

Though Christianity supersedes Judaism, love supersedes theology

This morning in Theology TableTalk, we discussed Stephen Prothero's AMERICAN JESUS chap.7 "[Jesus as] Rabbi"--on how American Jews/Christians have looked on Jesus & through him on each other's religion--each religion using the Jesus-link to make the other religion like itself--e.g., "The aim of Rabbi Stephen Wise [who was the early 20th-c.'s liberalizing Jew, parallel to the Protestant Harry Emerson Fosdick] was not to make Judaism more Christian but to make Christianity more Jewish": Christianity does not supersede Judaism, so Jews--while welcoming home their prodigal son Jesus from the far country of Christianity--should not become Christians. At mid-century, another rabbi (who had a Yale PhD in NT, & whom I knew in biblical gatherings) was as Jesus-leaning as anyone could get without becoming a Christian, but he was as insistent that Christianity does not supersede Judaism, so there's a permanent great gulf fixed between the two religions: "Jesus Christ is to me the outstanding personality of all time, all history, both as Son of God and as Son of Man. Everything he ever said or did has value for us today and that is something you can say of no other man, alive or dead. There is no easy middle ground to stroll upon. You either accept Jesus or reject him." (Prothero 258, from Sholem Asch, though the words could be those of scholar Samuel Sandmel).

On his journeys, Paul was hounded by antisupersessionist preachers determined to block Jewish conversions to Christianity, to "re-Judaize" Jews' who'd converted, & to "Judaize" converts from paganism. Until almost a generation after the Holocaust, there never had been any Christian antisupersessionists except Christians who had converted to Judaism.

All non-Christian Jews are antisupersessionists: Christianity does not (in the literal Latin) "sit above" (& so displace, replace, supplant, demote to an inferior position): what Jew would convert without coming to believe that the move would effect a personal advance in faith & life, a "sitting above" where one had been sitting? The NT is massively supersessionist, & Jews who convert see themselves as making a spiritual advance in response to a "come-up-higher" invitation: by grace, they supersede their old religion. Traditionally, such Jews are cut off from their families (not as bad as the situation of Muslims who convert to Christianity: the Qur'an commands that they be cut off from life).

What to make, then, of this new category, *Christian* antisupersessionists? (How is this not an oxymoron?) (1) Instead of saying don't convert to Christianity (which is the force of Jewish antisupersessionism), they're saying to Jews "You needn't convert to Christianity in order to be saved." Something to be said, perhaps, for the rhetoric of reversing the force of a word from negative to positive--but its confusing, & the negative persists in a revised form. (2) These Christians would have done better, & accentuated their positive, if they'd called themselves adsessionists (Jews & Christians "sitting alongside" each other on the same level, neither above the other)....This heretical move reduces Christianity to a religion for gentiles, as though Ro.1.16 had read "the gospel is the power of God to the Greek" (dropping "to the Jew first"). Jews, take a pass; it's OK to bypass Jesus; he's not "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn.14.6) for you: you don't need him. Some of these heretics soften their message by saying to Jews "It's OK for you to skip Jesus in this life, but here-after you'll have to submit to him" (Phil.2.10-11)--to which the obvious rejoinder is, "If eventually, why not now?"

1 In consonance with the NT's major message, this Thinksheet in the first word of its title concedes that "Christianity supersedes Judaism," but "love supersedes theology": Christianity "sits above" Judaism (as, says the Talmud with opposite force, Jesus sits on the shoulders of Moses & Elijah ["the Law and the Prophets"]), & love--the biblical love-commandment (even for enemies!)-sits above theology.

2 Now, you cannot love your enemies till first you make some: people who design life so as to have no enemies have no occasion to love enemies & so cannot obey Jesus' command "Love your enemies." But if you're convinced of a religion (i.e., a comprehensive way of seeing the world & living in it), all those convinced of other religions are theoretically & potentially enemies of yours simply by offering alternative competing comprehensive-exclusive ways of seeing the world & living in it: just by faithfully believing their religions, Jews & Muslims deny all the essentials of Christianity--the

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309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
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incarnation, the cross-atonement, Jesus' resurrection, the church as a divine creation, the parousia (Jesus' "representing"). In that these denials are explicit in no other religions, Judaism & Islam are our only explicit, & in this sense our worst, enemies. The rivalry is somewhat mollified in that its sibling: we three are, culturally, "the sons of Abraham": within the analogy, fights among ourselves are family fights. (An historical military analogy: near death, Alexander divided his empire among his three generals--but they didn't live in peace with one another.) NOTE: It's more accurate of two sons & a cousin: Islam is more different from Judaism & Christianity than they are from each other....

3indeed, in some regards they are the same--e.g., life's aim as the sanctification ("hallowing") of the Name, daily life ("the blessing" of food), & the world. In these regards, Christianity is Judaism released from tribalism (Second Isaiah's "a light to the nations")--as I put it in 2076.5, the "paradox" that "we are one faith but two religions; or one spirituality but two devotions; or one basic way of seeing the world but two communities living significantly differently in it." Further, we share the double-love commandment (though in the triple-love commandment [God, neighbor, enemy] Christianity supersedes Judaism); & when we act lovingly toward & with one another, Jews & Christians transcend theological differences without (sentimentally) trivializing them.

Jn. Paul II's theology was supersessionist, but in love he transcended theology: the first pope to attend synagogue worship & to put a message in the Wailing Wall (bemoaning Christian persecution of our "elder brother").

4 Among T.S. Eliot's bon mots is "the greatest treason" as "to do the right thing for the wrong reason." Well, Christian antisupersessionism is an instance of doing a wrong thing (say, robbing Christianity [Peter] to pay Judaism [in the saying, Paul]) for the right reason, viz. to improve Christian/Jewish relationships. Theoretically, the more Christians reduce/shrink/shave their scandals of particularity, the happier Jews will be. Actually, however, this move raised suspicions in some Jews: what new weirdness is this that those Christians have come up with? Can it be true humility when as a gesture of friendship toward another's religion one abuses one's own religion?

The Jewish eyes through which I see all this (& much else in the historic and contemporary confrontations between Judaism-Jews & Christianity-Christians) have been those of Rabbi CHAIM STERN, my closest Jewish friend (on whom I've never written a Thinksheet). He was America's most influential author in Jewish liturgics & a noted poet (in Hebrew & English). I wore my usual pectoral cross while preaching & lecturing in his temple, & he countered my supersessionism by joking that writing the NT was not a good idea. Upon the publication of each of his liturgical works, he would present me or Loree with a copy. Here are three, with his penned inscriptions:

GATES OF PRAYER (Central Conf. of Am. Rabbis/75), the 779-p official prayerbook of Reform Judaism: "To Willis--with deep affection and respect, for a friend and fellow-pilgrim on the way. Chaim" It was the first copy after his own. For use in synagogue, it's called "the BLUE book."

GATES OF THE HOUSE (Central Conf of Am. Rabbis/77--subtitled "The New Union Home Prayerbook," as the title of the former was "The New Union Prayerbook"). Why didn't he give it to me? Because while synagogue is papa's spiritual domain, home is mama's spiritual domain--so he took it to our home when he knew I was in NYTS 37 miles south of Chappaqua, & handed it to Loree: "For Loree & Willis--in friendship--Chaim Stern" (The subsubtitle is "Prayers and Readings for Home and Synagogue.") It's called "the GREEN book."

GATES OF REPENTANCE (Central Conf. of Am. Rabbis/78--subtitled "The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe"): * "To Willis--Once again, [in Hebrew, trd.] in friendship and [in Hebrew] shalom. [In Hebrew] Chaim" He told me he titled all these basic three prayerbooks "Gates....," to honor a holy rebbe of his boyhood in Brooklyn: people called him "Open Gates [shearà]" because heavens' gates were open wherever he was--& prayer, worship, is walking in in penitence & praise & hope.I could not be more serious about both assertions in this Thinksheet's title.