." "By being placed in its appropriate social and literary setting--that of polemic between ancient schools--the NT slander against Jews appears in a new light....the polemic is more intelligible....the use of this language everywhere in the fragmented Judaism of the first century. Readers today hear the NT's polemic as inappropriate only because the other voices are silent. Historical imagination can restore them." The alternative is a double historical distortion: Jews are made to appear "blameless," & Christians "nasty" with an inexplicable nastiness. A third way to go is to convict the Jews of hypocrisy. But all three ways are unhistorical, irrelevant, futile, unfair, & tragically dangerous. And "recognizing that both messianist [ie, Christian] and non-messianist Jews use the rhetoric associated with Hellenistic philosophical schools helps establish the hypothesis that this is the appropriate context for analyzing their interrelationships." "Grasping the conventional nature of the polemic can rob such language of its mythic force and therefore its capacity for mischief. Nothing relativizes plausibility structures like pluralism. Knowing that all parties to a debate spoke in a certain way forces us to relativize our party's version." Eg, Mt. lays a curse on Jews; but "curses were common coinage in those fights."

6. Because of ignorance-&-consequent-failure to compensate for the literary-historical context, some scholars have worked up an <u>unjustifiable hostility</u> against the NT. (I am being generous: some of these scholars would not let knowledge of the polemic context expounded by LTJ cool their hostility.) R.Reuther (FAITH AND FRATRICIDE: THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF ANTI-SEMITISM [Seabury/74]) holds that NT Christology is ineluctably antisemitic; & A.R.Eckhardt (JEWS AND CHRISTIANS: THE CONTEMPORARY MEETING [Ind.UP/86], p.153) speaks of Christianity's "christological idolatries." Some claim that supersessionism, the teaching that Christianity is the successor to Judaism (the NT's major motif on the matter, the coexistence of Judaism & Christianity being the minor motif here), leads more or less straight to S-H. Luke-Acts, says J.T.Pawlikowski (LTJ 419), is so supersessionist as to be "by far the most anti-Jewish book" in the NT, "posing far more difficulties" than Jn. Eckhardt (ibid.63): "the traditional Christian attitude to Jews and Judaism helped make the Abomination [ie, S-H] possible and perhaps even inevitable has become a truism of recent historical scholarship" [false & tragic "truism," say I!]. Even the splendid scholar J.T.Sanders (LTJ ibid.) shamefully comments on Luke-Acts, "A final solution[!] of the Jewish problem has been indicated."

7. Have you ever been with Jews when they fall into mutual insult & slander? I've seen it only as rhetorical jesting, & what pleasure it is to hear! The great Jewish comedians draw on their people's stock of slanderous utterance, to everybody's amusement. It's a semitic power: the Arabs have it to, but are less inclined to use it in jest, as a social game. Put this power down in the midst of the first-century Hellenistic **rhetoric of slander** (LTJ 420, my boldface), & add the fact that (LTJ 422, referencing Josephus extensively) "the Jews of first-century Palestine and the diaspora were in fact often fanatical and violent," & you have the picture of squabbling Jewish parties, including the Christian sect, cussing each other out. All very undignified for our modern taste. What, then, of the massive literature intending to exonerate the Jews from the death of Jesus & lay it all on the Romans? Let's have another look, suggests LTJ, who here makes me nervous: I'd rather not return any of the old supports for the charge of deicide. (Josephus, LIFE 197-203, says the Sanhedrin sent emissaries to arrest or kill him.)

8. LTJ rejects efforts to <u>sanitize the NT</u> by (1) censorship, (2) overcompensation (the claim that the Jews were too pacific to have anything to do with Jesus' death), or (3) claiming mistaken attribution (eg, the NT is attacking just bad Jews, not all Jews--or even not Jews at all, but only Judaizing gentiles). He sniffs at liberationists' desire to censor the NT, rewriting it to their specs--eg, "inclusive language" (421): "not much is left over when every sensibility is assuaged."