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## The Christian Bible and Tribalism (Or, How the God of Israel Became the God of the Gentiles and Some Implications for Today: Six Lectures) [Lecture Notes]

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# The Christian Bible and Tribalism

Or, How the God of Israel Became the God of the Gentiles and Some  
Implications for Today: Six Lectures

by Scott Gambrill Sinclair

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## Introduction

- I. History amply demonstrates that the primary loyalty of human beings has normally been to their ethnic group.
  - A. In technologically primitive societies that group was small and could be called a tribe.
  - B. With greater technological sophistication, larger groups became possible and could be nations.
  - C. In either case, people's primary allegiance was not to an individual (e.g., a ruler) or to an ideology or religion or class or to humanity as a whole but to some intermediate group which shared an identity that we might label as a distinctive culture. A culture often includes a common language, a homeland, and a set of conventions (e.g., about what to eat) that is not based on reason and is not shared by other groups.
  - D. Loyalty to a particular culture led to confrontations with other cultures and often armed conflicts and oppression.
  - E. Clearly people were willing to fight and even die to defend their culture, whereas people were rarely willing to die for anything else.
- II. The great missionary religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam have had a complex relationship to tribalism.
  - A. As religions which sought to convert the world, these religions have tried to surmount tribal and national loyalties and get adherents to be loyal to something universal. And on occasion these religions have criticized unethical conduct by a tribe or nation.
  - B. Yet in practice tribes and nations have often subverted these religions and
    - i. Used them to reinforce loyalty to the tribe or nation
    - ii. Got them to give sanction for acts and policies which gravely violated the universal ethics that these religions held.
- III. At present, the great missionary religions are struggling with national pressure.

- A. Throughout the world we seem to have a new fascism which places national loyalty above every other concern and uses that loyalty to oppress cultural minorities.
  - B. Meanwhile, religion seems to be divided over whether to resist such nationalism or embrace it.
  - C. For example, in the United States President Trump's policy of "America first" has
    - i. Been mostly accepted by many conservative Protestant groups.
    - ii. Been criticized by leaders of other denominations, including Catholics and Episcopalians.
- IV. For Christianity, a particularly important and complex issue is how to deal with Judaism.
- A. The Hebrew Scriptures are an essential part of the Christian heritage.
  - B. Yet these scriptures on the whole endorse tribalism by claiming that historically God made an eternal covenant with only one people and gave them a homeland by driving out the original inhabitants.
  - C. The claim that God had an eternal covenant with the Jews threatened the claim of the Church that Christianity was superior to Judaism.
  - D. Partly in response the Church over most of its history oppressed the Jews.
  - E. And traditional Christian anti-Semitism was the seedbed for Nazism and the Holocaust.
  - F. In response to the Holocaust most Christians recognized and repented of the sin of anti-Semitism.
  - G. But now anti-Semitism along with other kinds of ethnic and religious prejudice are on the rise even among Christians.
- V. In the following conferences, I will concentrate on the historical issue of how Christianity became a universal religion despite its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- A. We will begin with a quick summary of the origin and nature of what I will call ethnic monotheism (i.e., that the "God of Israel" is the only God).

- B. We will go on to the teaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God and to why Jesus was crucified and see that Jesus was looking beyond ethnic monotheism.
  - C. Then we will deal with how one radical group in early Christianity first rejected ethnic monotheism and welcomed all cultures.
  - D. Next, we will deal with Paul's life and thought and how they made Christianity culturally universal.
  - E. We will then use John's Gospel as an illustration of the ultimate identity of Christianity as an international religion which nevertheless is historically based on Judaism.
- VI. We will also deal with some implications for us today.
- A. At various points in these talks we will tackle the issue of Christian anti-Semitism and how we can responsibly appropriate New Testament material on the Jews.
  - B. Finally, we will deal with the issue of whether it is possible to affirm the truth of John's Gospel, which is the foundation of orthodox Christianity, and the truths in other religions.

## Lecture 1: Ethnic Monotheism and the Old Testament

- I. The Old Testament makes it clear that prior to the Babylonian Exile, most Jews worshipped a number of deities, including Baal, who was a god of storms and agriculture.
- II. Among these deities Yahweh, who would later be hailed as the only God, had three special characteristics, one ethical, one metaphysical, and one national.
  - a. Ethically, Yahweh was especially concerned about the plight of the poor and powerless. He was the patron of the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien.
  - b. Metaphysically, Yahweh could not be reduced to anything in this world.
    - i. Even in much of the earliest tradition, it was a sin to make any image of him.
    - ii. He could not be identified with anything specific in nature (e.g., the sun).
    - iii. Later these insights would culminate in the theology that Yahweh created the natural world out of nothing.
  - c. Yahweh was the God who had an exclusive relationship with Israel.
    - i. Competing deities, such as Baal, were worshipped elsewhere in the ancient world and were international.
    - ii. Yahweh became the national god of Israel.
- III. At least by the time of Elijah, there was a minority movement in Israel to worship only Yahweh.
  - a. The Bible makes it clear that Elijah insisted on the exclusive worship of Yahweh and was locked in mortal combat with the worshipers of Baal who usually had royal support.
  - b. Since Elijah also seems to have been concerned about justice for the powerless (1 Kings 21) and about the transcendence of Yahweh (1 Kings 19:11-12), Elijah's rejection of worshipping other deities probably had both an ethical and a metaphysical basis.

- c. And it also had a national basis, since Yahweh was the champion of Israel, and the royal support for Baal came in part from international concerns, including the religion of Ahab's foreign wife, Jezebel.
- IV. The Classical Prophets (e.g., Amos) continued the emphasis on exclusive worship of Yahweh as Israel's God, justice for the powerless, and the transcendence of the Divine, but they seldom had royal support and remained a minority voice.
- V. The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 and the exiling of the leadership of Judah (the only remnant of Israel) discredited royal religion and threatened to end Israelite culture.
- VI. In response, those who chose to remain traditional Jews reflected deeply on their history and theology and what needed to be done to preserve Israelite identity and concluded that
  - a. The disaster of the exile was due to unfaithfulness to Yahweh.
  - b. Yahweh was the only god.
  - c. It was necessary to write down all of the past culture of Israel and give it religious sanction as God's law.
  - d. If Israel would be faithful to the only God and keep his law, God would restore Israel's land and freedom.
- VII. The result was ethnic monotheism.
  - a. There was only one God.
  - b. He had a special relationship with the Jews.
  - c. One honored him by:
    - i. Rejecting other gods
    - ii. Ethical living, especially justice for the vulnerable.
    - iii. Observing a particular ethnic lifestyle that made Jews "holy," that is, set apart for God and different from other people.
- VIII. This synthesis had its strengths.
  - a. The social strength was that it guaranteed the survival of the Jewish people, since their particular culture now had sanction from the only God.
  - b. A theological strength was that Jewish religion recognized both



- i. The imperative of social justice, especially for the vulnerable.
    - ii. The transcendence of God.
  - c. A historical strength was that the biblical record would be honest about the past failings of the culture.
    - i. To explain why God punished Israel and why in the future God would support Israel, the people who wrote down and/or revised most of the books of the Bible emphasized the sinfulness of Israel's past.
    - ii. This emphasis that the nation's past has on the whole been deeply flawed is, as far as I know, unique, since normally national histories emphasize the moral greatness of the nation and its heritage and gloss over serious failings.
- IX. However, biblical ethnic monotheism had serious weaknesses, including the theological problems of
  - a. Explaining why most of humanity was not Jewish. What was the purpose of most human beings in God's universe?
  - b. Explaining disaster when the Jews were faithful. If there is only one God and he rewards the righteous, why do the righteous whether individuals or groups so often get clobbered (see, e.g., the Book of Job)?
  - c. The extreme evils which God orders the Jews to do to non-Jews (e.g., slaughtering the people and even the animals of Jericho [Joshua 6:17-21]). Note: Most of these evils do not appear to have happened historically, but are nationalistic statements about the need to maintain the purity of Jewish religion from outside influence.
  - d. An un-nuanced condemnation of all non-Jewish religion. The Old Testament denounces all non-Jewish religion as evil and empty.
- X. A reflection on the relevance of the above.
  - a. In practice monotheism tends to turn into ethnic monotheism, and monotheistic religions need to be constantly aware of this danger. Cultures tend to make religion endorse their selfish interests by claiming that God is especially pleased with the special features of a particular

culture and champions it in confrontations with other cultures (“God is on our side”).

- b. The dominant theology of the Old Testament which emphasizes the sinfulness of Israel’s past challenges the United States to acknowledge the grave evils of its past, including slavery and the slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants. Note, for example, the California genocide against the Native Americans.

## Lecture 2: Jesus's Rejection of Social and Military Nationalism

- I. The public ministry of Jesus can be basically divided into two periods geographically and chronologically.
  - a. In the first and longer period Jesus was in Galilee and only visited Jerusalem briefly.
    - i. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus never visits Jerusalem during the first period of his public ministry.
    - ii. By contrast, in John's Gospel Jesus repeatedly visits Jerusalem to celebrate the pilgrimage feasts (2:13, 5:1, 7:10)
    - iii. Since the Old Testament mandates these pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16), John is probably accurate.
    - iv. Nevertheless, it seems likely that historically Jesus's time in Jerusalem was limited to brief visits during the earlier period of his ministry.
  - b. As all of the gospels attest, near the conclusion of his public ministry Jesus went to Jerusalem and remained in the vicinity until his death.
- II. During the ministry of Jesus the political situation in Galilee differed fundamentally from that in Jerusalem.
  - a. Galilee was under a Jewish ruler, and Jews had no reason to be discontented at least on ethnic grounds.
    - i. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee throughout Jesus's ministry.
    - ii. And although he was a Roman puppet and paid tribute, he was Jewish and was sensitive to Jewish concerns. Note that his coins contained no forbidden images.
    - iii. It must be emphasized, since liberal scholarship often gives a wrong impression, that there were no Roman troops in Galilee and no Roman tax collectors. Herod had his own army and tax collectors.

- iv. Because Herod paid tribute to Rome, taxation may have been high, but since Herod Antipas did not engage in the extravagance of his father, Herod the Great, taxation was perhaps less during Antipas's reign than previously.
    - v. Hence, Jews in Galilee during the ministry of Jesus had no pressing ethnic reason to be hostile toward the government, since the government was by ancient standards reasonable and even (nominally?) Jewish.
  - b. By contrast, southern Israel, including Jerusalem, was under direct Roman rule, and Jews were resentful.
    - i. Pontius Pilate was a Roman governor, and he had Roman troops, and taxes went directly to Rome.
    - ii. There were repeated and often violent confrontations between loyal Jews and Roman authorities over various issues (e.g., idolatrous images).
- III. In the Galilean part of his ministry Jesus rejected cultural ethnic monotheism by his relative lack of concern about the distinction between clean and unclean.
- a. Galilean Jews (as well as other Jews) maintained their cultural identity by keeping the ethnic requirements of the Mosaic Law and shunning people who did not as unclean.
  - b. By contrast Jesus associated closely with both clean and unclean Jews ("sinners") and invited both to become part of his movement ("the kingdom of God").
  - c. While in theory he supported keeping the entire Mosaic Law, in practice he so emphasized ethical matters and so de-emphasized ethnic ones that the ethnic ones became irrelevant.
    - i. There are sayings of Jesus which stress that one should keep the entire law (e.g., Matt. 5:18), though many critical scholars question whether this material goes back to Jesus.

- ii. In any case, it is clear that Jesus's primary concern was loving God and loving others (even one's enemies).
  - iii. And Jesus was unmoved by popular criticism that he associated with sinners and even ate with them.
  - iv. And clearly some of these unobservant Jews became part of his movement without at the same time keeping the ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law.
- d. The effect of the above was that Jesus
  - i. Did not distinguish between people on whether they were faithful to Jewish culture
  - ii. But on whether they were faithful to his own leadership and his vision of universal love.
- e. Major themes in Jesus's teaching also undermined ethnic prejudice.
  - i. Normally, ethnic groups maintain their identity by
    - 1. Stressing the faults of other groups while ignoring the faults of their own.
    - 2. Teaching their children to dislike or look down on outsiders.
    - 3. Permitting some level of violence toward outsiders, especially if the outsiders initiate violence.
  - ii. The teaching of Jesus militated against each of these.
    - 1. Jesus emphasized the danger of hypocrisy and stressed that people needed to face their own sins which often were greater than the sins of others. Note, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan.
    - 2. Jesus stressed that people must love their enemies, just as God loves everyone.
    - 3. Jesus taught non-retaliation, turning the other cheek.
- IV. Jesus looked forward to some dramatic act of God which would vindicate his message, but he did not give details about what that act would be.
  - a. The kingdom of God was now at work in his ministry but was presently small and weak and scarcely visible to those who lacked discernment.

- b. But then God would do something dramatic.
  - c. And the kingdom would triumph.
  - d. However, Jesus did not give details.
  - e. It is especially important to note that Jesus did not deal with the question of what role the Gentiles would play in the kingdom beyond saying that in some way they would be part of it (Matt. 8:11), as various texts in the Hebrew Scriptures suggested (e.g. Psalm 87, Isaiah 2:1-5).
- V. Jesus did make it clear that in some sense his kingdom which would one day triumph was a new Israel. Note that he chose a group of twelve who at least symbolically represented the twelve tribes of the new Israel which he was calling into existence.
- VI. However, once Jesus went to Jerusalem, he could not avoid the issue of whether Jews should acquiesce to Roman rule or whether they should actively resist it.
  - a. At the end of his Galilean ministry Jesus aggressively moved to Jerusalem to confront Judaism with his message.
  - b. Upon his arrival he immediately had to deal with how to respond to Roman oppression.
    - i. He had to respond to the question of whether Jews should accept paying taxes to the Roman government. Was it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (i.e., Rome; Mark 12:13-17).
    - ii. He also had to respond to popular pressure to become a nationalistic, anti-Roman messiah. Note the greeting of the crowd when he arrived: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David" (Mark 11:10).
- VII. There has been continuing debate among scholars about why the authorities executed Jesus and the relative responsibility of the Jews and the Romans.
- VIII. This debate has been fueled by two things:
  - a. First, ambiguity in the gospel sources.
    - i. The gospels record that the Romans executed Jesus and did so on the charge of treason against Rome (being "King of the Jews").

Note the inscription on the cross which is surely historical, since it accords with Roman practice, and “King of the Jews” was not a title that early Christians used for Jesus.

- ii. Yet the gospels also insist that the Roman governor wanted to release Jesus, and only ordered his execution under pressure.
  - 1. The high priest had already found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and turned him over to the governor for execution.
  - 2. The governor only ordered the execution when the Jewish crowd was on the point of rioting if Jesus was released.

b. The political/social implications over whom to blame both in the first century and today.

- i. In the first century it was in the interest of the Church to exonerate the Romans as much as possible so that Christianity would seem harmless to the imperial government. And the gospels clearly exaggerate Roman resistance to the execution. Note Pilate washing his hands (Matt. 27:24), a scene which cannot be literally true, since Pilate could not have publicly stated he was collaborating in an injustice.
- ii. Today liberals (including me to some extent) want to blame the Romans, since traditionally blaming the Jews for the execution of Jesus justified Christian persecution of the Jews, and alas today anti-Semitism is increasing once again. Of course, no one today should be held responsible for what happened centuries ago.

IX. In my opinion, any theory about why Jesus was executed must account from the following:

- a. Why popular Jewish opinion turned against Jesus. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd was excited.
- b. What was Jesus indicating in his protest in the temple courtyard? Note that this was Jesus’s primary public statement, and by its nature the protest was provocative.

- c. Why the Romans in connection with the condemnation of Jesus released Barabbas, a convicted, violent revolutionary. The evangelists try to explain this strange development by postulating that there was a customary amnesty. But we have no other evidence for such a custom, and it is unthinkable that the Romans would have committed themselves in advance to release *anyone* whom the Jews demanded.
  - d. Why the Romans officially executed Jesus on the charge of treason. Note that there is no problem explaining the high priest accusing Jesus of blasphemy, since Jesus had challenged contemporary Jewish religious attitudes.
- X. I believe that N.T. Wright is correct that Jesus's demonstration in the temple was a protest against violent Jewish nationalism.
- a. The temple was the primary symbol of Jewish national pride, especially at Passover.
    - i. The temple complex was the greatest Jewish architectural monument.
    - ii. The temple had a special purity, and Gentiles could not go beyond the outer courtyard.
    - iii. The temple was central to the worship of the God of Israel, since it was the only place that sacrifices could be offered and was the home of God on earth.
    - iv. At Passover the lambs for the feast were sacrificed in the temple.
    - v. Passover was the feast of national liberation (cf. July 4 in our culture).
    - vi. Consequently, the celebration of Passover was deeply ironic under Roman rule and a time for renewed patriotism and even violent resistance.
  - b. Centuries before Jesus Jeremiah
    - i. Had a protest in the temple.
    - ii. He explicitly called the temple, "A den of robbers" (Jeremiah 7:11).



- iii. He said that unless Judah repented the temple would be destroyed (Jeremiah 7:13-15).
    - iv. Jeremiah also insisted that the Judeans should not rebel against Babylon (e.g., ch. 27), but accept foreign rule as God's punishment for Judah's sin.
  - c. In his demonstration Jesus consciously echoed what Jeremiah did.
    - i. Jesus quoted Jeremiah's condemnation of the temple as a den of bandits (Mark 11:17).
    - ii. About the same time Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, and perhaps his demonstration disrupting temple activities was even a sign act initiating that destruction (Mark 13:2,14).
  - d. Jesus's denunciation of the temple as a den of "bandits" was a denunciation of violent messiahs who in the eyes of their critics were merely "bandits." Note that Josephus, the pro-Roman Jewish historian, calls them bandits.
  - e. Of course, Jesus's protest against violent nationalism was consistent with his general teaching of non-retaliation and loving one's enemies (Matthew 5:38-48).
  - f. in his protest Jesus insisted, quoting Isaiah, that the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17; Isaiah 56:7), not just a monument to Jewish pride.
- XI. Once we recognize that the protest in the temple was an attack on Jewish nationalism, everything else in the gospel record makes sense.
  - a. The Jewish populace who had urged Jesus to become a messiah, turned against him after he attacked Jewish nationalism.
  - b. The high priest and his supporters who controlled the temple naturally turned against Jesus and had him arrested and condemned and demanded that the Romans execute him for making trouble.
  - c. The crowd was outraged at Jesus's attack on patriotism as it understood it.

- d. The Roman governor did not want to execute Jesus, since a Jew who was opposed to violent resistance was a political asset.
  - e. Hence, Pilate initially opposed executing Jesus.
  - f. But he could not afford a riot at Passover, since things could quickly get out of hand and lead to outright revolt.
  - g. To placate the crowd Pilate
    - i. Executed Jesus.
    - ii. Released a popular rebel, Barabbas (though still executing two "bandits"), and the crowd settled down.
  - h. Pilate had to justify his actions to Rome, in case there was an inquiry.
  - i. So he executed Jesus on the charge of being "King of the Jews," a charge that was at least plausible, since Jesus had preached the coming of God's kingdom.
- XII. Some implications for today.
- a. Cultural purity is often oppressive and is not a legitimate part of Christianity.
  - b. Violent nationalism is contrary to the message of Jesus.
  - c. Therefore, the Church must be careful not to endorse national and cultural aggression.
- XIII. One solution to the problem of the crucifixion and subsequent anti-Semitism
- a. As we noted above, the gospels place the blame for the execution of Jesus primarily on the "Jews."
  - b. Consequently, the gospel accounts of the crucifixion have incited Christians through the centuries to persecute the Jews as "Christ killers."
  - c. Liberal scholars who are anxious to get beyond the evils of the past tend to argue that the Romans were responsible for the death of Jesus. However, liberals end up unwittingly advocating a different sort of anti-Semitism by making the high priest and his supporters Roman puppets, which they were not.
  - d. As was argued above, Jewish nationalists, including the high priests, pressured the Romans to execute Jesus.

- e. Nevertheless, I do not believe that classical Judaism was in any way to blame.
  - i. During the lifetime of Jesus, Jews were divided over whether it was best to engage in violent resistance to Roman rule or live in peace.
  - ii. Jesus was not the only important Jewish teacher who advocated peace. For example, Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, apparently also did.
  - iii. Unfortunately, those who advocated violent resistance inspired the disastrous revolts that led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the expulsion of all Jews from Judea in 135.
  - iv. After the failure of the revolts classical Judaism arose and followed the peaceful counsel of Hillel.
  - v. All subsequent Judaism descends from this classical movement, and it is wrong to blame "Jews" (i.e., descendants of classical Judaism) for the death of Jesus.
  - vi. And to repeat, no one today is in any way to blame for what happened two millennia ago.

## **Appendix: The Political implications of Jesus's statement about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's**

- I. In reply to whether it was lawful to pay taxes Jesus said that people should render unto Caesar (i.e., the Roman government) what was Caesar's and to God what was God's (e.g., Mark 12:13-16).
- II. Subsequently, this famous statement has figured in discussions of the proper relationship between church and state.
- III. The original statement, however, was ambiguous, since it could be interpreted either as
  - a. A validation of government having a legitimate sphere of authority not subject to religious criticism.
  - b. A denial of any government independence, since all things belong to God.
  - c. This ambiguity got Jesus out of a difficult situation, since it allowed him to avoid the accusation of advocating illegal resistance to Rome without having to endorse Roman domination.
- IV. In my opinion, the most relevant part of the story in which the saying appears is Jesus pointing out a coin which had Caesar's inscription.
  - a. Pointing out the inscription showed the hypocrisy of objecting to Roman taxation while making use of Roman money. We see a similar hypocrisy today. Many people complain bitterly about taxation while making use of expensive government programs.
  - b. And by implication Jesus was saying that
    - i. Government provides necessary services.
    - ii. Any criticism of government on religious grounds must be moral, not self-serving.

## **Lecture 3: The Rise of International Christianity and the Rejection of Continuing Ethnic Monotheism**

- I. The primary foundation of Christianity was the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of his Holy Spirit.
  - a. Of course, the life and teaching of Jesus remained important, as did the heritage of Israel, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures.
  - b. Nevertheless, Jesus's life and teaching were called into question by the crucifixion which at the time seemed to discredit them.
  - c. Then the resurrection and gift of the Spirit triumphantly vindicated Jesus.
- II. The resurrection experiences included the divinity of Christ.
  - a. The basic experience of the divine (both in the Bible and always) is
    - i. A personal presence that has no limits and can appear at any time in any place.
    - ii. Call and promise. The divine invites us to live in a certain way and assures us that if we do so, God will support us.
  - b. We see the same dynamics in the stories of the resurrection.
    - i. When the risen Christ appears, he has no limits.
      - 1. He is mysterious and is not immediately recognized.
      - 2. He appears and disappears wherever and whenever he chooses.
      - 3. He bestows his Spirit to all who are open to her, regardless of where they are.
    - ii. Yet the risen Christ is profoundly personal.
      - 1. He is recognizably Jesus, even if a transformed Jesus.
      - 2. He cares about his disciples.
    - iii. He calls and promises. He challenges his disciples to share the good news of his resurrection and promises that he will support them as they do (Charles Perry).
- III. Hence, thanks to the resurrection the Church always recognized that the risen Christ was at least functionally divine (he acted as only God does). Of course,

reconciling the divinity of Jesus with monotheism was a problem that would cause centuries of discussion and ultimately result in the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ.

- IV. Consequently, for Jewish Christianity the Pascal mystery replaced the Exodus and the giving of the Mosaic Law as the core of their faith.
- V. We must assume that because of the life of Jesus and the crucifixion, the earliest Jewish Christians.
  - a. Still accepted the Mosaic Law as basically authoritative, since Jesus had.
  - b. But were casual about ritual purity and rejected violent Jewish nationalism.
- VI. This liberalism increased as a result of persecution from conservative Jews.
  - a. Conservative Jews, especially the high priests and their supporters, naturally feared a growing movement which held that someone they had condemned to death was the Messiah, and, even divine.
  - b. Hence, conservative Jews harassed the new movement. For example, the high priest interrogated early Christian leaders (Acts 4-5).
  - c. Presumably, such abuse hardened Christian attitudes against at least mainline, conventional Judaism.
- VII. There apparently arose a radical Christian movement that even rejected the distinctive ethnic foundations of Judaism that is the Jerusalem Temple and the Mosaic Law.
  - a. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the historical events is very limited.
  - b. Almost all that we can know must be based on material in the Acts of the Apostles, and there are historical problems with this material.
    - i. It is not clear how much reliable information Luke had.
      - 1. Scholarly effort to determine Luke's sources has been inconclusive.
      - 2. It seems likely that the early church was much more concerned with preserving accurate memories of what Jesus said and did, since he was Lord, than with preserving accurate memories of the decades of church history that followed.

- ii. Luke clearly imposes his own theology in interpreting the events, especially in emphasizing the orderliness and providence of what occurred. Note: Historians always have to simplify the past and make it fit into some kind of larger framework.
- c. Nevertheless, the following reconstruction seems to me probable.
- d. In Jerusalem there were “Hellenists,” i.e., Jews who spoke Greek and admired at least some aspects of Greek culture.
- e. Presumably, many of them had lived abroad.
- f. Some of these Greek-speaking Jews became Christians (Acts 6:1).
- g. These Christians had a deep experience of the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Note: Tongues are nonsense syllables which express profound spiritual emotion and can easily be shared by groups who otherwise have little in common.
- h. Perhaps because of their cultural background and their experience of the Holy Spirit, these Christians became radical and rejected both the temple in Jerusalem and the Mosaic Law as no longer necessary. Note the charges against Stephen (cf. Acts 6:13).
- i. This break with traditional Judaism, outraged other Jews, including the fanatical Pharisee, Saul Paul of Tarsus (see below).
- j. In an angry confrontation, a mob stoned Stephen, a leader of the radical Christians, to death.
- k. The rest of the radical Christians fled (Acts 8:1), and some went to the largely Gentile cities of the northeastern Mediterranean, including Damascus and Antioch (Acts 11:19).
- l. There they succeeded in converting some Pagans (Acts 11:20-21). This conversion was relatively easy because
  - i. The radical Christians spoke Greek and were already familiar with Greek culture and appreciated much of it.
  - ii. Speaking in tongues was attractive to Pagans who were familiar with ecstatic religion.

- iii. Much of Pagan religion involved worshiping divine saviors who had once been human (e.g., emperors). So the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was now the divine ruler of the universe was easy to accept.
- iv. The primary Christian sacraments, in contrast to the orthodox Jewish ones, were ethnically neutral.
  - 1. In contrast to circumcision, baptism was available to everyone regardless of gender or nationality.
  - 2. In contrast to Passover which celebrated the triumph of Israel over Egypt, Eucharist made people one with a Savior who was condemned by both Jewish and Roman authorities and who in his resurrection triumphed over both.
- m. After the conversion of Pagans, these radical Christians were ethnically diverse and shared a spiritual practice, including speaking in tongues, revering Christ as divine, and inclusive sacraments.
- n. As a result, they at least in theory rejected ethnic monotheism and traditional cultural distinctions altogether. They adopted as a motto, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you [probably, originally, we] are one in Christ Jesus" (quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:28).
- o. These Christians suffered persecution from Saul of Tarsus who pursued them to Damascus where he was converted.
- p. The Church in Jerusalem heard of the radical Christians at Antioch and sent a Levite from Cyprus named Barnabas to investigate (Acts 11:22-24). Probably the Jerusalem church thought that Barnabas would be perceptive and safe.
  - i. Since he was from Cyprus and now resided in Jerusalem, Barnabas would understand cultural variety.
  - ii. But as a Levite (an assistant priest) he would insist on the importance of upholding Jewish tradition.



- q. However, when he met the radical Christians, Barnabas was impressed with their enthusiasm and love and saw no need for correction.
- r. He then got the newly converted Saul Paul to come to Antioch (the third largest city in the Roman Empire) and help lead the movement (Acts 11:25-26).
- s. It would be Paul's task to formulate a theology which would synthesize the Jewish heritage of Christianity with this new international orientation, a theology which we will discuss in detail below.
- t. Paul soon began missionary work beyond the confines of Antioch, and converted Pagans on the understanding that they could be followers of Jesus without adopting the ethnic aspects of the Mosaic Law.
- u. The Jewish leadership of the Church then had to determine how to respond.
- v. Paul met with the most important leaders of Jewish Christianity, especially Peter and James (a blood relative of Jesus).
- w. They decided that Paul's position that Pagans could become Christian without adopting the cultural aspects of the Mosaic Law was correct because
  - i. The Hebrew Scriptures had not expected Gentiles to adopt the Law. The purpose of the Law was to make the Jews distinctive.
  - ii. Some passages in the Hebrew Scriptures had predicted the spread of the "gospel" to the ends of the earth.
  - iii. Gentile Christians clearly had the Holy Spirit and revered Jesus, and that was enough to make them complete Christians.
  - iv. Even Jewish Christianity was under attack from other Jews and was in danger of being excommunicated, a danger which was fully realized later.
  - v. Various people had visionary experiences which confirmed the wisdom of allowing Gentile Christians to keep their own culture.

## **Lecture 4: Paul the Champion and Theologian of International Christianity**

- I. More than any other figure Paul was responsible for making Christianity international.
  - a. A number of other missionaries to the Gentiles, such as Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos, were significant, but we know little about them. Note that at Corinth Priscilla and Aquila founded the church along with Paul. Later Apollos visited, and many Corinthians subsequently preferred him to Paul.
  - b. However, Paul was the most important force in the early Gentile mission, since he was enormously successful in making Gentile converts and founding Christian communities which had both Jews and Gentiles.
  - c. He was also the most ardent and stubborn defender of the law-free gospel that Gentiles could become full Christians without adopting the Mosaic Law and Jewish culture.
  - d. He was the one who got the leaders of the Church at the Council of Jerusalem to endorse the law-free gospel.
  - e. His students became church leaders.
  - f. And his letters remained influential after his death and ultimately became a major portion of the New Testament and a foundation for subsequent theology.
  - g. Ultimately, Paul's version of Christianity was the only one that survived.
- II. Paul's early life qualified him well to be the person to help the Church make the transition from a Jewish sect to an international religion.
  - a. On the one hand, his Jewish roots were impeccable, since he was a "Hebrew born of Hebrews," studied Torah in Jerusalem, and became a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5).
  - b. On the other hand, his Gentile roots were impressive also. He was born at Tarsus (e.g., Acts 9:11), an important center of Greco-Roman culture, and he apparently received some classical education, since he can write

Greek very well. Luke claims that Paul was a Roman citizen (e.g., Acts 16:37) though many modern scholars think that he was at most a citizen of Tarsus.

- c. His dual cultural heritage even appears in his name of Saul Paul (Acts 13:9).
  - i. Saul was the first king of Israel and was from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Samuel 9:1-2), as was Paul (Phil. 3:5).
  - ii. Paul was a common Roman last name.
  - iii. That name suggests that his parents were committed to making their son bi-cultural.

III. In his early adulthood Paul persecuted the early Gentile Church, but we can only conjecture what his specific problems with Christianity were.

- a. It is clear that Paul violently persecuted the church, since both Acts and his own letters repeatedly tell us so (e.g., Acts 9:1-2, 1 Cor. 15:9).
- b. Paul records he acted out of his zeal for the traditions of his “fathers” (Gal. 1:14).
- c. It would seem that he primarily persecuted the more radical Greek-speaking Christians, since it was these who fled to Damascus where Paul was later converted.
- d. Perhaps Paul was especially offended by
  - i. The shocking claim that a crucified person was the Messiah (cf. Gal. 3:13).
  - ii. The further claim that this person (Jesus) could be “Lord”—a claim that seemed to compromise monotheism.
  - iii. Christian missionaries winning converts among God Fearers (Gentiles who attended synagogue) by eliminating Jewish legal requirements.
  - iv. The preaching that in Christ Jews and Gentiles were one and that Jews should not hate their Romans oppressors.

IV. What we sometimes refer to as Paul's "conversion" was his acknowledgment of Jesus's lordship and his acceptance of a law-free mission to the Gentiles.

- a. Paul never ceased to think of himself as Jewish (e.g., Gal. 2:15), and he continued to live like a pious Jew when he was among his own people (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:20).
  - b. From what Paul tells us, his "conversion" involved seeing Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1), acknowledging him to be God's Son, and accepting a mission to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16).
- V. In his subsequent missionary work Paul had two contrasting goals:
  - a. To convert quickly as many Gentiles as possible by preaching a law-free gospel. Note that haste was urgent because Paul believed that the end of this age was near.
  - b. To give Jewish Christianity as much support as he could without compromising his gospel.
    - i. By preaching a law-free Christianity, Paul was discrediting the Jewish church among non-Christian Jews, and this concerned Paul.
    - ii. At the Jerusalem Council which recognized the legitimacy of Paul's law-free mission to the Gentiles, Paul agreed (Gal. 2:9-10)
      - 1. To confine his missionary work to Gentile territory and not interfere with the Jewish church in Israel.
      - 2. To raise money from the Gentile churches to help the church in Jerusalem which was under increasing threat from nationalistic Jews who regarded an organization which accepted Gentile members as a threat.
    - iii. Paul subsequently labored to collect money for the Jerusalem church, and the collection became a major theme in the Corinthian letters (1 Cor. 16, 2 Cor. 8-9).
    - iv. He also made it clear that Christian Jews should keep their Jewish heritage (1 Cor. 7:17-18), and he himself kept the Mosaic Law when he was with Jews (1 Cor. 9:20).
    - v. Although Paul did not believe that the keeping the Mosaic Law was the way to salvation (which was through Christ), Paul stressed that

when Jews, especially Christians ones, keep the Mosaic Law they do please God (Rom. 14:6).

1. Anything that we do in an attempt to please God does to that extent please God. God is pleased with our good intension.
2. Similarly, any time we act against our conscience we sin both because
  - a. We have chosen to do what we think is wrong and, therefore, we intend to do wrong (1 Cor. 8:7-13, Rom. 14:13-23).
  - b. We have become divided against ourselves, since are doing something which we ourselves condemn (Rom. 7).
3. Jews believe that God wants them to keep the Mosaic Law, and, therefore, when they do so, they please God.
- vi. Of course, if God is pleased, Gentile Christians should not judge Jewish Christians who keep the Mosaic Law (Rom. 14:3-4).
- vii. Naturally, the above has implications for how today we are to treat people, whether Christian or not, who have religious beliefs and practices which differ from our own.

VI. Although it is difficult to be certain, it appears that we can isolate Paul's basic theological ideas.

- a. Because Paul presents his theology contextually rather than systematically, the center of his thought is not entirely clear.
- b. What I give is my personal opinion; not all scholars would agree.
- c. Like other Jews, Paul emphasized there is only one God and in the past revealed himself primarily to the Jews and through the prophets predicted future events.
- d. Like other Christians, Paul emphasized that through the crucifixion, resurrection, and the giving of Christ's Spirit God has revealed the final truth.

- i. The cross demonstrates God's love for sinners and the wickedness and folly of the world. Hence, it teaches that we must suffer to show God's goodness and resist accommodation to this age.
  - ii. The resurrection demonstrates that Christ is mightier than the powers of this age, including death. Jesus now reigns as Lord and will soon return in glory. We will share in his final reign and be transformed into his risen likeness if we live as he lived.
  - iii. The Spirit gives us a "down payment" (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of that final salvation now. Consequently, we live both in the future blessedness and the present tribulation and have the paradox of strength in the midst of weakness.
- e. Consequently, with the resurrection we have entered a new phase in God's continuing plan to save the world.
  - i. There is only one divine plan to save the world, since God is consistent and knows the future.
  - ii. The biblical prophets predicted Christ and the coming of a new age.
  - iii. With the coming of Christ God is now offering salvation to the entire world.
- VII. From these ideas Paul argues that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek (Gal. 3:28).
  - a. The oneness of God means that he saves both Greeks and Jews without partiality (e.g., Rom. 3:29-30).
  - b. The cross demonstrates the folly of this age and of the (Jewish) law which regulated life during it.
  - c. The resurrection confirms Christ's triumph over the world and the law.
  - d. The Spirit does not come through works of the law but through hearing with faith (Gal. 3:2) and is given equally to Jews and Greeks.
- VIII. With a little imagination one can even synthesize a "systematic" theology about how Jews and Gentiles, and, by implication, other groups, can live together in Christ.
  - a. Humans have a natural tendency to choose to be self-centered.
  - b. This self-centeredness occurs both in individuals and groups.

- c. And the consequences of this self-centeredness gets passed down in history.
- d. Self-centeredness can lead to deliberate choices to do wrong.
- e. However, one can also become self-centered in trying to be virtuous though one's own efforts, whether as an individual or as a group. Note that Paul claims that the Jews have made this mistake by trying to be righteous through following the law (Rom. 10:1-3). This claim had a special relevance to Paul's own life and psychology, since it was his loyalty to the Mosaic Law which led him to persecute Christians!
- f. Individuals and groups can only get beyond self-centeredness by accepting the undeserved love of God, especially as made known in the crucifixion of Jesus who died for us.
- g. Salvation is being centered in God from whom we receive every blessing, especially, God's love in the Spirit.
- h. When we are centered in God's love in the Spirit, we are also united with all who are so centered regardless of ethnicity.
- i. This union becomes more powerful than any other through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.
  - i. Baptism is analogous to a death and resurrection (e.g., Rom. 6:3-4, 1 Cor. 12:13).
  - ii. In baptism we identify with the crucified Jesus and die to our old life.
  - iii. In baptism we rise to new life through the gift of the Spirit and look forward to final resurrection.
  - iv. And through Baptism we join a new spiritual family in which there is (at least ideally) no ethnic tension (Gal. 3:26-29).
  - v. Everyone who participates in the Eucharist becomes one body.
  - vi. Therefore, each group can keep its own culture while still being deeply united.

- j. Gentiles acknowledge God's undeserved love partly by accepting God's revelation to Israel and realizing that Gentile Christianity is based on Judaism (Rom. 11:17-18)
  - k. Jews get beyond self-centeredness by acknowledging that salvation does not come through trying to follow the Mosaic Law but only by accepting the gift of Christ's Spirit and seeing God at work also among the Gentile Christians.
- IX. God is acting so no people has a privileged relationship with him and, therefore, no group can feel that it is inherently superior.
- a. God has saved the Gentiles through the Jews, from whom we get the scriptures and the Christ (Rom. 9:1-5).
  - b. Nevertheless, since most Jews have rejected Jesus and fallen away, they can now receive God's saving message through the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13-14).
  - c. Excursus: Paul's logic also suggests a way for the different parts of the Church to value one another. It often happens that the oldest and most established parts of the Church (e.g., European Christianity) decline, whereas newer parts (e.g., Christianity in Africa and Asia) prosper. Paul's theology would suggest
    - i. One important reason why older Christian centers decline is
      - 1. They confuse the Christian message with their own cultural identity and narrow perspectives and feel smug. To use Paul's terminology, they try to establish their own righteousness.
      - 2. Hence, they no longer understand that our standing with God must come only from trust in the love which he has shown for us through Christ's death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit.
    - ii. By contrast, when a culture is first encountering Christianity, this culture finds it easier to accept the message that no one has a privileged position with God because of ethnic origin.



- iii. Nevertheless, these newer churches must not despise decadent older Christian centers because it is these centers which preserved the faith.
  - iv. The oldest and most established parts of the Church can turn to new Christian communities for inspiration and renewal.
- X. Paul stressed that all Christians should retain their own culture while not despising the culture of others or assuming that salvation is through culture.
  - a. His rule “in all the churches” was that Christian Jews should remain Jews and Christian Gentiles should remain Gentiles with each group maintaining its own lifestyle (1 Cor. 7:17-20).
  - b. And he warns both groups not to pass judgment on each other, since God accepts both groups.
  - c. And Paul even adopted the lifestyle of the group with which he was presently evangelizing (1 Cor. 9:20-21), a policy for which he received criticism.
- XI. Excursus: A tragedy of some later missionary work was that many missionaries ignored Paul’s perspective and told converts that to be Christian they must reject their own culture as unacceptable to God and adopt a foreign one. The consequences of that theological error haunt the Church still.
- XII. Paul and anti-Semitism
  - a. A. Paul as a Pharisee persecuted Christians, and Paul as a Christian was persecuted by Jews.
    - i. As noted above, before his conversion Paul persecuted radical Christians who rejected the continuing validity of the Mosaic Law and the Temple.
    - ii. After Paul converted to Christianity, other Jews persecuted him as a traitor to the orthodox faith.
      - 1. Paul himself repeatedly received beatings from synagogue officials (2 Cor. 11:24).

2. Conservative Jewish Christian missionaries repeatedly criticized Paul and tried to get his Gentile converts to adopt the Mosaic Law.
- b. Perhaps because of above, the issue of Jewish-Christian relations was an emotional one for Paul.
  - c. At times because of Jewish persecution one can find anti-Semitic outbursts in his letters both
    - i. Against non-Christian Jews (e.g., 1 Thes. 2:14-16).
    - ii. And against Jewish Christians who are trying to convert Gentile Christians (e.g., Gal. 5:12).
  - d. (partly review) Nevertheless, Paul stresses the greatness of Judaism and the continuing place of Jews in God's plan for salvation.
    - i. Paul emphasizes that God revealed himself to the world through Judaism (Rom. 9:1-5)
    - ii. Christianity is based on Judaism, and Jesus himself was Jewish.
    - iii. Paul can even boast of his own Jewish heritage and insist that he himself remains a Jew (e.g., Gal. 2:15, Phil. 3:4-6)
    - iv. Even after Jesus's resurrection, God has a special place in his plan for non-Christian Jews.
      1. Paul believes that the rejection of Jesus by most Jews was part of God's providential plan, since that rejection led to Gentiles converting to Christianity (Rom. 11:11). Note: It probably is historically true that because Christian missionary work was failing among Jews, Gentiles became more aware that Christianity was a different religion which did not require adherence to the Mosaic Law.
      2. All Jews are especially beloved because of their heritage, and at Christ's return all Jews will be saved (Rom. 11:26-29).
    - v. In the meantime Paul insists that Christians must strive to live in peace with and be kind to all non-Christians, including Jewish ones (Rom. 12:17-21).

- vi. Two thousand years later, it is perhaps worth noting that Paul and many contemporary Jews share a common conviction about Jewish identity.
  - 1. Paul encouraged Christian Jews to maintain their Jewish identity, even though salvation was through Christ, not the Mosaic Law (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:17-18).
  - 2. Many modern Jews no longer believe that Jews are the “chosen people,” but instead they choose to be Jewish.

## **Lecture 5: The Definitive Theological Formulation of What International Christianity is and How It Relates to Judaism from which It Came: John's Gospel as an Illustration; the Problem of the Inspiration of Scripture**

- I. There are various documents in the New Testament which outline what international Christianity is and how it relates to its Jewish roots. Both Hebrews and Ephesians are illustrations; here I will use John's Gospel which has been especially influential.
- II. John's Gospel is a theological interpretation of the past.
  - a. The gospel records real events.
  - b. But it sees these events through the lens of the author who in accordance with Jesus's promise in the book believed that the Spirit has led him into all truth (16:12-13).
- III. To give this spiritual sense of the past, the gospel sometimes places things that happened later but were the result of Jesus's life and teaching back into the gospel's presentation of Jesus. For example:
  - a. In John's Gospel Jesus himself converts Samaritans, whereas the evidence is that historically no Samaritans became Christians until after the resurrection.
    - i. In John 4 Jesus converts an entire Samaritan village.
    - ii. By contrast in Matthew 10:5 Jesus tells his disciples not to preach to the Samaritans.
    - iii. And in Luke-Acts the mission to the Samaritans only starts after the resurrection with the preaching of Philip (Acts 8). Note that Philip was a member of the radical Christian group discussed above. Probably his mission to the Samaritans was due to the radical theology that the temple in Jerusalem was no longer important.
  - b. The conversion of the Samaritans was the result of Jesus's vision.

- i. Jesus spoke well of the Samaritans (especially, in the famous parable of the Good Samaritan; Luke 10:30-35).
  - ii. And Jesus looked forward to the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth (Matt. 8:11).
- IV. A major theme in John is the coming of the gospel to the larger world.
  - a. This theme appears already in the prologue (1:12).
  - b. In the famous 3:16 Jesus emphasizes God's love for the world as a whole.
  - c. Then John narrates the coming of the gospel to the Samaritans in chapter 4 and includes a theological reflection to which we will have to return.
  - d. Finally, we have the desire of the "Greeks" to see Jesus in chapter 12.
    - i. These "Greeks" appear to be Jewish, since they have come to worship for Passover.
    - ii. But literarily, they symbolize the Gentile world.
    - iii. In the narrative, they do not actually see Jesus, but the text implies that after the crucifixion, the gospel will come to the Greeks.
- V. John presents a theological synthesis of the relationship of Christianity and Judaism that will be lasting in subsequent church history.
  - a. Christianity is based on earlier Judaism ("salvation is from the Jews;" 4:22), and to that extent all Christians have a common historical and cultural basis in Judaism, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures.
  - b. The coming of Jesus, and, especially, his death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit fulfill the work that God began in earlier Judaism which prophesied this fulfillment. John's Gospel insists that Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's coming (8:56), Moses wrote about Christ (5:46), Isaiah spoke of Christ (12:38-41).
  - c. With the death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, a new era has come in which the ritual law, including the liturgies of the Jerusalem temple, are no longer important.
    - i. Baptism replaces Jewish purification rituals (3:23-27).
    - ii. Eucharist replaces animal sacrifice in the temple. Now Jesus is the sacrificial lamb that takes away sin (1:29).

- iii. Jesus's body is the true temple and makes the temple in Jerusalem obsolete (2:19-22). Note
      - 1. Christians receive Jesus's body in the Eucharist.
      - 2. By the time John's Gospel was written, the Jerusalem temple had already been destroyed.
    - iv. Everyone is to look to Jesus as the role model and have the Spirit of the risen Christ.
  - d. This new spiritual era is possible only because in Jesus God had a human life and death. Especially, through the death of Jesus God has definitively shown his love and invited us to become Jesus's friends. Note, that when the Greeks in chapter 12 seek to see Jesus, they apparently do not succeed, because Jesus must be crucified first before the world can become Christian.
  - e. Loyalty to this incarnate person makes it possible to have a united community which is ethnically and culturally diverse.
  - f. We may summarize much of the above by saying that in John's Gospel incarnate monotheism replaces ethnic monotheism as the basis for a sacred community and makes a multicultural religion possible.
  - g. Incarnational monotheism will subsequently be the core of Christianity, as we can see from, for example, the Nicene Creed.
  - h. Incarnational monotheism will differentiate Christianity from the other two great monotheistic religions of the West which to some extent embrace ethnic monotheism.
    - i. Both Judaism and Islam will reject the incarnation as incompatible with monotheism.
    - ii. Both Judaism and Islam find their unity in a common culture based on ethnic regulations in the Hebrew Scriptures (in the case of Judaism) or in the Quran (in the case of Islam).

## VI. Anti-Semitism and John's Gospel

- a. (review) John's Gospel is the most anti-Semitic book in the New Testament, though the competition is stiff (especially, with Matthew).

- i. In the narrative the “Jews” as a whole increasingly reject Jesus. Already in chapters 5, 8, and 10 they try to kill him, and they later force Pilate to crucify him.
  - ii. In response to persecution from the Jews, Jesus uses extremely hostile rhetoric against them, even calling his Jewish opponents children of the Devil (8:44).
  - iii. Jesus talks about the “Jews” as if he were not one himself.
- b. There are various reasons for this extreme anti-Semitism.
  - i. In part this extreme rhetoric is part of a cultural convention, since in the ancient world, both Jewish and Gentile, it was customary to attack one’s intellectual opponents in the strongest (and to us, most offensive) terms. Note how Paul attacks Pagan religion in Romans 1:18-32.
  - ii. In part the anti-Semitism in John’s Gospel is an understandable emotional response to the expulsion of Johannine Christians from the synagogues, an expulsion that the gospel repeatedly foreshadows (9:22, 12:42, 16:2).
  - iii. And an attempt to keep Jewish Christians from returning to their former faith and perhaps to put pressure on secret Jewish Christians to confess publicly their Christian faith (e.g., 12:42; Raymond Brown).
  - iv. In part, since the Johannine community included Gentiles, the anti-Semitism was taken over from Gentile prejudices against Jews, a prejudice which surely became stronger after the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66-70).
  - v. But, of course, there are theological issues also, especially,
    - 1. Whether the Hebrew Bible should be seen as a preparation for the coming of Jesus. Note: Literarily and theologically, what the Hebrew Scriptures mean depends on the context in which they are read.

2. Whether the Johannine claim that Christ is divine is compatible with Jewish monotheism.
- vi. John's Gospel gives two contrasting reasons why most Jews did not accept the Christian message and makes no attempt to reconcile these conflicting perspectives.
  1. Lack of election (10:26, 12:39-40).
  2. Sin (15:22ff.).
- c. In evaluating John's Anti-Semitism several things are important to keep in mind.
  - i. The Johannine Community was a powerless minority, whereas in later centuries the Church which revered John's Gospel was in power over Jews.
  - ii. The anti-Semitism in John is not ethnic, only religious. John's Gospel records that Jesus himself was Jewish as were his original disciples. Notice, for example, that the only two major non-Jewish characters in the gospel, the Samaritan Woman at the Well and the Roman Pontius Pilate, both remind Jesus (and the reader) that Jesus is Jewish (4:9, 18:35).
  - iii. In some passages the word "Jews" does not refer to all members of a non-Christian religion.
    1. Occasionally, the term "Jews" in the gospel only means the inhabitants of Judea (e.g., 7:1). In Greek the same word refers both to the residents of this geographical region and to the adherents of its dominant religion.
    2. And sometimes where we read the word "Jews," it seems to refer only to a much smaller group (e.g., Jewish leaders).
    3. "The Jews" can even be a literary symbol for uncommitted Christians. Note, especially, 8:30-31.
    4. Or a literary symbol for the world which rejects Christianity. Note 15:18-20.
  - iv. John's Gospel does not give an accurate presentation of Judaism.



1. The gospel (and the New Testament in general) is polemical and does not give an unbiased presentation of Jewish belief and conduct.
  2. John's Gospel presupposes a period when the "Jews" are a different religion than Christians and, therefore, does not give a reliable picture of the relationship of Christians to (other) Jews during the time of Jesus and the earliest church.
  3. Of course, the Judaism that John's Gospel attacked is not the same Judaism which nearly two thousand years later exists today in various forms.
- v. But despite such mitigating features, it is clear that John's Gospel encourages hatred for the Jews as those who forced the Romans to kill Jesus.
  - vi. And it is clear that Christian anti-Semitism was a grave and continuing evil in church history.
  - vii. And Christian anti-Semitism was the seedbed from which Nazism and the Holocaust arose.
    1. The Nazis got their anti-Semitism from the continuing anti-Semitism of much Christian culture.
    2. And they combined it with the (theological?) idea that Germans were the chosen people.
    3. Since in a Christian culture shaped by the Bible, Jews had the strongest claim to be the chosen people, they had to be eliminated.

## VII. The danger of ecclesiastical monotheism.

- a. In these conferences we have looked at ethnic monotheism, i.e., that God has a special relationship with a particular tribal or national group. Of course, the identity of such a group may be reinforced by other shared characteristics, such as race.

- b. The worst danger of ethnic monotheism is that it will encourage a particular group to appeal to God to justify unethical policies (even genocide) which favor the group in question.
  - c. We have also seen that beginning with Jesus himself and then continuing with early church history, Christianity rejected ethnic monotheism and ultimately replaced it with incarnational monotheism.
  - d. Nevertheless, there remains the problem that incarnational monotheism can in practice become ecclesiastical monotheism. The church can appeal to its possession of unique truth to justify its own selfish institutional goals and impose its own traditional cultural practices.
  - e. And, of course, there has been plenty of ecclesiastical monotheism in church history as the church used its spiritual authority to oppress both its own members and other religions in the name of the One God who became incarnate.
  - f. And ecclesiastical monotheism has also helped produce an unjustified negative evaluation of the beliefs and rites of other religions and even of other Christian groups.
- VIII. I am not competent to comment further on church history, but will say something about the proper interpretation of the New Testament.
- IX. There are various options for whether the New Testament is inspired and, if so, to what degree. Here are several, listed from the most skeptical to the most credulous.
- a. An anti-Christian atheistic position: The New Testament is a thoroughly human document from the distant past and makes incredible historical statements (e.g., Jesus rose from the dead) and champions outdated ethical perspectives (e.g., on homosexuality and women). The claim that this document is inspired has held back progress and facilitated human rights violations.
  - b. A humanistic position: The New Testament is a thoroughly human document from the distant past and makes many untenable theological claims but does contain timeless ethical values (e.g., the importance of loving one's neighbor).

Therefore, the New Testament has in practice often contributed to human wellbeing despite the outdated and misleading theology.

- c. A non-Christian theistic position: The New Testament comes from human beings who had profound insights into the Divine but erred in insisting on the superiority of their own teacher, Jesus. Therefore, the New Testament has helped countless Christians enter more deeply into the life of God but has also fostered religious intolerance.
  - d. A liberal orthodox Christian position: The New Testament is a human document which uniquely bears witness to the truth that in Jesus God became incarnate. Therefore, the New Testament contains the limitations of any human document, but has a unique authority. Through the New Testament, humans learn that God became one of us, and this knowledge gives our relationship to the divine an additional dimension that otherwise cannot be had.
  - e. A “Fundamentalist” Christian position. God would have wanted for human beings to have an infallible ethical and spiritual guide so that we would not be prey to the uncertainty of human opinions. Therefore, God inspired the New Testament fully, and the New Testament contains no errors.
- X. A Catholic (which here includes Anglican) position on the inspiration of the New Testament.
- a. Catholics are committed to the use of reason and accept the results of sound critical scholarship.
  - b. Sound critical scholarship has demonstrated that there are errors and limited perspectives in the New Testament (see above).
  - c. Hence, the Fundamentalist claim that the New Testament contains no errors is untenable.
  - d. Catholics accept the orthodox claim that in Jesus God became human.
  - e. Therefore, Jesus reveals God as fully as a human life can, and in Jesus God directly experienced the limitations and sufferings that human beings do.
  - f. Since Jesus was fully human, he also had the limited perspectives of a person living in a particular cultural context.

- g. Of course, the authors of the New Testament were fully human and had limitations.
  - h. Nevertheless, the New Testament preserved the indispensable truth of the incarnation and is uniquely inspired.
  - i. As non-Christians complain (see above), the limitations of the New Testament and even of the fully human Jesus can and historically sometimes have inspired intolerance and cruelty.
  - j. However, the New Testament emphasizes loving everyone (even enemies) and that God's Spirit can lead the Church into all truth.
  - k. These emphases allow the Church to recognize the problems that the New Testament has caused and move beyond them and be charitable to all.
- XI. It is my hope that these conferences have themselves been an illustration of how one can accept the inspiration of the New Testament and recognize its limitations and take a step forward in love to address contemporary problems.

## **Lecture 6: How Can Christians Responsibly Affirm the Superiority of John's Christian Path and Affirm the Valid Insights of Other Religions? One Possible Answer.**

- I. John's Gospel clearly teaches that the sole way to "salvation" is through Jesus.
- II. John bases this conclusion on the theological grounds that Jesus is the only incarnation of God.
- III. Of course, the author's negative view of other religious paths probably reflected a cultural perspective, not merely a theological one.
  - a. Part of that cultural perspective was the legacy from the Old Testament of Jewish antipathy toward "Pagan" religion.
    - i. Before the Exile the prophets attacked "foreign" religion, because it justified a royal system that oppressed the poor. Not surprisingly, in its opposition to foreign religion the prophets focused on the worst aspects of Paganism (e.g., child sacrifice).
    - ii. At least from the time of the Exile (586 B.C.E.) on, monotheism became the primary marker that one was Jewish, and the need to preserve Jewish identity reinforced a negative attitude toward other religion.
  - b. John's Gospel accepts the inspiration of the Old Testament and affirms, often uncritically, its basic perspectives.
  - c. Part of John's cultural perspective was also due to the fact that the non-Jewish religion which he knew was very primitive.
    - i. Of course, John had no knowledge of the high religions of Asia
      1. When the Gospel of John was written, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism had all existed in one form or another for centuries.
      2. But these religions were almost unknown in the Roman Empire.
    - ii. The popular religion of the Greco-Roman world which John

certainly did know was very primitive.

1. It was still mythological.
    - a. A mythological religion only tells stories and cannot critique them (Robert Bellah).
    - b. By the time of John's Gospel, philosophers were trying to elevate Greco-Roman religion but had not changed the shape of religion as a whole.
  2. The purpose of official Pagan religion was primarily to placate the gods so they would ensure public welfare, including the maintenance of the current power structure.
  3. Most religion was not concerned with ethics or deep, transforming religious experience.
- IV. For a modern Christian reader, however, the primary question must be how to affirm the valid insights and experiences of the higher (axial) religions and the exclusive claims that John's Gospel makes.
- V. Even axial religion is very diverse as we can see by a quick comparison of Islam and Buddhism, the two religions which are (at least at present) the greatest competitors to Christianity.
- a. Islam
    - i. Insists that there is one God.
    - ii. Stresses the autonomy of each individual and the need for every person to choose to submit to God.
    - iii. Emphasizes that religious images are evil.
    - iv. Looks forward to the glorious fulfillment of sensual desire in paradise.
  - b. By contrast, Buddhism
    - i. Is not in principle theistic.
    - ii. Denies the existence of a (separate) self.
    - iii. Freely uses religious images.
    - iv. Looks forward to the extinction of desire in Nirvana.
  - c. One can recognize that both Islam and Buddhism bring joy and peace to

their adherents, but this recognition does not imply that these two religions are basically saying the same thing!

VI. No conceivable religious system can accept everything that even the axial religions have experienced and taught, and attempts to do so should not be confused with "tolerance."

- a. The three great missionary religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, all claim that they offer the ultimate path to truth and salvation. And we may note that together these three religions account for the majority of people on earth!
- b. The more "politically correct" position of Hinduism that all religions are equally valid paths to ultimate reality contradicts what the great missionary religions teach and is a claim to superiority, not a claim for tolerance. Note that intolerance of intolerance is a form of intolerance (sometimes an extreme form)!

VII. It is often claimed that John's Gospel holds that no one except baptized Christians who accept the divinity of Christ can be saved. This claim is solidly based on such texts as John 3:5 ("unless one is born from water and the Spirit, one cannot enter into the kingdom of God"), 8:24 ("you will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM"), 14:6 ("no one comes to the Father except through me").

VIII. Nevertheless, one must note that John's Gospel also insists

- a. God loves the world and has no desire to condemn the world, even though the world deserves condemnation (3:16, 12:47).
- b. Salvation is union with God, and damnation is separation from God.
- c. Judgment in John, whether in the present or on the last day, is exposure. The wicked cannot bear the truth and must hide from it (3:18-21, 12:48). The condemning truth is either that they refused to believe in Jesus or that their deeds were evil.
- d. Those who are honestly ignorant of the Christian message have not sinned (9:41, "If you were blind you would have no sin," and 15:22, "If I had not come and spoken to them they would have no sin.")
- e. Surely those who acted lovingly without being Christians will have much to

rejoice in when their deeds are brought to light at the last judgment.

- f. When Jesus was "lifted up," he drew all people to himself (12:31-32).
- IX. To some extent the tensions between "VIII" and "IX" above demonstrate that John's Gospel is not systematic theology! And one should beware of doing theology on the basis of isolated verses, rather than considering the Gospel as a whole.
- X. Nevertheless, the following is surely in John.
  - a. Those who heard Jesus when he was alive in the flesh and rejected and killed him have an especially difficult challenge to find salvation because
    - i. They rejected the incarnate God definitively. Hence, it will be difficult to acknowledge what they have done.
    - ii. They will have a hard time perceiving Jesus in the Spirit, since they did not even see God in Jesus when he was physically present (12:35-36).
  - b. Nevertheless, with the crucifixion, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit, even those who killed Jesus have a new opportunity to acknowledge him (cf. Acts 3:11-21).
  - c. By contrast, all who are truly (invincibly? [Thomas Aquinas]) ignorant are innocent and will have a chance to be saved at the final judgment when Jesus will be visible to all and will reveal the good and evil that people have done.
  - d. Building on John, we should note that many people are "invincibly ignorant" of the truth of Christianity because of the shortcomings of Christians.
    - i. John's Gospel insists the world will know that we are Christians by our love.
    - ii. Given how often Christians have demonstrated a lack of love, it understandable why so much of the world is not impressed with Christianity.
- XI. In my opinion the best way of classifying religions (whether whole religions or denominations within larger religions) is whether they have a mysticism of



separation or a mysticism of identity.

- a. There are, of course, different ways of classifying religions.
- b. A famous one is orthodox (religions emphasizing correct belief) versus orthoprax (religions emphasizing correct behavior). But since all axial religion includes both belief and behavior, I personally am not comfortable with this dichotomy.
- c. It seems to me that if religion is (by definition?) about how to relate to Ultimate Reality then we should classify religions by how they do this.
- d. There are basically two ways.
  - i. A mysticism of separation.
    1. The primary religious experience is the chasm between God who is almighty, eternal, morally perfect and the human individual or community which is weak, transitory, and sinful. Two famous illustrations of this experience are Isaiah's vision in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-8) and Arjuna's experience when Krishna reveals his divine self (Bhagavad Gita, chapter 11).
    2. This experience gives birth to a theology emphasizing the absolute difference between the Divine and the world. Note that some practitioners of Hinduism insist on the difference between God and the human who loves God.
  - ii. A mysticism of identity.
    1. The primary religious experience is that one's deepest self is identical with Ultimate reality. We find this experience in such diverse documents as the Upanishads of Hinduism and the Sufi writings in Islam and even in the Buddhist doctrine of no (separate) self.
    2. Of course, this experience gives birth to a theology that the deepest self is Ultimate Reality. "Brahman is atman."  
Everyone's deepest nature is the Buddha nature.
- e. Although both schools of religion exist to some extent in all of the axial religions (religion in general?), it is basically true that the religions that

originated in the Middle East tend toward a mysticism of separation, the religions that originated in India tend toward a mysticism of identity, and the religions that originated in China contrast with each other.

- i. Mainline Judaism and Islam emphasize the difference between the Divine and the human self.
- ii. Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize the identity of the Absolute and the Deepest Self.
- iii. Confucianism with its emphasis on education, constant self-examination, and following social norms tends toward the "separation" branch of religion, whereas Taoism with its emphasis on being childlike, spontaneous, and disregarding social norms tends toward the "identity" branch.

XII. Although both schools of religion obviously celebrate profound experience and arrive at deep truth, I believe that both schools of religion have severe problems.

- a. The problem of the mysticism of separation is that deep communion with God is impossible because of the chasm between the divine and human.
- b. There are two problems with the mysticism of identity.
  - i. If the divine is identical with the deepest self, it is difficult to love the divine, because love can only be strong if it embraces the Other.
  - ii. If the divine is identical with the deepest self, sin cannot be too serious. Our deepest selves are perfect. Note that religions that emphasize a mysticism of identity tend to dismiss sin as only ignorance.
  - iii. With the dismissal of sin as only ignorance, there is a tendency to regard injustice as unimportant or even an illusion.
    - 1. In Hinduism and Buddhism there really is no injustice. What appears to be innocent suffering is in fact due to unethical choices in previous incarnations.
    - 2. In Taoism what appears to be evil is in fact good when seen in a larger context.
  - iv. If injustice is unimportant, social reform is not urgent.

- XIII. I believe that John's Gospel proclaims a religion that affirms both a mysticism of separation and a mysticism of identity and avoids the problems of each.
- a. John's Gospel stresses the tremendous difference between the Eternal God (who is Father, Word, and Spirit) and created reality. Note, especially, the emphasis on the horrifying sin of a world which hates the truth and kills Jesus and his followers (John 15:18-25).
  - b. Nevertheless, John's Gospel stresses the unity between God and those who believe in Jesus and become like him. At the highest stage of Christian maturity, Christians are no longer the servants of the Divine Christ but are his "friends" (15:15) and "brothers" (20:17) and sisters. Indeed, John's Gospel does not hesitate to call us "gods" (10:34-35). And in the next life we will experience God's glory fully.
  - c. The reason that John's Gospel can embrace both the mysticism of separation and the mysticism of identity is the incarnation which culminates in the crucifixion/resurrection.
    - i. There is a barrier between God and the universe which human beings cannot cross by their own efforts.
    - ii. God crosses the barrier by becoming a human being and then raising that human being. Note, especially,
      - 1. Through the incarnation of the eternal Word, God reveals to us who he is.
      - 2. The incarnate Word suffers and dies, just as other human beings do.
    - iii. Thanks to the resurrection, the Word now dwells with the Father in heaven.
    - iv. And sends to us his Holy Spirit who dwells in us.
    - v. Accordingly, through the incarnation (and only through it) we can enter fully into the life of the divine. This entrance is not only due to the realization of inherent potential; it is also "new creation" by the power of God's Spirit.
    - vi. As we enter into the life of the divine, we take Jesus's place in this

world by reaching out in love to others. Through Jesus his disciples will even do greater works than he did while on earth (John 14:12).

- XIV. Therefore, I personally find in John's Gospel an affirmation of the higher religions, because John's Gospel emphasizes the complementary truths that
- a. There is a chasm between humans and the Ultimate Reality, and as humans we do sin and perpetrate injustice.
  - b. The deepest self has tremendous gifts and even greater spiritual potential. The deepest self can indeed become divine.