Setting (Not to Say, Justifying) the Argument in Auto-Biographical Context

I open the introductory chapters of this book by saying that I have been convicted by certain contemporary theologians' prophetic call to self-examination and repentance with regard to the Church's material history of mistreatment of its Jewish neighbors and with regard to its theological tradition's complicity in that mistreatment. I then point out that I am less convinced by many of their constructive proposals for theological reformation. This book is my own "labor of thought" in attempting to address the issue of theological reformation in response to self-examination and repentance with regard to the Church's past and present relation to the Jewish neighbor.

But this does not quite tell the whole story of the genesis of the book and its argument. I was not always unconvinced by said contemporary constructive proposals for theological reformation, or, as I say in the early pages of the first chapter, for making Christian faith safe for both the Jewish neighbor and the neighbor generally speaking. Quite the contrary; I spent a good number of years thoroughly convinced by and so appropriating these theological proposals as my own, or at least their basic assumptions and concepts employed with regard to faith, theology, religion, and the ethical. It was only in inhabiting these assumptions and employing these conceptions over time, while continuing to labor toward an articulation of my own theological position, that I gradually became

unconvinced of their adequacy. Like wearing out a good pair of sneakers, they ceased to hold up over time and continued scrutiny.

When I say I am unconvinced by certain constructive theological proposals treated in this book, then, I am not rejecting them outright and at face value as unacceptable on the basis of some gate-keeping yardstick for theological orthodoxy. Rather, I am pushing beyond—blowing through the bottom of, as a friend of mine likes to put it—the limits of certain assumptions, conceptions and rhetorical moves, having experienced the exhaustion of their promising and compelling possibilities from the inside-out, as it were.

I became more and more dissatisfied with the ability of these assumptions to account for the complexity of the reality I was attempting to analyze and constructively address—e.g., the reality of the Church's faith in relation to the ethical, the contested multiplicity of the reality of the Jewish neighbor, the relation of the Jewish neighbor to their neighbors and to the neighbor generally speaking, the limitations of the ethical in relation to the concept of imperialistic discourse, etc. In the face of this multilayered complexity, I kept running into points of ethically problematic self-contradiction, where the ethical promise and intention of contemporary theological remedies of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor were undermined by certain assumptions in which they were rooted. This is a particularly dicey problem given that those assumptions themselves are driven by an ethical desire in relation to the historical experience (centuries' worth) of interreligious conflict emerging from concrete religious particularity and difference. But this anticipates the argument of the book. What I want to do here, at the risk of appearing self-indulgent, is to share briefly a few highlights of the journey (simultaneously historical and theological) along which I encountered these deepening levels of complexity. It is a journey that, eventually and unexpectedly—and disconcertingly, for that matter—exhausted the promise of the theological remedy for Christian faith that I had appropriated; a remedy that prescribes "leaving room" for the self-understanding and self-definition of the "religious other."

Having been raised in a conservative, evangelical missionary community, encountering the theology of Karl Barth in my college years opened the door to a more "liberal," or at least more expansive, understanding of the depth and breadth of God's grace, an understanding that I was aching for and readily embraced. "Liberal," here, is of course meant

in the relative sense (*ergo*, the inverted commas); to the American evangelicalism that raised me, Barth was seen as the "liberal" menace, and anything theologically left of Barth was simply beyond the pale. In seminary, however, I was blessed to encounter a full array of contemporary liberation and contextual theologies—Black, Latin American, womanist, feminist, queer, Holocaust, and the emerging postmodern discourse on religion—all of which entailed serious critiques of Barth as part and parcel of the oppressive white, Eurocentric patri- or kyri-archal structures that violently denigrate and marginalize the voices and experience of people of color, women, Jews, LGBTs, and, more generally, particularity, difference, and "the other." I found—and still find—these voices and their critiques compelling and personally convicting. I began to read Barth, along with the Christian theological tradition as a whole, through my robust appropriation of their critical lenses.

Through seminary and into my PhD work, it was the encounter with Holocaust Studies and, more particularly, with theological interpretations of the Holocaust as a radical rupture of historical faith, both Christian and Jewish, that most captured my imagination and energy. If Christian theology could not respond responsibly and unflinchingly to this challenge, the game was up. I focused my energy on post-Holocaust theology. I worked toward an ethically viable, and so radically constructive, transformation of Christian faith and theology in response to the authoritative voice—and silenced voices—of Jewish suffering, both throughout the history of Christendom and from out of the black hole of the Holocaust itself.

The first shock to the system that alerted me to the fact that I might not have a full grasp of all the angles involved in the Church's theological and ethical relation to the Jewish neighbor came at an international conference on European Studies, held in The Netherlands, in a session on the philosophical and theological dimensions and consequences of the Holocaust. I presented a paper critiquing the ethical viability of Barth's Christian theological assumptions. My critique was based on and in agreement with Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim's critique of Barth in light of the Holocaust as unique and incomprehensible rupture of historical experience. I was, of course, expecting some possible heat from Christian theologians at the table; I was also expecting pats on the back all around from the Jews in the room. However, the heat came—white hot—from a Jewish woman auditing the session. She expressed her an-

ger and contempt at my taking Emil Fackenheim (who was, from my Christian perspective, expressive of the voice of the Jewish other and of Jewish suffering) seriously as in any way authoritative for Jewish thinking, experience, and identity.

I was rendered, if not speechless, then stammering. In my mind, I was turning, with the argument of my paper, on my own tradition in solidarity with the authoritative voice of the other, the Jewish neighbor, which said tradition had and has unjustly victimized. And here, in doing so, I had apparently done an injustice to and made an enemy of a Jewish neighbor—violently denigrating her sense of integrity and identity.

Constructing an ethically viable remedy for Christian faith and theology in relation to the Jewish neighbor would not appear to be a simple matter. *Which* Jewish neighbor? And who gets to decide?

The challenge of this experience was confirmed a year later when I was lucky enough to spend a year studying modern Jewish history and religion, including the Holocaust, at the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. The opportunity to study Judaism and modern Jewish history and identity within a Jewish Studies context introduced me more fully to the contested multiplicity of Judaisms and Jewish identities, and not simply in the abstractions of academic study, but in the context of concrete relationships. I again encountered, and was able to further pursue, strong Jewish resistance to the equally strong Jewish arguments for the uniqueness of the Holocaust, both as a matter of historiography and in terms of its challenge to religious tradition and faith. In addition, I became more acquainted with the internal tensions between various forms of religious Jewish identity, and between religious and secular Jewish identity.

A growing appreciation for the varying possibilities of Jewish identity as such (religious and non-religious), and of Jewish religious identity and faith in particular, began to greatly complicate my attempts to find points of contact and draw easy parallels with Christian tradition and experience. I remember well the wonderful evening spent in an instructor's home, celebrating the Passover meal. The gracious hospitality, robust enjoyment of the delicious (and endless) food and wine, the singing and lighthearted sense of humor, the sense of fun and mischief for the children, all made a great and lasting impression. But no one made a greater impression than a friend of our host, who, over the course of the evening,

generously attempted to explain his relation to his Orthodox Jewish identity to his curious Christian neighbor at the table.

In my Christian skin, I had assumed an *Orthodox* religious identity meant a firm belief in traditional religious doctrines and the sacred scriptures upon which they were based. Thus, I did not quite know what to make of my neighbor at the table describing his dissatisfaction with the Reform synagogue he had recently attended. He was put off by the sermon's emphasis on intent spiritual reflection and piety. He felt imposed upon by the effort of concentration on the liturgical and scriptural proceedings that such reflection and piety apparently demanded. By contrast, at his own Orthodox synagogue, according to his description, no one pays much attention to the readings and recitations going on up front, leaving one the freedom to catch up on the news of the week with your neighbors. When I noted, a bit confused, that he had mentioned earlier the importance of the biblical story for Jewish identity, he looked at me and smiled. The biblical story was indeed central to the history of the Jewish people and so to the traditional goings-on in the synagogue and therefore to his identity as a Jew. But make no mistake, he cautioned. It was, for all that, "a cracking good yarn." His Jewish religious identity was not a matter of *belief*, as I, as a Christian, understood this term, but of *observance*.

Needless to say, my Christian categories were scrambling for a toehold. How to discern what is necessary for a theological transformation of Christian faith and belief in response to a Jewish religious self-understanding that does not require, and so does not include, elements of confessional faith and belief in the sense traditionally central to Christian identity and ecclesial community? There is no value judgment to be made here; only an acknowledgement of genuine incommensurability.

These difficulties—the internal tensions and contested multiplicity of Jewish identity; the incommensurability between Jewish and Christian understandings of religious identity and faith—confronted and seemed to unravel the transforming remedy I had appropriated for Christian faith in response to the Jewish—or *any* religious—neighbor: to leave room for the self-understanding and self-definition of the "religious other." Again, which—or whose—Jewish self-understanding and self-definition?

And, what if the religious self-understanding and self-definition of the "religious other" entails its own demonizing of the *other* other—of, for example, either the other *Jewish* other or the *non*-Jewish other? (And

this predicament holds for the Muslim neighbor, the Buddhist, for every so-called "religious other.") The ethical mandate under which I had been laboring, to leave room for the *religious* other, seemed to assume a shared *ethical* core—or sameness—to the "religious" generally understood; we can and should let the other define themselves religiously precisely because it is assumed that such a religious self-definition would or should be inherently ethical in a way that we can recognize and therefore affirm. When the above question is raised—that is, if the self-understanding of the religious other is discovered to express itself in opinion or behavior we find ethically questionable or abhorrent—the answer I found myself giving (and hearing) was that we must then, of course, be willing to engage that neighbor critically with regard to such opinion and behavior. But, I began to ask myself, what assumption does this response entail? Is it not, either that the "religious other" has a non-viable religious self-understanding after all, or that they are simply mistaken as to how their religious self-understanding is related to—is *to be* related to—the ethical? And this, according to whom? To whose criteria? To whose self-understanding? Ours? You see the problem.

The move to leave room for the *religious* other seems to come with certain *ethical* qualifications and criteria required for what that "otherness" could and should entail. In other words, we are willing to leave room for the *religious* otherness of the neighbor, but not for the *ethical* otherness of that neighbor. In the latter case, the ethical mandate is precisely *not* to leave room. Or put differently, religious difference is only tolerable on the basis of shared, common—the same—cultural assumptions with regard to the proper relation of particular religious identity and faith to the ethical.

This was brought home to me quite recently while screening a film to a class of seminary students studying the world religions. The film brought together representatives of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, representatives at various levels of religious and academic leadership. These representatives had no trouble agreeing that the major religions have more fundamental issues in common than they have things that separate them, and therefore each can and should happily affirm the others as legitimate pathways to that which is ultimate. As compelling and inspirational as I found their testimonials to be, what I found more interesting was the rather conspicuous fact that all the various representatives, including those of non-Anglo-European descent, had flourished and/or

were flourishing within the higher levels of the educational systems of the West. Equally conspicuous was the absence of representatives raised and educated in religious institutions that intentionally exist outside the reach of those systems in the conviction that their distinctive religious faiths are not reducible to and subsumable within the founding, supposedly secular assumptions of those educational systems and the cultures they both shape and mirror. Most interesting of all, and most troubling, was the extent to which the religious representatives gathered in the film had an equally agreeable time demonizing those referred to as the fundamentalists of each religion—most significantly, each in relation to the fundamentalists *within their own religion*—as distorters and betrayers of the most basic insights of religious faith and, as such, the real obstacle (to be removed?) to an otherwise inevitable peace among the religions, and so perhaps, among the nations of the world.

Generally speaking, then, certain contemporary remedies for traditional *religious* superiority and exclusion appear to often be constructed and prescribed on the basis of underlying assumptions of *cultural* superiority and exclusion: the cultural assumptions of the educated West. And in many cases it would seem you can trace this line of cultural chauvinism straight through the heart of the major world religions. *Speaking in the particular*, as regards the focus of the argument put forward in this book, contemporary remedies for traditional *Christian* anti-Judaism and supersessionism are often constructed and prescribed on the basis of underlying assumptions of *cultural* anti-Judaism and supersessionism. (I will argue that these latter assumptions actually entail *less* self-critical resistance to the rhetorical and material damages of both Christian and cultural *antisemitism*.)

And so it happened that I found myself wearing through the soles of my good liberal, progressive, theological shoes. My own feet were starting to smart, and it was becoming clear that I was not, in fact, doing my neighbors—in all their concrete complexity and multiplicity—much good either. I could only continue to think that I was by repressing the question, Which neighbor? How, then, to honor the desire for an ethically viable Christian faith in relation to Jews and Judaism—expressing a commitment of both love and justice toward the neighbor (and the neighbor's neighbor)—that was able to move beyond the ethically problematic self-contradictions of simply leaving room for and in response to the religious other? The surprising possibility I stumbled upon and attempt to

communicate in this book: one honors that ethical desire by questioning it, by questioning the very desire, together with its assumptions, for an ethically viable Christian faith. That is, by revisiting the assumption that the ethical is the measure of faith—the distinctively *modern* assumption that, in relation to faith, the ethical is the highest.

Finally, then, a few words regarding the last mile, as it were, of the journey I have been recounting here.

It is worth noting the grammatical ordering of the key formulas I employ in the book—"risking proclamation, respecting difference," and "appeal and contestation" (I borrow the latter from Alphonso Lingis). The ordering: appeal "first," contestation "second." Inasmuch as my own theological thinking has again, more recently, been impacted by Barth, I now understand this grammatical ordering to be not merely incidental, but to resonate with a critical theological logic. To anticipate the unfolding of the argument in the later chapters, it is as *appeal* to what I will call the "particular-elsewhere" of Jesus Christ that Christian witness finds itself in *contestation* with the indigenous self-understanding and self-definition of its various neighbors, Jewish and otherwise (as well as with its *own* indigenous self-understanding). This ordering, according to my argument, should not be reversible. The Church should not contest the neighbor for contestation's sake, or because *it* believes, according to its own lights, that this is the proper ethical course of action. Following Barth, I believe that this latter assumption of reversibility inevitably and paradoxically devolves into its own ethically problematic form of imperialistic discourse. I argue that the only *ethical* action (contestation) that does not so devolve is the ethical action that is a necessary *consequence* of the response of *faith* (appeal) to divine action and promise.

As I have said, I attempt to signify this same irreversible theological logic with the formula, "risking proclamation, respecting difference." Again, while I now understand the irreversibility of this phrasing to express the theological position, and its ethical possibilities, for which I am arguing, the reader may be interested to know that the title of my dissertation was precisely the reverse of this formula: "respecting difference, risking proclamation." This phrasing (like the reverse of "appeal and contestation") seems to suggest that it is *for the sake of respecting difference*—i.e., of being appropriately ethical (taken as such and in its own right)—that the Church should engage in the risks of proclamation. It was only in revising the dissertation for publication, which involved

me in renewed and ultimately deeper engagement with both Barth and Kierkegaard, that I realized its argument still moved wholly within the key assumption of the "modern ethical desire" that it was attempting to question and critique; the assumption that the ethical is the highest in relation to religious faith. Consequently, my so-called postmodern reading of Barth—bringing out the resonance of his theology with postmodern all-stars such as Derrida and Levinas—remained, in fact, thoroughly modern (as does, I am more and more convinced, much of what passes for postmodern theology today).

The dawning of this realization with respect to my dissertation required that my initial plans for revision be changed to a thorough, substantive re-working of my position and of the text's argument for it. Needless to say, it has been a long last mile. And while there are many imperfections and oversights that still remain in the book you are holding, I am content enough with the clarity and attempted fairness of the argument to submit it to your good judgment and await the inevitable surprises and discoveries of continuing, engaged, and critical conversation.

Chris Boesel