

INTERROGATIVE TRIALOG: JEWS, CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS

Dear Tim:

On this shrinking globe, & even more in our increasingly multireligious America, God (I have no doubt) is calling devotees of the three Abraham religions to question one another in the interests of love, truth, & cooperation for the good of humanity & the only planet our species will ever inhabit. Please read this letter in light of this conviction of mine.

THIS THINKSHEET IS A CONCERNED COMMENTARY ON YOUR "A MEDITATION FOR GOOD FRIDAY ['00], MATTHEW 26:30-27:50," A COPY OF WHICH A "SHOCKED" PARISHIONER OF YOURS GAVE ME.

1 I'm writing this on what used to be called "Columbus Day" but now, in the interest of smearing Columbus & noble-savage honoring of the Amerinds, is called (e.g., in our United Church of Christ Calendar) "Indigenous Peoples' Day" (as well as, which I approve, "Yom Kippur"). Your Holy Week "Interfaith" sermon was also politically correct, as a smear against your/our religion vis-a-vis (in this case) the noble Jews. Of the three underlined terms in this Thinksheet's 1st ¶, it's a grave error to think that the concerns of the 1st & the 3rd can be advanced by slighting the 2nd, as you did. Love & cooperation are not advanced, but only polluted, by sentimentality.

2 Said parishioner, in a note to me, accuses your sermon of having "thrown out basic Christian doctrines." The accusation comes not from some fundamentalist but from a United Church of Christ ordained minister who is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, NYC, no conservative school. I hope to add some weight to her accusation: she says that in her conversation to protest what you did, she "did not get through to" you.

3 Your 1st clause is "The day of betrayal [meaning Good Friday] is upon us." Yes, the day of your betrayal of the Faith. Why do we call it *Good* Friday if it was, as you say, "the day when it all went wrong"? "Good" carries the triumph of the Cross, but your sad sermon looks instead only at the double tragedy of Jesus' death & the Christian side of storytelling distortions about it. "Good" signals the Good News, the Gospel, which I find nowhere in your sermon, though you are an ordained Christian minister.

4 I thought perhaps this suppression of the Gospel was a disgusting thing liberal ministers are inclined to do in the presence of Jews, but on inquiry I discovered there were no Jews present even though the occasion was called "Interfaith." (Almost 40 years ago I & the rabbi were the nucleus of the "Chappaqua Interfaith Council" parallel with the (Christian) "Chappaqua Interchurch Council." In these latter days, has the latter collapsed into the former?)

NOTE TO MY READERS: Below, I refer the the sermon's ¶s by numerals; but you are not disadvantaged in not having the whole text of the sermon: I quote all that's necessary.

5 In ¶2 you say that atonement theories & Easter are "supposed to add up to my salvation." Well, man, do they or don't they? Do you, personally, still bear the Christian witness to the Cross & Resurrection?...."It seems wrong to me that we should devise ways for this day to no longer trouble us." What Christian is no longer troubled by the Crucifixion? What "odd denial" "seems to be going [on]"? At this point in my reading of your sermon, I sensed that you were about to echo the current politically correct exoneration of Jews / condemnation of Romans vis-a-vis Jesus' death.

6 Your ¶s 3 & 4 suggest that the whole thing, Jesus' Cross/Resurrection, was an adiaphoron, unnecessary to salvation: Christianity unneeded! "I am not convinced that this had to happen to Jesus, the one we now call Christ, in order to obtain some kind of salvation." Blithely, it seems, you see the Christian Faith as violating the law of parsimony: it's more than the minimum hypothesis for explaining good as emanating from Jesus! How you have wandered away from the sound Christian teaching I know you got at Princeton Seminary!

7 How differently do you sound from an enemy of the Faith? "What kind of world do we live in that would require such a sacrifice [as the Cross]?" (The Christian answer: This kind of world.) Next sentence: "What kind of God are we imagining who would demand such an outcome?" (The Christian answer: This kind of God, the biblical God, the only real God.) You continue ¶5 with a fatuous idealism: "In a better world it would not have happened....I think we must, on Good Friday, entertain the possibility that Jesus died in vain."

8 ¶6: "The redemption that was to come in the death of Christ is proved impotent almost every time you pick up a New Youk Times." Did you never learn to read the newspaper *with Christian eyes-mind-heart*?

9 ¶8: With your good theological education, why were you (recently!) surprised to find "anti-Jewish" statements in early Christian literature? If you were (recently!) that naive, doubtless you've yet to be surprised by finding anti-Christian rhetoric in early rabbinic literature. The "anti" theme was, & continues to be, the negative in group-identity literature. (See my Thinksheet #2249 [herewith], "Mutual Blasphemers, love one another!") TWO WRONGS: (1) Imagining that this negative strain can be "cleansed" from community-defining sacred literature; (2) Reading the texts as though they were behavioral guides, injunctions to abuse those defined out of the community: we Jews/Christians/Muslims are to engage in mutual interrogation (for the three reasons listed in this Thinksheet's 1st ¶), not mutual execration! And we should each sophisticate followers in the proper reading of the particular community's sacred books.

10 ¶9: You are guilty of Christianity-bashing when you say "there is much (!) in our Holy Scripture [you mean here the NT] that is anti-Jewish." *Much?* In bulk, there is very little. Your denigration of the NT is unworthy of your calling.

11 As a biblical scholar, I smile when you use historical-critical speculations you agree with to declare what is "simply not true" in the Passion Narrative in the Gospels: most of what those speculators claim they *do* know, they *can't* know. (¶s10-13)

11 While you conclude with a note of hope for what we can do (without crediting what God has done & is doing), the mood of your sermon is gloomy, maudlin, even mawkish, in the vein of post-Holocaust be-kind-to-Jews Christian rhetoric, a rhetoric that does neither Jews nor Christian any good. Indeed, this shameless exploiting of Shoah is as corrupting & dangerous when Christians do it as when Jews do it without being interrogated.

The socalled "Holocaust" (Greek, wholly burned up) was indeed horrible, & it has been easy to yield to the temptation to treat it romantically (emotionally) instead of realistically (critically)--violating both truth & honor. Much of the Holocaust literature lacks authenticity: the Christian materials smell of excessive repentance about what bad news we've been to "them"; the Jewish materials smell of excessive, bathetic mourning over what bad news we've been to "them" (as, e.g., the Washington DC Holocaust Museum gives not the slightest suggestion that anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism is or ever has been anything other than a Christian phenomenon).

Frankly, Holocaust propaganda (in which I must roughly put your sermon) sickens me, sickens (in my opinion) society. After the 1st two years of the annual Community Holocaust Service, I stopped going. But I made an exception this year because the speaker was Krister Stendahl, a scholar colleague of mine whom I've met through the decades at Society of Biblical Literature meetings. But Krister did not break out of the sick pattern. His most memorable image was of the cross being turned around to function as a sword (translation: aren't Christians simply awful?).

NonJews are sick of all this Holocaust-pushing, which thus ironically feeds antisemitism. And the Jewish tradition itself provides a caution & corrective to excessive mourning in the case of professional mourning, i.e., hiring persons especially good at breast-beating & wailing (whether paid or not as early as Jer.[9.17-19]). The early rabbis worried: "it is forbidden to overstress mourning" (M.K.27b).

The very use of the term "Holocaust" is an instance of this sick excess: Hitler came no where near the "total" elimination of Jews, though he intended it. I'm glad to note that the more honest Hebrew word "Shoah" (destruction) is gradually replacing the inflated Greek word.

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- "Lope" - 10 - 10 = 0

Who Is On Trial?

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ives
First Congregational Church

Chappaqua, New York 10514

A Meditation for Good Friday

Matthew 26:30-27:50

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The day of betrayal is upon us, the day of denial is this one, the day when even the messiah felt that God had abandoned him, even Jesus felt forsaken. This is the day that must trouble every Christian because today is when it all went wrong.

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That is why I believe this is a day that should trouble us. Perplexity and confusion must be a part of this day because I am not sure we have figured it out yet. Oh yes I am aware of well thought out theories of atonement that explain why today had to happen. And yes I know that the suffering of Good Friday should be easily erased by the splendor of Easter morning. And I know that somehow all of this is supposed to add up to my salvation and yours too. But it seems wrong to me that we should devise ways for this day to no longer trouble us. It seems like some kind of odd denial going.

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It is a little like the Job story that way. Job does recover all that he lost and more but somehow that doesn't quite make it right. Job suffers an incredible reversal of fortune, he loses his family all of them, and he suffers painful afflictions of the body and soul. And though all is restored how could he ever be the same person that he once was? What happened to Job was brutal and it strains credulity to believe that all was redeemed for him.

why should he?

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In the same way I am hard pressed to believe that the resurrection of Easter morning redeems what happened on Good Friday, or redeems all the sins of the world, or makes right the mountain of suffering that passes for living every day. Further, I am not convinced that this had to happen to Jesus the one we now call Christ in order to obtain some kind of salvation.

What kind of world?

What kind of world do we live in that would require such a sacrifice? What kind of God are we imagining who would demand such an outcome? In a better world it would not have happened and I am not sure that his death has made that world that killed him then appreciably better today. So I must

Holocaust!

and I think we must, on Good Friday, entertain the possibility that Jesus died in vain.

6 This possibility lingers not because of the weakness of our theology but because of the overwhelming reality of today. The redemption that was to come in the death of Christ is proved impotent almost every time you pick up a New York Times especially this time of year. Columbine, Oklahoma City, Waco all examples of when evil won. This time of April also includes holocaust remembrance day and of course there is no more frightening example of the absence of God than the killing of six million of Jesus' own people. Good Friday did not end on one day long ago. And it did was not defeated by Easter Sunday. Rather it lives on in millions of ways large and small. Millions of examples of human betrayal and denial, and most frightening so many examples of God's absence.

+7-7 Good Friday is not over and can not easily be dismissed no matter what we know or what we believe.

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I have had a bit of a Good Friday Lent myself. Not that anything tragic has happened but I discovered something that has truly tested my faith and challenged me as a Christian leader. I did a series of lectures this Lent called provocatively "Is It Christian to be Anti-Semitic?" The answer I thought was obvious. I thought for certain when I started this inquiry that I would find out that any anti-Jewish feelings in the church would have only surfaced after the church became a part of the Roman Empire. I thought it would be the pagan Romans who would introduce such hatred into the church that I loved. But the truth is that most of the church fathers were extremely anti-Jewish and if their writings were published today they would cause an uproar and be condemned as anti-Semitic. And these writings are not from the lunatic fringe. St. Augustine and St. Ambrose were chillingly anti-Jewish. In fact it is hard to find anyone from the early church who is not.

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But that is not what was most troubling to me. I also came to realize that there is much in our Holy Scripture that is anti-Jewish and finds its way there because of an ongoing rivalry between church and synagogue when the gospels were written down. Please notice how many times the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees are villains in our many sacred stories. Could it be that the very best of the Jewish people could be as bad as they appear in our scripture?

10 But the part of what I found out that is pertinent to this day is that there is good reason to believe that many of the details of Jesus' trial, the story that we just read are simply not true. They were put there to shift the blame for the death of Jesus from the Romans to the Jews.

11 Listen to this. Jewish scholar Paul Winter in his influential book The Trial of Jesus convincingly argues that if indeed such a trial as the Gospels describe took place, the Sanhedrin achieved the considerable feat of breaking just about every rule in the book. One of the most relevant rules prohibits holding a capital trial by night or on a festival. We are asked to believe by the synoptic writers that Jesus was arraigned before the Sanhedrin on the evening of the Passover celebration. That is unlikely at best.

12 We are asked to believe that the best of the Jewish people would plot and want the death of Jesus because they disagreed with his theology. It was not blasphemy to claim to be the messiah. It is blasphemy to claim to be divine. Many people have claimed to be the messiah, they may have been wrong but they were not guilty of blasphemy. Actually according to the story one of the chief priests commits blasphemy by saying out loud the name of God when he says "tell us if you are the Son of God." They may have had theological differences but that is not uncommon among rabbis, or priests, or any religious leaders but only seriously flawed people would seek the death of another because of religious differences. And I might point out that it was unlawful for a Jew to kill and those who were most interested in following the law and maintaining the law would hardly be the ones who would want to break it because they were so jealous of Jesus.

13 The story also wants us to believe that Pilate unwillingly put Jesus to death because of the demands of the Jewish crowd. Pilate was no sweet heart. From anything we know from other sources of the character or conduct of Pilate the picture of Pilate trying to defend Jesus from the howling Jewish mobs is ludicrous. Pilate was eventually relieved from his post for brutality in his administration that was excessive even in Roman eyes. It is hard to imagine the man who killed easily and often caring much about the integrity of Jesus or the guilt he might harbor over this or giving in to a mob of Jews that he thought little of.

14 And there is more but my purpose here is not to prove some scholarly theory about our sacred book but to open the possibility that our sacred book is not excluded from the darkness in the world. Just because we are in the sanctuary of the Christian church, just because we try hard to be true to holy

scripture, just because we celebrate the decisive day of Easter it does not mean the darkness does not remain.

18 As the Pope's trip pointed out we share a history that has injured too many in the name of the very one who came to love this world into redemption. It remains only a possibility just as it was on that first Good Friday and for that we should grieve, but for that we should also find hope.

16 It remains a possibility so it has incredible potential. In spite of Columbine, Oklahoma City, Waco, or the holocaust itself. In spite of the awful history of anti-Semitism and the guilt the church must bear, despite the darkness that is alive in our world and our souls we stand on the edge of possibility and that is the hope that can move us through. The glorious truth about this God made world is that in the very next moment we can make the decisions that begin the healing, relieve the suffering, change the darkness into light. We have that freedom, now all we need is the courage, the faith, and the hope to make salvation real. It only seems impossible on Good Friday. In Christ Jesus. Amen.

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