

Iceland Conference

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I would like to begin with a brief introduction to my background as a Jew and as scholar of religion. I am a professor of Jewish Studies in a department of Religion, though most of the courses I teach are in the department of History. My doctorate is in Religious Studies with a concentration in modern Jewish thought, but I also hold a master's degree in Church history and Protestant theology from Harvard Divinity School. My scholarship does not seek boundaries, but intersections. Indeed, it is precisely the overlapping concerns of Jewish and Christian theologians in the 19th and 20th centuries that I study – and I do so because I firmly believe that both Christian and Jewish theologies developed with careful attention to each other. Indeed, each was shaped by the claims and concerns of the other: reforms of the synagogue, for example, followed traditions of the church (organ, weekly sermon, music), while Protestants wrestled with the (non)distinctiveness of Jesus from first-century Judaism. Modern Jewish thinkers were fascinated with the figure of Jesus, who become a tool to express a variety of Jewish concerns, ranging from a new evaluation of the importance of rabbinic Judaism to expressions of Zionism and the Holocaust, and I will give you a few examples of that. Christian theologians questing for the historical Jesus wrestled with the fact that Jesus's own faith was that of Judaism, and that his teachings were those of the other Pharisees of his day, and that led to a crisis in defining the distinctiveness of Jesus and the purpose of Christianity.

But before I launch into my historical presentation, let me briefly say a few words about my own religious background and commitments. I come to you as the child of a Jewish theologian who was plucked as a brand from the fires of Europe, but who lost his mother and sisters in Warsaw, Auschwitz, and Treblinka. My father, the scion of a highly distinguished rabbinic family, was raised in a deeply pious environment in Warsaw; he later said he grew up surrounded by people of “religious nobility.” He then studied in Berlin and came to the United States in 1940 as a refugee from a Germany whose Protestant theologians were proclaiming that Jesus was an Aryan, Hitler was sent by God, and the Old Testament was a Jewish book that had no place in a Christian Bible. I grew up in New York City surrounded by Jewish refugee scholars from Europe, and by glimmers of my father's world in the few surviving members of his deeply religious family.

Yet even as my soul was exalted by gentleness of my elderly Hasidic rabbinic relatives, I was frustrated that there was no room for me at the table because I was female. I was in the kitchen, rather than participating in the prayers, singing, teaching, and discussions of the men. My Orthodox day school was of no help, and my rebellion was strong. My father's involvement in the Civil Rights movement gave me the opportunity to meet and to listen to the major figures – Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, William Sloan Coffin, Andrew Young – on many occasions, and it was they who saved the Bible for me, and imbued in me the conviction that the prophets

were the tool to soften hardened hearts and change the course of America, and that racism was utterly antithetical to religion.

And then I read Bultmann, Wellhausen, Emil Schuerer. And that made me understand the Jewish thinkers I was studying - Abraham Geiger, Leo Baeck, Martin Buber - in a new way. I understood their context, what they were trying to change and also what was driving their agendas. While writing a book on Geiger's historical scholarship, which focused on the origins of Christianity, Second Temple Judaism, and also, interestingly, a highly influential historicist analysis of the Qur'an, I came across the publications of a group of Protestant theologians in Nazi Germany who supported Hitler and sought a synthesis of Christianity and National Socialism. After several years of hunting in various archives in Germany, I discovered the archives of this deJudaization Institute and reconstructed its history in my book, *The Aryan Jesus*, published three years ago.

How do I stand, as a religious Jew, in relation to Christianity? I have discovered and exposed one of the ugliest moments of Christian history: Christian theologians, here in Germany, who sought to eradicate Judaism. That is your history; you must come to grips with it.

As we know, pluralism and tolerance are not categories that arise in Scripture, nor are they goals of most theologians of any religion prior to what we call the modern period. We might say that 'religious pluralism' is not a religious phenomenon at all. It arises from economic and cultural developments related to Western Liberal Democracy. This movement began in the 18th century, peaked in the late 20th century, and seems to many of us to be already in retreat and unlikely to survive the 21st century. The late Alistair Kee, professor at the University of Edinburgh, observed that "The high point of liberalism was the late nineteenth century, when economic and political forces required individual liberty. Circumstances are now very different, producing attitudes of suspicion and irrationality in politics and fundamentalism in religion. Liberalism will not return, but it is possible that after the credit crunch there may be a new suspicion - this time of the ethos of greed."

But let me put aside Professor Kee's pessimism about the 21st century for the moment and have a look at the moment of optimism, when Jewish thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries believed that a new era was opening, and that by demonstrating the affinities between Judaism and Christianity they would build bridges of understanding and sympathy. Liberalism, they were certain, would bring Jews equal political rights in Europe, social acceptance, and that a new, rational, historical approach to religion would reveal the centrality of Judaism as the font of the three great monotheistic religions and hence the ethical foundation of Western civilization.

Yet religious pluralism and tolerance might also be viewed in the context of rising nationalism and imperialism. Without denying the very important positive aspects of respect for differing religious teachings and communities, let us also remember that theology comes into being within a political and cultural context. Modern Europe consisted not only of nation-states, but also of imperial powers with vast empires. Missionary activity was one tool of empire, but there were also

imperial and colonial impulses behind the interest in the European study of non-Christian religions, as well as theological calls for religious pluralism and tolerance.

Let me present to you, briefly, my understanding of the encounter during the nineteenth century of Jewish and Christian theologies. In my study of Geiger, I discovered that he – and several other Jewish theologians – were widely read by Christians, particularly Christian scholars of the New Testament, who wrote reviews in their journals and books of Jewish scholarly literature. This was, of course, an era when scholarly journals would only accept articles by Christians, so that Jewish scholars had to found and fund their own periodicals.

But what were the arguments and what were the responses? Geiger developed an original interpretation about the nature of Second Temple-era Judaism and its context for Jesus, Paul, and the Gospel authors. The Pharisees were the liberal, progressive movement within Judaism, while the Sadducees, the Temple priests, were the reactionary party sympathetic to Rome bent on preserving their positions of authority. The Pharisees considered each Jew equivalent to a priest, each home a temple, and interpreted Scripture in that spirit, to relax its strictures via an oral law that eventually became the Talmud. The Sadducees had their own interpretation of Scripture, a Sadducean oral law, but it allowed little room for relaxing biblical law. With the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, the Sadducees lost the foundation of their power and were pressured to join their former enemies, the Pharisees, which they refused to do, and instead they joined the early Christians, bringing both their priestly interests into New Testament texts such as Epistle to the Hebrews and their anti-Pharisaic polemics into passages such as Matthew 23. Christianity itself began when Paul brought Jewish monotheism to the Greco-Roman world and mixed up Judaism with pagan ideas, thus producing the dogma of the church. Jesus, however, was one of the Pharisees, a figure like the rabbi Hillel, who, according to Geiger, “did not utter a new thought.” Christians seeking the faith of Jesus would find it in Pharisaic liberalism. Geiger’s argument was not without its contemporary relevance. Where was Pharisaism to be found in the 19th century? Very simple: Reform Judaism was not a repudiation of rabbinic Judaism, but an effort to recapture its liberal, progressive thrust. Christians wishing to follow the religion of Jesus rather than the doctrinal religion about Jesus should become Reform Jews!

Geiger’s denial of Jesus’s originality and distinction from Judaism did not go unheeded by his Christian colleagues. Well-aware of Geiger’s claims, they found it difficult to repudiate the historical context for comparing Jesus’s teachings with those of the rabbis, though Wellhausen absurdly insisted that the Mishnah was not a valid source for Pharisaic beliefs but the gospels, including Matthew 23, were acceptable historical sources. Others, such as Schenkel, Hausrath, von Hase, and Keim, wrote lives of Jesus that cited Geiger’s scholarship but tried to rescue Jesus by insisting on the uniqueness of his religious consciousness, if not the content of his teachings. Still others turned to racial theory in order to define Jesus as racially distinct from the Jews, even if his teachings mirrored theirs; Ernest Renan is the prime exemplar.

Racial theory was appealing as a tool to modernize Christian theology, since racial theory seemed avant-garde and scientific in the late 19th century. Race was

also a tool to rebel against the doctrinal authority of the church, and of course to affiliate with nationalist political movements that were invariably anti-Semitic but sympathetic to Christian teachings and imagery. National Socialism appealed to many theologians for a variety of reasons: its calls for a return to traditional values; its rejection of the secularism of the Weimar Republic; its solution to the Jewish Problem; its call for a revival of the patriarchal family, its opposition to godless communism. Even before Hitler came to power, Protestants formed a so-called German Christian Movement that not only supported Nazism, but sought to create a Nazified Christianity. That effort reached a pinnacle in 1939 with the establishment of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life, directed by Walter Grundmann, professor of New Testament at the University of Jena. That Institute, funded by the Protestant church and with membership of approximately sixty professors and instructors of German theology, as well as bishops, pastors, and religion teachers, claimed that Germany was fighting a defensive war against the Jews on both military and spiritual battlefields. For the spiritual battle, the Institute published a deJudaized version of the New Testament in 1940, sold to churches throughout the Reich, as well as a deJudaized hymnal and catechism, and numerous scholarly and popular books, pamphlets, and articles “proving” that Jesus was not a Jew, but an opponent who fell as victim to the Jews; Hitler was fulfilling Jesus’s own mission; Christianity was originally anti-Jewish but the Jews had falsified the text of the New Testament by interpolating Jewish passages. The goal of the Institute was to restore the original, pristine text, a task furthered by historical-critical scholarship.

How shall we understand this history and how do we go forward after studying it? The most important starting point is the recognition that Judaism lies within Christianity, at the heart of its theology, a presence that has given rise to anxiety and tensions, rather than the affection of intimacy. Through the Christian doctrine of supersessionism, Judaism came to function in Christian theology as the other whose negation confirms and even constitutes Christianity. Yet its colonization of Judaism is not a conquest, in which Judaism is destroyed or sublated, but, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “a specific type of conflict that is best defined as the conflict between an integrity and its disintegration.”¹ The conflict is reflected by Paul, who writes in Romans 11:28: “As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors.” Enemies of Christianity, deniers of its faith, Jews are beloved for having unwittingly provided the very basis which constitutes Christianity. Without Judaism’s concept of election, there would be no Christianity, yet by refusing to accept Christianity, the Jews become enemies who must be forced to submit.

In its theological structure, then, Christianity created a colonialist model that provided an easy validation for subsequent geographic colonial ventures. At the same time, in colonizing Judaism, Christianity was unable to erase it; Judaism is taken within, becoming the unwilling presence inside the Christian realm, a presence that is deeply troubling and gives rise to a variety of strategies within Christian theology to contain, redefine, and, finally, exorcise that presence. One might term that effort a kind of “theological bulimia.”

How does this look from the perspective of Jewish theology?

Amos Funkenstein has described the premodern Jewish self-understanding of the Jews' uniqueness among the nations as rooted in their difference from others, whereas the modern Jewish sensibility sees the Jews' uniqueness expressed by the universality of Judaism.ⁱⁱ The role of Jesus in modern Jewish thought is a good illustration of that point: Judaism is no longer unique because of its distinctiveness as a religion, but because of its almost literal universalism, generating Christianity and Islam as well. Through Jesus, according to the modern Jewish construction, Judaism became the most important religious force in the West, and for that reason alone Jews ought to be granted a social and political emancipation. The effort occurs most significantly when the histories of the two adversaries are intimately connected, as in the case of Christian and Jewish origins, "because the forger of a counteridentity of the other renders his own identity to depend on it."ⁱⁱⁱ Making Judaism's significance to Western civilization so intimately linked to the figure of the Jewish Jesus forged a dependence, in German-Jewish thought, upon the success and glory of Christianity, thus reinscribing the colonized's dependence for identity upon the colonizer. Indeed, we can ask if the figure of Jesus is described by Geiger, Baeck, Buber, and other Jewish thinkers after the model of the rabbis – as they claim – or if their depiction of the rabbis is modeled after the liberal Protestant image of Jesus.

Geiger's extensive scholarly examination of Christian origins, especially the figure of Jesus, should be understood not as an effort at assimilation, but, in light of postcolonial theory, as an attempt to subvert Christian hegemony and establish a new position for Judaism within European history and thought. In arguing that Jesus said and did nothing new or original, but was simply one of the numerous liberal Pharisees of first-century Palestine, Geiger claimed that Christianity (and Islam) had derived their most important teachings from Judaism. Both religions, he argued, actually had the promotion of Jewish religious ideas as their goal; the purpose of both was nothing more than to spread Jewish ideas to the pagan world, making them maidservants to the great religious genius of Judaism.

There is at the same time another important element to the story and that is the role played by Islam. Starting in the 1830s, young Jewish students, the first generation permitted to matriculate at German universities, flocked to the study of Arabic and the origins of Islam. Their interest is striking, given the shift of interest in Germany to Sanskrit and the study of India, heightened by German romantics who sought the origins of the German Aryan soul in India. Gustav Weil, who spent several years studying in Cairo, published a biography of the prophet Muhammad and also a chronological reordering of the suras of the Qur'an before becoming the first Jewish professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Heidelberg. Geiger published a highly acclaimed study of parallels between the Qur'an and rabbinic literature, demonstrating the origins of numerous Qur'anic passages in the Midrash. Indeed, Jews came to dominate the field of Islamic Studies in Germany, and wrote about Islam with an admiration and respect that stood in stark contrast to popular and scholarly views of the day that spoke of Muhammad as an imposter, seducer, and even an epileptic. Many interacted with Muslims: Josef Horowitz became professor of Arabic for seven years at a Muslim university, while Max Herz was invited to Cairo to direct the restoration of the al-Azhar and al-Rifai mosques. In writing histories of the Jews, Jewish historians emphasized the era of tolerance when Muslims ruled

Spain, a “Golden Age,” in contrast to the persecutions suffered by Jews in Christian Europe.

By identifying aspects of Judaism with Islam, such as monotheism, rejection of anthropomorphism, and the ethical basis of religious law, Islam became a template for European Jews in the 19th century to present Jewish teachings to a Christian audience. The alliance with Islam also carried an implied polemic against Christianity, and an added gesture of rebellion was the decision to build modern synagogues in Moorish architecture, an added signifier of the alliance of Judaism and Islam.

With the early twentieth century, there was a change of atmosphere among both Jewish and Christian theologians. Whereas Hermann Cohen, the great neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher, declared that there are no religions that stand in greater intimacy than Judaism and Islam, Franz Rosenzweig, under Hegelian influence, united Judaism and Christianity in a Heilsgeschichte in which Islam did not participate. Jewish scholars predominated the field of Islamforschung in Germany during the 1920s and early 30s, before being exiled after Hitler came to power, but their scholarship reflected a more negative evaluation of Islam, with a focus increasingly on Muslim conquests and deviations from Judaism. On the Christian side, we see the rise of the German Christian Movement to a position of control over most of the regional Protestant churches in Germany, and a response from both Protestant and Catholic opponents who insisted, regardless of whether or not they supported Hitler and the war, that Christian doctrine must be obeyed and that Scripture remained inviolable.

And then, after the war, what happened? In some areas of New Testament scholarship, nothing changed: Walter Grundmann, who had been academic director of the deJudaization institute, published the most widely-read commentaries on the synoptic gospels, required reading for German-speaking Protestants seeking ordination as pastors well into the 1990s. Gunter Bornkamm, Ernst Kaesemann, Georg Strecker shaped new approaches to the study of the New Testament, yet they did not confront the anti-Judaism within Christian theology nor the significance of the Holocaust for Christians. Indeed, as Norbert Reck has demonstrated, we have had to wait until the third generation of German Christian theologians to hear about the significance of the holocaust for Christian theology.

And yet miracles occurred. The church of the Rhineland, the most liberal in Germany, declared that it would no longer proselytize Jews. The Vatican issued *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, no longer blaming all Jews for the death of Christ, a historic statement prepared in consultation with Jewish theologians, including my own father. After the war God sent us Krister Stendahl, W.D. Davies, and E.P. Sanders, three of the great New Testament scholars of the century. Their extraordinary interpretations of Paul, their affirmation of the Judaism within and around early Christianity, and their definitive break with centuries of theological narrow-mindedness opened new vistas for Jewish-Christian understanding. These were Christian theologians who read the Bible with the vision and insight of Christians who recognized the horrors of the war and yet had not forsaken God; they were, indeed, signs that God has not forsaken the Jewish people nor the Christian people.

As a religious Jew I am also deeply grateful for the gift of Christianity. Christianity has enriched our civilization, given us great works of music and art that inspire us, and Christianity also has contributed in positive ways to Judaism. So many aspects of Judaism have been influenced by Christian piety: our devotion to the Shekhinah as the feminine aspect of God was shaped, in part, by medieval Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary. Modern Jewish thought, from Moses Mendelssohn to Martin Buber, was shaped by an effort to clarify the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

We tend to think of pluralism as a problem of reconciling truth with the existence of separate, individual religions. Yet that understanding is challenged by historians who demonstrate how intertwined our religions are: Judaism exists within Christianity and is affirmed whenever “Jesus” is called “Christ,” the messiah. To define what is central to Christianity, the messiahship of Jesus, is to affirm the Judaism that brought the very concept of messiah to the world. To claim to be the New Israel is to affirm that there is an Israel, as God’s beloved disciple.

Christianity does not stand within Judaism, but outside it. Christianity is the cultural and political context in which Judaism has taken shape. Indeed, we speak of the Christianization of Judaism in the modern era. We each influence the other: Judaism from within Christianity, Christianity surrounding Judaism on the outside. Often, we hear theologians speak of Judaism and Christianity as mother-daughter religions. Even in some harsh antisemitic imagery and texts, we find a subtle recognition that Judaism lives within Christianity, as a baby in its mother’s womb, though that usually gives rise to tension and rage rather than joy and welcome.

Thus, the pluralism we speak of is not of three religions that are separate entities, but three religious traditions that are deeply intertwined. How do we understand our relationship differently, given how intertwined we are? We share more than we realize, and we are each affected by developments in the others. “No religion is an island,” my father used to say.

Judaism and Christianity are antiphonal religions: Christianity speak of forgiveness, Jews speak of atonement, Christianity speaks of love, Judaism of law – each religion makes its contribution to one side of the balance – and so we learn from each other. We have such antiphonies within our religions as well. Michael Welker, professor of theology at Heidelberg University, is helpful when he writes that Christians need the sanctifying presence of the divine biblical law-traditions with their care for justice, mercy and the search for truth “before God”.¹ Christianity, in other words, cannot be based on love alone; both justice and mercy, law and love, are necessary, as they are for Jews as well. Welker writes, The strict correlation of justice and mercy challenges the legal evolution to move into “humane” directions; the correlation of mercy and justice urges the morals of compassion to strive for diaconical social institutions.

¹ Michael Welker, „Security of Expectations. Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel”, in: *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 237-260; cf. Michael Welker, „Moral, Recht und Ethos in evangelisch-theologischer Sicht“, in: *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* XIII, hg. W. Härle and R. Preul, Elwert: Marburg 2002, 67-81.

For centuries, sadly, Christian theologians have denied the continued validity of Judaism as the will of God. Yet for Christian theology to denounce or renounce Judaism is to cut off a piece of itself, to excise its very heart. To attempt to eradicate Judaism, whether through missionary efforts to convert Jews or through theological anti-Judaism, is to tear the heart of Christianity. What would be left of the God of Israel if the people Israel ceased to exist? How could Christianity survive the moral shame if Judaism were to be eradicated, God forbid. "I would rather go to Auschwitz than give up my faith," my father stated, because for him, to give up his Judaism was to tear out his heart, to end his very existence.

Yet I might also note that there is a Christianity that stands within Judaism as well. We Jews have shaped our understanding of Torah with an eye toward Xnity. Although most Jews through the centuries lived under Muslim, rather than Christian rule, Jews developed a fascination with Christianity and internalized many of its teachings and images. Rabbis speak of the Jew as a living embodiment of Torah, the Jew as Torah incarnate, using Christian imagery; much of the music of our synagogues has been borrowed from churches. Our Passover Seder liturgy was most likely written, as Yisrael Yuval has recently argued, as a response to Jesus and the Eucharist. Modern Jews define our religious observance with an eye to Christian polemics: when I criticize aspects of Jewish law, for example, I worry that I might sound Pauline. There is no independent theological tradition because Judaism does not exist in isolation, but carries the Christian within it, as a looming presence that officially must be kept outside the gates of Judaism, to preserve the uniqueness and difference of Judaism, but that unofficially is very much within us.

Islam has long been our silent interlocutor. Islam has symbolized for many Jews an opportunity to escape the complexities of Jewish-Christian relations. For many Jews, Islam was the religion of tolerance within which Judaism could flourish, and modern Jews built European synagogues in the 19th century in Moorish architecture as reminders of that medieval Golden Age in Spain. Islam seemed to some Jews to fulfill Judaism's promise: a religion of pure and strict monotheism, without anthropomorphisms. For Christians, the invention of "religion," which is really a projection of 19th century European Protestantism with a large dose of colonialist attitudes, established an antagonism between law and religion, external action and internal devotion. Yet for both Muslims and Jews, that antagonism is meaningless. For us, the external and the internal are united and inseparable, even as Jesus is homoousios, God and man in one, for Christians.

Given the role of Islam as the third voice in our dialogue, I wonder if we might think of it as a potential ally, a theological voice that can encourage greater understanding between Christians and Jews. Perhaps Islam can help to clarify the meaning of law, including Jewish law, as authentic religiosity for Christians who think that only gospel can be God's word. And perhaps Islam might also encourage Jews to recognize the prophethood of those who brought God to other peoples, to Greeks and to Arabs, Jesus and Muhammad.

Having the presence of a third voice, Islam, observing our dialogue as Christians and Jews might make us consider the ways in which we present our teachings. The crucifixion, for example, has usually been presented to Jews as a threat: look how you crucified our lord; it has even been reenacted against us, in the

blood libel. It has also been used as a spiritual threat: efforts to convert us to Christianity threatens to rob us of our identity as Jews, our spiritual heritage, what is most precious to us. We have known martyrdom for centuries in defense of our faith against Christian missionaries. Jews in Germany killed themselves and their children in the face of the Crusaders rather than convert to Christianity. Given that heritage, how can the Christian message be presented to Jews without threat?

At the same time, we Jews have change the way we hear the Christian message. Since the days of the Jewish theologian Abraham Geiger, most Jews have believed there is nothing new or original in Jesus, that Paul invented a religion about him. Indeed, they have extended that to Islam, arguing (as did Ernst Renan) that Islam was a mere vessel of other traditions and had no capacity to develop. Instead, we have to understand that Christianity, emerging from Judaism, is not a simply vessel of the past or a distortion of Judaism, but something novel that may reveal to us as Jews spiritual directions of our religion that we have neglected, ways to enhance our Judaism.

One of the great tragedies of world history is that Christianity and Judaism have been such antagonists. "The children did not arise to call the mother blessed; instead they called the mother blind.... A Jew, on the other hand, ought to acknowledge the eminent role played by Christianity in God's design for the redemption of all men," my father wrote. Perhaps we need to be more attentive to our many religious faiths as revealing the beauty of God's creation. "Stand still and consider the wondrous works of the Lord," says Job. We human beings will not perish for lack of information, but we may perish for lack of appreciation. Intellectual truth is not sufficient, and the love taught by religion cannot stand alone.

ⁱ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deconstruction of Christianity," in *Religion and Media*, ed.

Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001),

117.

ⁱⁱ Funkenstein, Perceptions of Jewish History, 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Funkenstein, Perceptions of Jewish History, 48.