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Eleonore Stump

Norman Kretzmann

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BLINDINGLY OBVIOUS CHRISTIAN ANTI-SEMITISM

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann

In "Stump, Kretzmann, and Historical Blindness," Paul Griffiths charges us with "being historically blind and (therefore) ethically insensitive."¹ "These are harsh words," he says, but he thinks that he is justified in applying them to us as the authors of "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy,"² our reply to Gordon Kaufman's "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response" (p. 79).³ Although Griffiths apparently agrees with us in rejecting much of Kaufman's position, he shares Kaufman's view that the "Christian faith...bear[s] some significant responsibility for most of the evils" of the twentieth century (p. 79). In particular, Griffiths accuses us of being historically blind to Christian anti-semitism and therefore ethically insensitive to it. Our position leaves us, in his words, "happily untroubled by (even unaware of?) what most Christians have believed about important matters such as the status of the Jewish people before God and the modes of behavior toward Jews justified by this supposed status" (p. 84).

Griffiths rests his defense of Kaufman's view on "the following particularization of [Kaufman's] more general claims: [*H*] *Christian ideas about Jews have contributed directly and in significant measure to the occurrence of the holocaust*" (p. 79). "[T]he truth of *H*," he says, "seems to me blindingly obvious" (p. 80). We think that all educated, fair-minded people must agree that *H* is indisputably true, but only on one interpretation of *H*.

Luther's obscenely immoral "sincere advice" to Christians on what to "do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews," quoted with rhetorical effect by Griffiths (p. 83), does, of course, count as an expression of Christian ideas in a sociological sense: it emanates from the great Reformer himself writing in a pastoral capacity. Just as plainly, it must count as an expression of *anti-Christian* ideas in a doctrinal sense: it is incompatible with such defining pronouncements as the Sermon on the Mount and the second (at least) of Christianity's two Great Commandments.

Taking ideas associated with some institution, such as a religion, a philosophy, or a political system in a sociological sense is a matter of characterizing those ideas as they are understood by individual adherents of or participants in the institution who suppose the ideas to be part of the institution. Taking the ideas associated with that institution doctrinally is a matter of considering



the content of the ideas constitutive of the institution itself.⁴ Taking Marxist ideas sociologically, for instance, requires considering what individual Russian Marxists or Chinese Marxists hold as Marxist; taking Marxist ideas doctrinally involves investigating Marx's position itself. (The distinction does not require that there be one determinate source for the ideas or institution in question. Taking capitalist ideas sociologically, for example, requires considering what 19th-century British capitalists, for example, or American capitalists of the Cold War period held capitalism to consist in. Taking capitalism doctrinally involves reflecting on the defining characteristics of capitalism and what is compatible with them and presupposed or implied by them.) There will, of course, generally be some recognizable degree of similarity between the ideas of a particular institution taken in a doctrinal sense and the ideas taken in a sociological sense. Unless the adherents of a particular institution are hopelessly wrong in what they take the institution to be, there will be at least some overlap between the ideas associated with that institution taken sociologically and the ideas taken doctrinally.

We can consider Luther's sort of anti-semitic ideas, too, either in a sociological or a doctrinal sense. That is, we can consider what such anti-semitic ideas, considered in the abstract, imply, presuppose, warrant, and so on. Answers to those questions are relatively unproblematic. Or we can consider anti-semitic ideas in a sociological sense and ask how Luther and others understood them. What actions, for example, did they prompt in Luther or in others who held them? Reliable answers to those questions are at best difficult to come by, because of the notorious problems in getting reliable information about an individual's psychology or in drawing reliable inferences from a person's beliefs to a person's actions and *vice versa*.

So to us, too, *H* seems obviously true if 'Christian ideas' is taken in a sociological sense to mean anti-semitic ideas held by people who supposed those ideas to be Christian and if the anti-semitic ideas at issue are, in turn, understood in a doctrinal rather than a sociological sense. But *H* seems to us obviously false if 'Christian ideas' is taken doctrinally to mean ideas entailed by or included in Christianity itself, and *H* strikes us as only dubiously true if we understand the anti-semitic ideas in question sociologically rather than doctrinally.

Contrary to the suggestion in the title of Griffiths's article and his explicit claims in it, the issue between him and us is not over whether a religion's history is important or unimportant, but rather over the way in which a religion (or some other body of belief) is to be defined. In replying to Kaufman, we relied on the distinction between taking ideas doctrinally, on the one hand, and taking them sociologically, on the other. To begin with, we observed (p. 329a) that as philosophers we are naturally concerned with the meaning of and evidence for and against doctrinal propositions, and that

theologians, as represented by Kaufman, are put off by this philosophical focus on theory in part because it seems to render philosophers of religion indifferent to the sociology of religion. But someone working in atomic physics, for example, might similarly seem indifferent to contemporary sociological data (and therefore ethically insensitive) just because qua physicist she's focusing on the constitution of the nucleus rather than taking account of the dangers posed by nuclear power plants and the attendant political controversy about them. Analogously, entirely ignoring Luther's certifiable anti-semitism while trying to make sense of, say, the doctrine of the atonement is methodologically sensible. It is no more evidence of historical (or political) blindness and consequent ethical insensitivity than is not attending to the debate over nuclear energy while investigating the strong force; and, of course, it is perfectly compatible with the philosopher's or the physicist's commitment to a robust program of social action.

But we also used the sociological/doctrinal distinction in directly addressing Kaufman's charges against Christianity, and it is this use of it that worries Griffiths. He says that our "strategy is to drive a wedge between Christianity and (some of) its adherents, and to suggest that while one may easily be able to show that some adherents of Christianity have held antisemitic views, one cannot show that there is anything about Christianity itself that suggests, requires, or makes plausible such views" (p. 80). Griffiths is right about our two-pronged strategy, but his description of the second prong is wrong. Of course, there are things about Christianity that have suggested anti-semitism or made it plausible to deplorably many people over two millennia. What we claimed one couldn't show is only that "Christianity *itself*...requires... such views." We stated our claim this way: "we are skeptical about the possibility of anyone's producing a sound argument" "that there is a *single set of beliefs* which counts as Christian," and "that *this single system entails the rightness of moral precepts that enjoin or at least warrant...genocide*" (p. 333; emphasis added). Griffiths alters the second part of our claim into this less demanding one: "one must then be able to show that there is *something about Christianity so understood that entails antisemitism, or, more weakly, warrants it or makes it plausible*" (p. 80; emphasis added).

Once our claim has been altered in that way, Griffiths can readily say that "of course, it is very easy to show that there are indeed such common threads and connecting themes that do warrant antisemitism and make it plausible" (p. 81). If we take Griffiths's apparently broad construal of 'warrant' and the vagueness of 'common threads and connecting themes,' then we agree; it is very easy. We never were nor could have been skeptical about the possibility that a sociological survey of Christians would turn up appalling anti-semitism, which some Christians have supposed was supported or even required by Christian doctrine.

The two particular considerations on which Griffiths actually rests his case are nonetheless worth examining, just because they are far closer to the core of Christian doctrine than are the unmistakably anti-semitic fulminations of Chrysostom or Luther he introduces later.

The first of these two considerations is what Griffiths calls “the *blood-guilt theory*” (p. 81), stemming from Matthew 27:25: “Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.” Of course an earnest Christian reading of this passage has often suggested anti-semitism. But it can’t also have *warranted* it, in the epistemological or logical sense of ‘warrant.’ There clearly isn’t anything in the people’s answer that “entails the rightness of moral precepts that enjoin or at least warrant” human vengeance against those Jews, their children and their children’s children. There isn’t even anything in the people’s answer that entails blood-guilt. No plausible doctrine of prayer entails that every petition be granted; no plausible doctrine of God’s judgment and mercy entails God’s actually damning everyone who says “Well, I’ll be damned.” The kindest thing to be said about Christians who have based anti-semitism on Matthew 27:25 is that they’ve been criminally irrational in drawing doctrinal inferences.

The second of the two considerations on which Griffiths rests his case is “the *supersessionist theory*”: “the view that God’s covenant with the Jewish people has been superseded, made null and without effect, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth” (p. 81). Insofar as Judaism and Christianity include incompatible bodies of belief, adherence to one involves supposing the other wrong. In our reply to Kaufman we argued at some length that nothing in the belief that Christianity is right implies so much as arrogance, let alone hostility, towards those who hold non-Christian beliefs. We won’t repeat those arguments here, but we do want to say a word about Griffiths’s claim that adherence to Christianity fundamentally includes the notion that Judaism has been rendered null and void. Nothing could be more fundamental to Christian doctrine than the Bible, which simply *incorporates* the Jewish Scriptures, and certainly not because they present the record of a canceled contract, a record over which the children of the new adoption might gloat. Griffiths brings out the intended force of the null-and-void clause in his version of supersessionist theory immediately after stating the theory: “from which the conclusion is drawn that the Jewish people since the time of Christ *have no more reason for being*” (p. 81; emphasis added). No doubt some people have sometimes drawn that conclusion; but, of course, it is as invalid as it is immoral, even if the null-and-void clause is retained. A theory compatible with the Bible and the creeds would hold that Christian doctrine supersedes Judaism not as the First Republic superseded the French monarchy, not even as Einstein’s physics superseded Newton’s, but more nearly as algebra supersedes arithmetic—incorporating much of it, essentially depend-

ing on it, and enhancing its range and power. Christians who draw the conclusion that the Jews have no more reason for being are being quite as irrational as but far more reprehensible than (imaginary) algebraists who would wipe out arithmeticians.

Fundamental to Griffiths's entire criticism of our position is his rejection of any "ahistorical and essentialist reading of the referent of the term 'Christianity'" (p. 83), the sort of thing he suspects lies at the root of the ethical insensitivity he charges us with. We don't accept his yoking of essentialist with ahistorical approaches to religion, but in any event his own approach to understanding 'Christianity' is not so much historical as sociological. He wants to *define* Christianity in terms of beliefs or practices common to its adherents in various periods and places. On his account, "Christian ideas" isn't ambiguous; it can be understood only sociologically. And, of course, it is his sociological approach that enables him, as he supposes, to discern in Christianity the evils for which he and Kaufman both hold Christianity responsible. But it is important to recognize that this approach, if workable, would enable us to show that every body of belief espoused by a group of people over a period of time is similarly responsible for the evils committed in its name by the members of that group. Marxism is thus responsible for the horrors of the gulag; Islam is responsible for the unrelenting efforts to exterminate the Kurds. On Griffiths's approach, no culturally significant body of belief will be above serious moral reproach since, as far as we know, there is no culturally significant body of belief whose adherents have not perpetrated some evil in its name. On Griffiths's approach, any adherent of such a body of belief who wanted to associate the evils in question with people rather than doctrines would similarly be guilty of historical blindness and ethical insensitivity.

Furthermore, it isn't clear that Griffiths's approach is workable. If you follow Griffiths and characterize religion purely sociologically, so that it becomes not a body of doctrine, which can be distinguished from the various beliefs various of its adherents take it to include, but instead characterize religions just as vague sets of beliefs and practices common to vaguely delineated groups of people, how do you determine which of the many sets of beliefs widely held by Europeans in the first half of the twentieth century is in fact responsible for the Holocaust? The people who carried out or tolerated the Holocaust shared not only anti-semitic beliefs and Christian beliefs, but also lots of others: economic beliefs in the merits of capitalism, social beliefs in the expertise of scientists and the deference due them, political and quasi-historical beliefs in the cultural superiority of a select group of Europeans. If you adopt the approach Griffiths advocates, then in asking what Christianity is responsible for (or what anti-semitic beliefs are responsible for), you are asking not about what is entailed by a certain body of

doctrine but only about the connection between particular beliefs of a particular group of people and particular actions those people performed or permitted others to perform. On what basis could you decide that it is precisely the religious beliefs or the anti-semitic beliefs of these people, as distinct from their economic ones (or combinations of them all) which are responsible for the Holocaust? Surely not simply on the basis of what the guilty might have said, since, as everyone recognizes, people in such circumstances are strongly inclined to gloss their self-regarding actions with a patina of what strikes them as ideologically more palatable. We might suppose that anti-semitic ideas had to have pushed their adherents at least in the direction of genocide even if their ultimate or strongest motive was something else. But though this sounds plausible, whether or not it's right—given the vagaries of human psychology—is a matter for sociological research; and what research there is doesn't clearly support it. For example, in her sociological study of Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Nazi period, Nechama Tec devotes one entire chapter to "anti-semitic helpers," that is, to overt anti-semites who nonetheless risked their lives to rescue Jews.⁵ Although Tec titles this chapter "The Rare Case of the Anti-Semitic Helper," she also says "only a few helpers [Poles of any description who rescued Jews at cost to themselves] managed to steer clear of the influences of the diffuse cultural anti-semitism. Most were caught in its clutches...."⁶ Finally, it is not clear what the relevance is of quoting historical figures such as Chrysostom in this context, given Griffiths's approach to Christian ideas, since few of those involved in the evils of the Holocaust would have read Chrysostom or been influenced by him.

So characterizing a body of beliefs sociologically rather than doctrinally makes it at least much harder to tell whether those beliefs are responsible for some particular evil. We find *H* blindingly obvious on one interpretation just because we make the distinction Griffiths rejects, between doctrinal and sociological readings of bodies of belief. We take not only Christian beliefs but also anti-semitic beliefs doctrinally; and it does seem to us obviously true that anti-Christian anti-semitic beliefs taken doctrinally have a readily discernible connection to morally reprehensible actions against Jews. Without the distinction between doctrinal and sociological readings of bodies of belief, however, the blindingly obvious truth of *H* seems to us much harder to discern. In order to be struck by the blindingly obvious truth of *H* one must see the distinction Griffiths rejects.

Consequently, if religion is defined only sociologically as Griffiths thinks it should be, it is difficult to determine whether a religion, or any body of belief, has been responsible for some particular evil; and in that case Griffiths can't support his claim that Christianity was responsible for the Holocaust. But if such determinations can in fact be made, then it looks as if every

worldview or body of belief of any cultural significance is responsible for serious evil. There will be no religion, no worldview, which is not similarly impugned, and Griffiths's approach will tell us only about the proclivities of groups of people, not about the moral merits and demerits of bodies of belief.

For all our deep differences with Griffiths, we are so far in agreement with him that we, too, think anti-semitism a monstrous moral evil. And we, too, think that in every age some Christians have believed that Christianity entailed, enjoined, or was at least compatible with anti-semitism. If we also thought that (*per impossibile*) Christianity itself really did entail, enjoin, or permit anti-semitism, we would take our stand not with Christianity but against it.⁷

St. Louis University

Cornell University

NOTES

1. Paul J. Griffiths, "Stump, Kretzmann, and Historical Blindness," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), 79-85, p. 79.

2. *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), 329-339; the second page of this article was omitted from the original printing and supplied in the next issue as a loose sheet numbered 329a.

3. *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 35-46.

4. The ideas characteristic of an institution such as a religion or a political system will no doubt constitute something of a fuzzy set. Some ideas will be fundamental to the institution, while others will be more peripheral. The repudiation of monarchy, for example, is fundamental to Marxism; attitudes towards the role of the artist in society are less central; and approaches to pedagogical methods in public schooling are peripheral.

5. *Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland: When Light Pierced the Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

7. We are grateful to William Alston, Steve Maitzen, Alvin Plantinga, and Robert Pasnau for comments on an earlier draft.