

Christians and Jews – together across abysses into the future?

Meetings with obstacles by Rudi-Karl Pahnke

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1. Everyone who gets close to the reality of Christian-Jewish history and takes note of it critically and conscientiously – that means with his own conscience – gets shocked sometime or the other about the enigmatic and branched out Christian anti-Judaism.

Just two examples from the 20th century are to be named here:

Walter Grundmann was very familiar to the priests and theologians of the GDR as being a scientific commentator of the Gospels. They read and used his comments for their preparations of the sermons and for their own work.. Those who were interested more specifically knew about and used the “Umwelt des Urchristentums I-III” (Environment of the ancient Christianity I-III), from which he was the publisher and contributor. Many priests and church employees knew that Grundmann was president of the seminar of catechisms in Thuringia. Since 1970 he had been lecturer at the theological seminar in Leipzig. In 1974 he became church councillor in Thuringia. What we did not know until lately was the fact that he was one of the leading “Deutschen Christen” (German Christians) – a Nazi on the podium and on the pulpit who propounded the most abstruse theories to take the Jew-being away from Jesus. Grundmann was leader of an institute “for the exploration and disposal of the Jewish influence on the German church life” (zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben) in the university town of Jena, where he also was a professor. In his memorandum for the foundation of this institute, Walter Grundmann wrote – shortly after the pogrom in November 1938 - : “ In the churches, the decision against Jewry must be carried out in all clarity and from this decision, appropriate measures must be taken for all areas of church and religious life.” After the war, Grundmann was more or less rehabilitated – after discussions with his church-leadership of Thuringia. The generations that followed heard nothing about his past history and read his comments. Something similar happened with other persons from the area of this institute (see Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, Hrgin.: “ Christlicher Antijudaismus und Antisemitismus”, Arnoldhainer Texte Band 85 – “Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism”)

As a second example, pastor Walter Steiner is to be mentioned.

After the war, Steiner was pastor at the Galiläa-church of Berlin until 1961. He lived in West-Berlin and held this pastor-post in East-Berlin. In 1961 his parish-job ended because of his domicile in West-Berlin. What the parish in East-Berlin did not know however, was the fact that Steiner was a radical, German Christ, Nazi and member of the SA, who not only had been standing up for the removal of the Jewish in Christianity and for the removal of the Old Testament from the Christian bible, but that he also had set on fire and destroyed the synagogue at the Fränkelufer in Berlin-Kreuzberg, together with his “SA-Sturm” (SA-Storm) in the November pogrom. When he came back from the war after 1945, his parish in Neukölln did not accept him as a pastor anymore, so he was given a parish-job in the Eastern part of Berlin.

2. The New Testament as a document of Christian faith is on the one hand an evidence for
- the entire roots of the early Christians in the Jewry (Jesus / Jesus movement), it is
 - on the other hand an evidence for the rejection from Jewry (Paul, e.g. Phil 3, 2-10),
 - the struggle for the solidarity with the Jewry and with the Jew-Christianity (Paul – Romans 9-11, especially 11,29 / Epheser letter, 2,11pp)
 - and the turn against the Jewry (e.g. Matthew 21,43 / John 8, 43p.)

(see Rosemary Ruether, “Nächstenliebe und Brudermord” – Compassion and fratricide)

3. The church shows in its history (especially after the “Konstantinische Wende” – Constantinic Turn, but also before) mostly an anti-Jewish face – up to outrageous comments and disgraceful excesses of murder (e.g. crusades / inquisition / among other things Luther’s paper “Von den Juden und ihren Lügen” – About the Jews and their lies / legends of host desecrations).

4. In 1934 the protestant “ Bekenkende Kirche” (Confessional Church – in Germany under National Socialism) itself remained silent about the preposterous anti-Semitic challenge of the Nazis and of the German Christians in the “theologische Erklärung von Barmen” (theological statement of Barmen). Karl Barth, among others, confessed it as guilt after the war.

5. During the pogrom of November 11th (“Reichskristallnacht”) the church remained silent about the destruction of the houses of God and about the killing, internment, persecution and disparagement of Jewish people – apart from very few and single exeptions.

6. The Christian churches did not take action against the extermination of the European Jewry (the Shoah)- except for single persons, who risked their lives in order to save their Jewish citizens – they were likewise willing helpers of Hitler. Some were definitely active in person, but most of them showed their willingness by looking away and by keeping quiet.

7. After 1945, the churches did not reappraise their own history – anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in the churches were covered over and concealed to a large extent. Only after 1960 (Church-day in Berlin 1961 – “Der ungekündigte Bund” – the association not to be under notice of resignation) it came to a change of views and to a gradual reorientation that has not been completed until today.

8. The reorientation of the churches regarding the relationship to the Jewry

- is – if it is happening – connected with retroactive effects and identity problems for the church itself;
- because it would have to critically tackle with its own history,
- with the anti-Judaism that is probably existing in its entire history,
- with the results of the critical theory,
- with the intention to mission (Jew-mission) in the past and in present times,
- with its Christology and its implications,
- with the traditional and for the Christian formation of dogmata constitutive theory of trinity and theology.

9. The consequences of that are, e.g.: The church accordingly and, above all, definitely has to establish, to reflect and to attest the Jewry as its source and its parent religion, from which the church does *not* keep a distance.

10. Christianity has to ask, to reflect and to understand itself as a branch of the “Jewish Religion” (David Flusser), or rather as a part of the Jewish religion, although it developed itself independently after the formal separation from Jewry.

11. The central person of Christianity, the Jew Jesus, is, as being one of the eschatological-messianic figures of Jewry of that time, the decisive person of Christianity, but nowadays he cannot be put naively next to God himself – or without critical verification of the manner of speaking and without a sharp process of clarification – with the dogmatic-mythological terms of the traditional Christian theology

- as the second person of trinity
- as the eternal son of the eternal father
- that means interpreted as God-like
- and to impose faith as exactly-like-this-being-true (not to be questioned)

12. As a Jewish-eschatological proclaimer of the reign of God, of the one God of Israel – despite his dying – Jesus had, without doubt, also after his death a central significance in the Jesus-movement and in the early Christian church (visions of resurrection), which the Christians of the “Old World” could only quote and prove with mythological terms.

13. The appointment of Jesus as a mythological person is due to the poetry of the successors of Jesus. It is “Love poetry” (Theißen, arguments for a critical belief). His successors had been touched by his message and by himself and hoped for the reign of God through him and his message.

Jesus as a mythological person is and will be an important poetical metaphor, but the metaphor itself cannot be object of faith. Object of faith can only be Jesus himself as the Jewish prophetic-eschatological proclaimer, or rather that what should be brought up by the mythological terms.

14. Jesus had an intensive and far reaching importance for his successors – also for the Jewish population:

- his message of the near reign of God
- The love and care for the people – especially for those people and groups of people on the verge of society
- his radicalized mercy and his radicalized Thora
- Next to him, other Jewish teachers and announcers had comparable views of God, of life and of the responsibility of the human being – and in the Jewish population a comparable meaning, but not in the Christian movement anymore
- In principle applies: the doctrine of Jesus does not only match with Jewry, it is Jewish

15. In the testimonials of the early church (New Testament) then, a change of Jesus occurred:

- By the mythologization, Jesus gains a central meaning – theologically and mythologically – for the faith and for the identity of the people in the Christian movement.
- That means that the Jew Jesus is “put” next to God (Phil.2, 5-11) – on the one hand that is to understand in relation with the Jewish background (speculations of wisdom and other things). His mythical raising here takes place for the praise of the one God;
- But, in other connections, he is consequently and anti-Jewish-like turned against the Jews as a mythical central figure (John 8, 43 f.)

16. Jesus cannot – on critical examination – be interpreted as the Messiah / Christ who brought the final redemption, even if he was understood this way. He himself did not understand himself as the Messiah.

- Without doubt though he is already messianic in the understanding of the Christians of early times,
- They look back on him, remember him, commemorate him, e.g. “ Do this for my remembrance” (1.Cor.11, 25)
- On the other hand they also wait for him: “until that he comes” (1.Cor.11, 26)

That means: the final redemption and relief is, also in the understanding of the Jesus movement and of the church, still to be expected.

17. Religious Jews also wait for the Messiah, for the one anointed by God (e.g. on Raw Schnerson in the “Movement of Lubawitsch”).

The central theme is that God acts releasing and relieving.

- In the end it is not decisive who it is, but
- That God is acting, that means
- What will happen there – namely redemption and release.

18. In the question of Messiah (Messiah-question), Christians and Jews could have a way with each other without any tensions. In this case, God also means:

The future will prove it – who he was, who it is.

19. Between Christians and Jews, there are the abysses of the real past and present. Their common history is a story of failed relationships with devastating consequences (as a literary example: André Schwarz – Bart, the last of the Just).

20. Well-known Jewish scientists, researchers, representatives of Jewish faith expressed their lack of interest very clearly towards a dialogue with the Christians (as a prominent example serves Jeshajahu Leibowitz).

Other Orthodox (Jews) totally ignore what is in store for them from the part of the Christians. First, so it is said then, the Christians would have to work on and clear up their own history and the way they see themselves before it comes to a dialogue.

21. The Christian faith and the Christian churches are, for their part, in deep, non-simultaneous processes of change.

- That means the differences between them in reality are brusque and, at a closer view, obvious
- Theological “soft” formulas of consensus do not solve any problems
- While some (a minority?) try hard to enable a dialogue with the Jewry based on a partnership and totally without any mission (Rhenish Church / Church of Berlin-Brandenburg / EKD- Protestant Churches of Germany / EKV – in their update of “the Theological Statement of Barmen 1” / Second Vaticanum / Pope John Paul II ?),
- Certain groups still set on the missionary work among the Jews,
- Others ignore the theological developments and understandings and still talk about Jewry as an antiquated, preliminary stage of Christianity – and that Christianity is the real people of God
- Still there is also a latent, or even manifested anti-Judaism among Christians.

22. For those on both sides who really want and get involved in a dialogue, it is a characteristic that they commonly look for a way of agreement into the future across the abysses of the past, without suppressing questions and reservations.

This is and was valid for Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig, for Martin Buber, for David Flusser, Schalom Ben Chorin, for Pinchas and Ruth Lapide, for Abraham Heschel, for many Jewish and also for many Christian thinkers who are and were involved in this process of meeting and dialogue – while they do not question their own identity.

23. Besides other questions from the Jewish side to the Christian side, Christology and the Theory of Trinity always play an important role.

Here, the Jewish side is very clear and offensive in its disassociation: “The belief of Jesus unites, the belief in Jesus separates us”.

An especially separating element of the both religious persuasions is the “High Christology” (Michael Wyschogrod: “A High Christology sounds like worshipping of idols in Jewish ears”)

Christian theologians explain the different backgrounds in the dialogue (besides Wengst and before him many others) – among others also the Jewish statements and speculations – and the history of the origins of “high” Christological mythology, but they do not dare to do a consistent historical and venturing interpretation, that means to relativize or even relinquish the mythological terms, because the identity of the church obviously seems to depend on these mythological terms, after comprehension of the majority.

Here, the Christian dialogue obviously comes up against limiting factors. Nevertheless, on the Christian side clearly is developing a theological reflection of Jewry, and on the other hand also a Jewish reflection of Christianity, that means of the “Subsidiary-religion” and its interrelations. (David Flusser: “Christianity and Jewry are one religion”, remarks of a Jew on the Christian theology).

On the Christian side, a very important person in this dialogue was Father Daniel Rufeisen from Haifa with his own biography. He was born as a Jew in Poland, grew up Jewish-like, fled to a convent of nuns during the period of National Socialism, later was baptized, became a priest, came to Israel, fought for his recognition as a Jew with the Israeli State and he also fought for the recognition of his Hebrew parish in Haifa with the Vatican.

His denomination was Jewish / Christian.

The Roman Christianity was too “Roman” for him, too far away from the belief of the mothers and fathers. The explanation of the meaning of his person and his history still awaits investigation and handling.

24. Not independent from the dialogue-efforts, that are mainly effected by the wing of the liberal Jewry and of the critical wing of Christian theology (protestant and catholic), relationships are developing between Jews and non-Jews, Christians and Jews through diverse meetings. Youth exchange, for example between Germany and Israel, is not without any effect. Many volunteers from Germany who worked and still work in Israel have also basically created another attitude towards Christians and Germans.

What here grows is an understanding for each other and the willingness to make steps forward across the abysses of history together into the future.

25. Because the Christian denomination (came into being about 200 A.D.) always and again emphasizes its proximity and its distance towards the Jewry and in the sense of the newer theology only expresses it very inadequately what the substance of faith is, I would like, in the end, to present a transformation of the credo that is trying to take into account the matter of the dialogue of faith and that is influenced by a critical newer theological problem:

I believe and hope that there is a sense to life.

I am convinced that we are able to collaborate on many aspects of the world in a responsible way and that we have to arrange and design life – that is our task, but we are not creators of life.

Life and its final interpretation is evaded from our access.

It is founded in God.

I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of Heaven and of the Earth.

As not being Jews or Muslims we get used to this faith in the area of the Christian church by the doctrine and the example of the human being Jesus of Nazareth.

He was born as a Jewish child of Jewish parents, lived in Nazareth and became a teacher of his people. His message of the reign of God aroused hope and broke the inner and outer boundaries of traditional faith.

Many people join him until today and are learning from him how to live life out of compassion and within the ways of God.

Since his view was extremely provoking, the rulers had an interest in his death and they killed him.

He suffered the Roman punishment of crucifixion.

But his death was not the end of his doctrine and of his life.

Many people – now especially out of the people – still follow him and experience the validity of his doctrine.

It is testified to us from the origins that he believed himself as being commissioned and confirmed by God;

As a human being bringing the closeness of God to other people –

And that not even death could separate him from God.

So, this Jewish man Jesus can and will be important to us until the end of days.

He grew up to be a significant human being for all generations.

The Promise of God to Abraham and to the people of Israel is the root for our faith, too.

We believe in the existence and in the unity of the people of God, consisting of Jews and other people.

We believe that life is under protection and under promise of God. The way he is compassionate to us human beings, the same way we can be merciful as well – we all do live out of forgiveness.

We believe that God creates life and is life, the source of all life. The respect for life is our answer to his Creation.

So we want to believe, so we want to put our trust in Him.

Ani maamin: I believe – Amen.