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A guest in the house of Israel: post-Holocaust church theology

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Clearly this is a book for specialists in Schleiermacher studies or scholars interested in the early reception of Kantian ethics. It will have little appeal beyond these groups and, frankly, for busy pastors and lay people, even the academically inclined, it is hardly likely to make it onto the "must read" list. It is, nonetheless, a work of necessary scholarship that Froese has given us, for which we are grateful. All graduate level theological libraries will want this work added to their growing collections of Schleiermacher works in translation.

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A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology

Clark M. Williamson

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993

344 pp. \$28.98

This book attempts to reveal the anti-Jewish elements of Christian theology, and to reconstruct an alternative theology that corrects these prejudices. In his opening chapter, Williamson traces a direct line back from modern anti-Semitism to the anti-Jewish bias that arose within Christianity from its earliest days. This Christian hostility toward Judaism was the result of conflicts between Jews and Gentiles within the early church, and also stemmed from rivalry between the Jesus-movement and the mainstream synagogue establishment. This unresolved conflict divided a common religious heritage that should have been united in witness and purpose and tainted nearly every expression of the Christian faith from the development of its scriptures to the interpretation of those same scriptures, and the articulation of its major doctrines. As Christianity grew in popular support and came to control a monopoly on the state and social apparatus, Christian theology adopted a triumphant attitude and a repressive policy toward the continuing Jewish tradition. The church began to see itself as the new Israel, the benefactor of a new covenant that superseded in quality and effect the old covenant between the God of Israel and the Israel of God. This supersessionist attitude underpins most Christian theology, and has served as the legitimizing doctrine behind much of the social repression and official discrimination of Jews and the Jewish faith wherever the Christian faith has been the dominant religion. The culmination of this history of supersessionism and theological arrogance was the European Holocaust (*Shoah*) of 1933-1945.

Williamson does the church a valuable service in revealing the dark side of Christian theology. His recounting of the historical origins of Christology, the doctrine of the church, and the authority of scripture, as well as the historical assumptions behind our evaluation and interpretation of Paul and Jesus, force us to confront the true motivations behind some primary elements of the Christian faith.

In answer to these problems set forth, Williamson attempts to construct a new theological paradigm that stresses the essential and continuing unity between the Jewish tradition and the Christian project. For Williamson, the Jewish "no" to Christ does not negate the truth of the Christian witness, but neither can the Christian witness divorce itself from its Jewish context and still remain faithful to the one God whose grace and mercy are at once the foundation and the continuing source of inspiration of both expressions of faith. The church, instead of seeing itself as the new Israel in possession of the new and better covenant that supersedes the old agreement with Israel, must see itself as the latecomer to a continuing tradition and covenant that remains unchanged, and to which God remains ever faithful through all ages of ages. Christians are not beginning something new. They are guests, being brought into a house and family that pre-existed them for many millenia.

This book makes a good attempt to begin a theological reconstruction based on this new paradigm, but falls short on several key points. The attempt to include two continuing and often diverging faith traditions in one paradigm succumbs to a theological "apartheid" theory of separate but equal development. The model implies that Christ's death and resurrection are of value only to pagan Gentiles inasmuch as it opens them to the continuing covenant that God has established with Israel. The death and resurrection of Christ are of no consequence or significance to Jews at all. Williamson achieves his synthesis by discounting the cosmic significance and importance of the resurrection of Christ. Did the resurrection not begin something new for all humanity, indeed all of creation? Does the resurrection not bring new life to all regardless of race or covenant status? The death and resurrection of Jesus seems like a tremendous waste of effort if its only effect is to Judaize some pagan Gentiles into a parallel form of existing covenant. There must be more newness to the new creation in Christ than what this model allows.

Williamson also does not help his case by reverting to process theology to come up with a workable notion of God that will fit both traditions. He readily admits that process theology is not part of the mainstream of Jewish theological thought. So the challenge becomes doubly complex for the faithful of both traditions; not only to see each other in a different light, but to adopt some radically new ideas about God. The other problem with process theology is that it undermines the essential nature of God's grace in both traditions. If God cannot or will not exercise almighty power on behalf of those God claims to love, at least every now and again, what good is God's grace for me? How can I offer praise and thanksgiving to a God

whose grace is limited to helping me be a better person? There has to be more efficacy in the grace of a more powerful and substantive God than what process theology allows.

The other caveat to Williamson's project is that he uses the Holocaust as the starting point to his theology. No doubt the Holocaust will probably be the theological event of memory from the twentieth century, but to use such a contemporary event as a basis for theology is fraught with several dangers. The first task is to be clear about the Nazi perpetrators' own theological underpinnings. Williamson claims Nazi ideology, in its anti-Semitic aspects, was a natural outgrowth of centuries of religious persecution and prejudice. Nazi anti-Semitism, however, was not religious in its foundation. It was a doctrine of pseudo-scientific racism that had its roots in modernism and Germanic Romanticism. Its primary goal was racial purity based on pseudo-scientific theories of genetic inferiority, not religious conformity based on Christian orthodoxy. The Nazi project was aimed at many other people beyond the Jewish population, i.e., Gypsies, the disabled, Slavs, homosexuals, and must be criticized for what it was: twisted pseudo-science, not religious prejudice. A Lutheran deaconess in Czechoslovakia was sent to a death camp because she was deemed to be of an "inferior" race (Jewish), not because she rejected Christ.

Finally, we must be careful of the "cheap grace" of buying into a false-based sense of guilt, and then of absolving ourselves of that guilt by trying to put our house in order. Was the Holocaust really the culmination of religious prejudice or do we bear the guilt of that event on a whole different level? One of Williamson's principles is that nothing should be said that cannot be said in the presence of burning children. But can anything be said in the presence of burning children? Can any commentary or explanation be acceptable in the face of such a crime? Perhaps we need to squirm a little more in the discomfort with our tradition when it denigrates Jewish people. Perhaps we need to hear the lamentations and the anger of Jewish people in its raw form without offering our meagre attempts at recompense or apology or explanation or theological reconstruction. To do any less would be a dishonour to those who suffered and died.

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