

## REVIEW ARTICLES

Eugene B. Borowitz

### **Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response**

New York: Paulist Press

203 pp., 1980, \$8.95

Eugene Borowitz' book *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response* is an admirable though somewhat confused attempt to discuss some contemporary views of Christ from a Jewish perspective. His reason for engaging these christologies is the centrality of the doctrine of Christ for Jewish/Christian dialogue. Borowitz' discussion is an attempt to understand these christologies in relation to his own faith.

The basic question that Borowitz ultimately wants to consider is the one dealt with in chapter eight of his book: Does christology lead to anti-Semitism? This is the key issue in any Jewish/Christian dialogue. Thus, what is needed in this review is not so much a critique of Borowitz' critique of the theologians he discusses, but rather through his treatment an attempt must be made to flesh out what Borowitz believes about christology and its implications for Jewish/Christian dialogue. Therefore, it will not be necessary to discuss all of the Christian thinkers he deals with, but only with those who help to accomplish the task that has been undertaken in this review.

It seems clear that Borowitz is impressed most of all with the christologies of Rosemary Ruether and H. Richard Niebuhr. While he does question Ruether's desire to make Jesus a paradigm of man (p. 51, 62-63), he applauds the fact that she makes anti-Semitism a methodological principle of her christology (p. 182). For Ruether anti-Semitism is "the left hand of christology" (p. 176). Ruether wants to rethink the traditional interpretation of christology which means for her the rejection of the deity of Jesus.

Borowitz' discussion of H. Richard Niebuhr centers around his widely read book *Christ and Culture*. According to Borowitz, Niebuhr's book presents no problems for Jewish/Christian discussion (p. 155). In fact Borowitz is so impressed with *Christ and Culture* that he attempts his own parallel Jewish typology which he calls "Torah and Culture."

Borowitz is correct to notice that Niebuhr does not use much traditional language with regard to Christ when defining his own position, nor does his Christ play more than a symbolic role (pp. 168-169). This is perhaps crucial in understanding why Borowitz thinks that liberal Christian theology is the most harmonious to Jewish thinkers (p. 82), and why he believes traditional Christians should engage in dialogue

with traditional Jews, and liberal Christians with liberal Jews. For it is only then, says Borowitz that “genuine religious discussions emerge and confront each other” (p. 41).

Borowitz seems to be the least happy with the christologies of G. C. Berkouwer and Karl Barth, whom he refers to as “absolutists” (which is a term that labels these men as being narrow-minded in some respect) because they believed Jesus Christ to be “the criterion of all truth and value” (p. 33). Borowitz feels that such a conviction means that there can be no valuable Jewish/Christian dialogue because Jews could say nothing meaningful about the Christ to Christians with such convictions (p. 34). The result of this kind of dialogue would be a one-sided discussion in which the Jew would be expected to remain open while the Christian remained closed to anything that the Jew might say about Jesus (p. 34).

In reference to anti-Semitism Borowitz believes that consciously Barth denies anti-Semitism as godless and states that the Jews as God’s chosen people are specially close to God in such a way that no Christian can ever be (p. 177). He, however, accuses Barth of theoretical anti-Semitism because he believed that “Israel denied its election and calling” and moved toward an empty future (p. 178). The Jews rejected Jesus and Barth judges this negatively (p. 178).

Borowitz likes Berkouwer somewhat better than Barth. According to Borowitz anti-Semitism is almost completely absent in Berkouwer because he applies “a universalizing hermeneutic” to the places in the New Testament that refer to the Jews as ones who oppose Christ and/or the Church (p. 179). While dealing with the vast differences between Judaism and Christianity Berkouwer is careful to leave behind the anti-Semitic exegesis that is associated with the New Testament (p. 179). Borowitz does not, however, hesitate to criticize Berkouwer’s understanding of Israel’s calling as “unfair and prejudiced” (p. 179).

Borowitz also discusses the christologies of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, and Jurgen Moltmann.

In contrast to Barth and Berkouwer, Borowitz believes Pannenberg is one he can dialogue with because Pannenberg wants to assert the resurrection of Jesus as “a historical event in the common, academic sense of the term” (p. 35). Borowitz, of course, denies the resurrection of Jesus and argues against it, yet he appreciates Pannenberg because of his desire to be historical (p. 37) as opposed to Barth (Borowitz is not fair to Barth on this issue). He does, however, mention that Pannenberg’s early work on christology had a close association with anti-Semitism because of certain statements he made about Judaism. Pannenberg, however, “awakened to his sinfulness” and corrected himself (p. 180).

Borowitz pays the work of Karl Rahner a great tribute when he observes that Rahner’s christology “is the enemy of anti-Semitism” (p. 183). Rahner believes that Israel should continue on as a presence

in history and it would be a tragedy if the Jewish people were totally secularized. He also asserts that Jewish/Christian dialogue is essential if the church is to be true to its mission. Borowitz applauds all of this. He does, however, challenge Rahner on the perfection of Jesus which is visible in his perfect obedience to God's will (pp. 78-80). Borowitz feels that Jews have other examples of obedience to the will of God equal to, if not surpassing, Jesus (p. 80). It is also difficult for Borowitz to comprehend Jesus as perfect since Jews reserve perfection for God alone (p. 78).

The thought of Moltmann is influenced greatly by Jewish thinkers. It is for this reason, according to Borowitz, that Moltmann is opposed to any type of anti-Semitism. For Moltmann Christianity and Judaism are bound in solidarity together (p. 183). What Borowitz has problems with is Moltmann's insistence that the crucified God stand at the center of christology (p. 83). It is the crucified Christ that lies at the heart of the Jewish/Christian disagreement (p. 90).

Now it is true that anti-Semitism has unfortunately infected the church in every century of its existence. This is a blemish that exists on the face of the church and must be removed. Those Christians who have anti-Semitic tendencies have failed to adequately comprehend the nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ. At the same time, however, Borowitz' definition and answer to the problem is absolutely unacceptable, because his definition of anti-Semitism is problematic. It has become fashionable in some scholarly circles, both Jewish and Christian, to refer to any Christian critique of Judaism as anti-Semitic. Any exclusive truth claims made for Christianity that leaves Judaism out is considered anti-Semitic. Thus many scholars such as Ruether even assert that the New Testament documents in and of themselves are anti-Semitic.

This, however, is not the case. It must be remembered that most if not all of the New Testament writers were Jewish. The fact that they had come to believe in Jesus did not make them any less Jewish. It should come as no surprise that the New Testament writers use the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament) to argue for the truth of their claims. For them, acceptance of Jesus was a very Jewish thing to do. The disagreement taking place in the New Testament between those Jews who believed in Jesus and those Jews who didn't is not one about anti-Semitism, but rather it is an argument over truth claims.

Similarly, Barth's claim that in rejecting Jesus Israel denied its election and calling is not an anti-Semitic statement (whether one agrees with Barth or not is at the moment irrelevant to the issue). What is anti-Semitic is when one takes such a statement and then twists it to justify pogroms and synagogue burnings. What is anti-Semitic is when one takes the truth claims of the New Testament and warps them into justifying such godless events as the Nazi Holocaust stating that it was God's judgement upon the Jews for rejecting Jesus. The problem is not with

the claims made by the New Testament, but how they are then interpreted. It is a problem of hermeneutics. Ruether believes that the deity of Jesus is inherently an anti-Semitic notion. One has to wonder if Ruether is asking the right question. If she isn't, her solution will not fix the problem.

Finally it must be asked, What does Borowitz want? He certainly wants Jewish/Christian dialogue (in my opinion a necessity), but does he carry too much baggage to the table? He thinks that Christians and Jews must address each other's theology if there is to be better understanding between the two groups, and he is right. He also says he doesn't want anyone from either side to give up their convictions, yet he seems to feel that certain common convictions are necessary if Jews and Christians are to have effective dialogue (p. 88). Thus he is doubtful about the possibility of meaningful dialogue with a man like Karl Barth who insists that Christ is the standard of all things. So it appears that unless Barth gives this belief over he cannot participate in the dialogue that is so necessary. Thus Borowitz has not been completely honest when he states that he doesn't want Christians to give up any of their convictions. He wants them to give up one: Christ as the stumbling block. Perhaps this is why Borowitz likes the work of Ruether and Niebuhr for they have already abandoned such a claim. In fact, it must be said that there is nothing decisively Christian about the christologies of Ruether or Niebuhr and this is what appeals to Borowitz. What does Borowitz hope to accomplish by dialoguing with Ruether and Niebuhr anyway? Their christologies can hardly be said to be representative of the majority of the world's Christians.

Yet for Christians who accept the traditional christological claims, such convictions cannot be given up without "losing the entire game." If the traditional claims about Christ are suspect, the whole faith becomes suspect. These convictions must not be given up. This does not mean that Jewish/Christian dialogue is impossible. Many evangelical Christians have and are engaging in meaningful dialogue with Jews and have not given up traditional claims about Jesus.

Borowitz would agree that disagreement should not cut off dialogue, but it seems that he presupposes that both sides should hold certain epistemological convictions in common if Jews and Christians are to have valuable discussion. Some of these epistemological presuppositions, however, would rob Christianity of its foundation. This is why Borowitz seems so willing to dialogue with Pannenberg who wants to argue for the resurrection of Jesus in the academic sense of the word "historical." Borowitz doesn't think that Pannenberg can make his case. Borowitz wants to manipulate the discussion before it starts. By excluding those from the dialogue that really want to participate (such as Barth) one wonders if Borowitz is asking too much.

— Allan R. Bevere

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