DISSENTING FROM REDEMPTION: Judaism and political theology

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I.

As described by Schmitt, political theology as such has its origin in the secularisation of religious forms and structures.
[1] Schmitt and his intellectual descendants have tended to focus on what scholars of religion might characterise as explicit religion: deliberately constructed structures which are clearly differentiated from secular culture, clearly articulated doctrines, and behaviours which require particular effort on the part of individuals (e.g., church attendance). However, I argue that this approach gives insufficient attention to *implicit* religion,[2] and particularly to the afterlives of theological doctrines as pre-philosophical intuitions, underlying and frequently unexamined assumptions about the way the world works which inform the way that both individuals and societies structure their lives.[3] For example, while messianism itself is too highly developed as an explicitly philosophical concept to be described as a pre-philosophical intuition, an examination of statements about messianism can reveal several underlying assumptions that do, more often than not, pass unexamined: that the state of the world as it is leaves something to be desired, that the state of the world is capable of being improved upon (these are not the same thing), that some extraordinary effort or impetus is required to bring about an alteration in the state of the world. It is assumptions such as these that universalism is most likely to be undone by, as they can reveal instances in which the same signifier points to radically different concepts—in the words of the great semiotician Inigo Montoya, "that word […] I don't think it means what you think it does."[4]

This is one important function of community-based inter-religious dialogue: the move past sitting a group of people with very different beliefs in the same room and persuading them to overlook their outward differences and historical disagreements to agree that they all believe, more or less, in the same things, with those things defined by vaguely positive words like "peace" and "love" and "justice".[5] The more philosophically serious dialogue programmes—of which Scriptural Reasoning is by far the most well-known—push people to unpack, from within their traditions, exactly what the content of these vague things that "we all believe in" is, and discover that it's probably not quite the same.[6] The goal of this exercise is to break down the false understanding of sameness in order that a better understanding of, and respect for, differences—what Hannah Arendt terms 'plurality'—might, eventually, be constructed.[7]

In this article, then, I am interested in probing beneath the surface of the concept of redemption, particularly as it has tended to be mobilised in Jewish-Christian dialogue. This particular inter-religious dialogue is still somewhat in a state of reaction against centuries of the *adversos Judaeos* tradition of Christian exegetics, which portrayed Jews and Judaism as inverted Christians: hopeless, corrupt, and through their own choice, beyond the reach of redemption.[8] The extent to which this tradition became part of not only the pre-philosophical intuition that governed social and political activity in Europe and its colonies, but also, in many places and times, a firm and explicit policy of exclusion, is a matter of historical record.[9] Following the atrocities of the last century, there was a move, especially on the part of Christian theologians—such as Jürgen Moltman, Dorothee Sölle, Alice and Roy Eckhardt, Krister Stendahl, and the Second Vatican Council, to name a few—to expose, examine, and cast out the negative assumptions inherited from the *adversos* legacy and to emphasise a common ground

between Christianity and Judaism. While this theological turn is, of course, an extremely welcome corrective, it is only a first step, a step into sameness.[10] Even this first step is not entirely complete; it is still, to this day, quite easy to find remnants of the *adversos* tradition mobilised in both popular preaching and in academic theology.[11] And there is good reason for this: Jews and Christians do not actually believe in, or hope for, the same things. This is particularly true with regards to the key issue of redemption (as well as the closely related issues of justice and hope), which is among the terms on which constructive, we-all-believe-the-same-thing dialogue has been built and upon which it is most likely to stumble. It is not sufficient to base inter-religious understanding on the idea that redemption is a good idea, or even that justice and redemption are things towards which hope ought to be directed, without any understanding of the content of these terms. A careful examination of the conceptual framework underlying such terminology reveals that Jewish thought is not a straightforward counternarrative to the Christian-influenced philosophy of the West (as the *adversos* tradition would have expected) but a complication of the discourse, a reminder that our words don't necessarily mean the same thing to everyone that we think they mean.[12]

II.

The possibility of a world which might not be redeemed is a minority opinion within the wider scope of Jewish tradition, but it has been particularly influential in post-Holocaust theologies. In his most famous essay on the subject, Richard Rubenstein recounted a meeting with a German Evangelical pastor, Dean Heinrich Gruber. Gruber's conversation with Rubenstein was clearly informed by the faith that had led him to active resistance and sustained him through internment in Sachsenhausen. Citing Psalm 44, Gruber expressed his conviction that, in the Holocaust, Germany had been

bent to the service of God's will—that the Holocaust was actively necessary to God's plan for the redemption of the world. Rubenstein recognises a consistency between Gruber and other German Evangelical theologians who he had met, [13] but also between Gruber's view of divine providence and that espoused by many Orthodox Rabbis, and so casts Gruber as the representative of the religion which Rubenstein argues must be rejected:

> If I believed in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama and Israel as His Chosen People, I had to accept Dean Gruber's conclusion that it was God's will that Hitler committed six million Jews to slaughter. I could not possibly believe in such a God nor could I believe in Israel as the chosen people of God after Auschwitz.[14]

Rubenstein was one of the earliest Jewish theologians to directly address the Holocaust in English, and his work was quickly taken up by the radical Christian Death-of-God theological movement,[15] contributing to a popular understanding of the Holocaust as fundamentally altering the nature of Jewish religious belief and practice.[16] But Rubenstein's rejection of the idea of a God who is present in history was also predicated on an extremely limited understanding of the scope of Jewish thought, which approached the Holocaust as an event without precedent, and did not embrace medieval or modern sources which might otherwise have provided a model for wrestling with belief in the face of catastrophe.[17]

The mystical concept of the world fractured at the point of creation, as presented in the creation myth of Lurianic *kabbalah*—an elaboration on the spirituality of *Chassedi Ashkenaz* that developed in the shadow of the Rhineland massacres, which was itself prompted in part by the trauma of the Spanish expulsion—can be read as implying not just a substantial degree of human responsibility for the ongoing redemption of creation, but also a substantial degree of divine incompetence and neglect. Moreover, the relation between these two implications is causative: humans

become responsible for the redemption of creation as a direct result of divine inadequacy; in some readings of this tradition, the purpose of humanity is to redeem God's mistakes.[18]

In Jewish theology, discourse about God's presence in history is always also discourse about the validity of the Biblical covenant between God and the Jewish people: does history demonstrate that God has kept God's promises? Who is responsible, or indebted, to whom? The mutuality of the covenant, the fact that it makes demands on both Jews and God, points to the fact that what the covenant is actually doing is providing a formal structure for a dialogical relationship,[19] a space in which shared values may be negotiated. Attempts to argue for the continued validity of the covenant, for the continued presence of God in history, over and against the apparent witness of history itself, are attempts to find some way to sustain this relational space within the world. This, then, is the context for messianic movements in Jewish history: at the moments when God can least be depended upon, *kol Israel* becomes responsible for its own redemption.[20]

III.

In contrast to this dialogic model of redemption, Christianity understands the flaw in the present world to originate from human disobedience to God's plan,[21] and perceives God, in the person of Jesus Christ, as the main protagonist (if not the sole actor) in the redemptive drama—and it *is* a drama, with exposition, climax, and denouement all already written. While it would be an unfair dismissal of the wide array of very good and interesting work being done in Christian theology to suggest that all that remains is for humanity to wait patiently for the eschatological curtain to fall, it is reasonable to say that the majority of this work is oriented towards

discerning (and enacting) humanity's responsibilities in light of Christ's already successful redemption of creation.

The results of this alternate narrative of redemption are two important assumptions which derive naturally—though not inevitably—from this broad theological framework. First, and most simply: redemption being assured to the point of having been already accomplished permits the future ultimately to be considered with a strong sense of optimism, in which historical disasters are understood as temporary setbacks, rather than epoch-making experiences which necessitate a re-consideration of core theological premises.[22] This assurance, in large part, fuels the myth of progress which itself has played a significant role in Europe's imperial and colonial history.[23] Second: an idea of redemption which comes from outside of the world lends itself to universalism far more readily than does an idea of redemption which relies on particularly located human effort. Granted, the drive for universalism is also an explicit doctrine of Christianity (Matthew 28: 18-20), which has itself been bound up in colonial history;[24] what I am suggesting is that even without this explicit encouragement, the redemptive metanarrative of Christianity still gives rise to the common evangelical assumption that anyone who does not participate in the belief system has simply failed to understand it properly.[25]

While these sketches have been necessarily briefer and broader than I might wish, I hope that laying them side-by-side serves to illuminate the problematique of inter-religious language which I identified at the beginning of this essay. When an individual whose model of redemption is primarily dialogic and an individual whose model of redemption is primarily theocentric enter into conversation on the premise that both share a vision of a redeemed world, they are in fact beginning from a mistaken premise—a fact

with which more recent developments in interfaith dialogue have begun to contend.[26] More problematically, however, when the concept of redemption enters into the political sphere, divested of the theological trappings that might otherwise prompt an examination of the underlying assumptions which operate coextensive with it, it is liable to produce the illusion of a shared culture (the Judeo-Christian values beloved of conservative politicians throughout the English-speaking world), and any attempt to correct this illusion is seen as, if not an outright attack, then certainly a wilful and perverse dissent from the project of a common good.

1 See especially Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) pp. 36-37.

2 The terminology of "implicit religion" owes a great deal to the work of Edward Bailey; see especially his seminal article "The Implicit Religion of Contemporary Society: An Orientation and Plea for Its Study", *Religion* 13.1 (1983), pp. 69-83.

3 Of the substantial body of work existing on intuition and its role in philosophy, see especially P. Van Inwagen, "Materialism and the Psychological-Continuity Account of Personal Identity," *Philosophical Perspectives* 11 (1997), pp. 305–319, which defines intuitions as "the tendencies that make certain beliefs attractive to us, that 'move' us in the direction of accepting certain propositions" (p. 309). Admittedly, my characterization of religion as a means by which certain beliefs become attractive may appear to be circular reasoning of the worst sort, should one understand religion as primarily concerned with belief. I am here making an implicit distinction between belief and doctrine, the latter being a component of explicit religion, which I am arguing continues to exert an implicit influence on unexamined beliefs, even when an individual might reject a doctrinal position which they have subjected to close examination.

4 Quoted in W. Goldman, *The Princess Bride* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1973) p. 85.

5 This is a very brief, practitioner-level gloss of dialogue work, with a bias towards state-sponsored dialogue oriented towards creating social cohesion, of which Interfaith Scotland, where the author volunteered for a number of years, is exemplary. A more complete account of the history of and different approaches operative within the dialogue movement may be found in Lucien Cosijns, *Dialogue Among the Faith Communities* (Lanham: Hamilton, 2008). See also Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", in David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (eds.), *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 193-217.

6 See Marianne Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue" in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) pp. 64-86; see also David F. Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning: Its Anglican Origins, its Development, Practice and Significance" *Journal of Anglican Studies* 11.2 (2013) pp. 147-165; Nicholas Adams, *Long-Term Disagreement: Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism*, Modern Theology 29.4 (2013) pp. 154-171.

7 Human plurality is a constant theme in Arendt's work, but see especially *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958; 2ⁿᵈ edition 1998) pp. 7-8.

8 For an historical overview of the *adversos* tradition, see A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversos Judaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian* Apologiae *until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012); see also Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Adversus Judaeos Tradition in the Church Fathers: The Exegesis of Christian Anti-Judaism." *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (1979): 174-189.

9 See, especially, the documents collected in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* 3ʳᵈ edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

10 Readers familiar with the scholarly literature on theology of religions and interfaith dialogue will note that I am here deliberately avoiding the standard typological vocabulary of exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism developed by Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983) and expanded upon to include particularism by Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) and Paul Hedges, "The Interrelationship of Religions: Some Critical Reflections on the Concept of Particularity", *World Faiths Encounter* 32 (2002), pp. 3-13. In addition to the obvious fact that these terms are descriptive of Christian attitudes towards other faiths, rather than modes of encounter between religious systems, and therefore inapt vocabulary for a non-Christian to deploy, I also avoid this vocabulary because it is specifically

focused on approaches to truth claims (and particularly soteriological truth claims) which the vast majority of academic work on theology of religions, primarily written from an implicitly Christian point of view, treats as the central issue of interfaith dialogue; see, e.g., Frederiek Depootere and Magdalen Lambkin (eds), *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012). This is another theologically inflected assumption which I would wish to contest: I am nowhere near as interested in questions of ultimate salvation as I am in questions of this-worldly existence and co-existence, and I do not think that a protracted debate on the discernibility of the ultimate truth-value of another person's belief is the necessary precursor to political engagement with them.

11 Examples of the *adversos* tradition operating in feminist and liberation theology are chronicled by Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); see especially chapter 4, "Stereotyping Judaism", pp. 119-166; for the continuation of the pattern that Levine critiques beyond academic theology, see e.g. the Report of the Theological Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry, Church of Scotland, May 2013 <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/13811/20_THEOLOGICAL_2013.pdf> accessed 26 September 2015. Another area in which the *adversos* tradition remains alive and well is liturgical theology, such as Alexander Schmemann's interpretation of the Eucharist as a reformation of the corrupted tradition of Passover in *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Ashleigh E. Moorhouse (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966) pp. 68-69; while Schmemann slightly pre-dates the post-Holocaust theological turn, his centrality within liturgical studies has led to this position being continually and un-critically repeated as part of a narrative of liturgical history, even within works which otherwise seek to value Jewish traditions; see, e.g., Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) pp. 34-35.

12 A similar point is argued by Claire Elise Katz, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014).

13 Isabel Wollaston has raised the question of whether Rubenstein is accurately presenting Gruber's viewpoint in this passage (personal correspondence, 27 September 2015); certainly, other Christians have been happy to accept what Rubenstein records as representing "the logic of covenantal theism" (Henry F. Knight, "Before Whom Do We Stand?" *Shofar* 28.3 (2010) pp. 116-134, p. 120).

14 *After Auschwitz*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966.

15 See George N. Boyd, "Richard Rubenstein and Radical Christianity", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 30.1 (1974) pp. 41-49.

16 I take issue with this understanding in *Making Memory: Jewish and Christian Encounters in Monument, Narrative, and Liturgy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013) pp. 145-146.

17 See especially Steven T. Katz, "Richard Rubenstein, the God of History and the Logic of Judaism" in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: NYU Press, 1983) pp. 174-204; see also Zachary Braiterman, "Hitler's Accomplice"?: The Tragic Theology of Richard Rubenstein", *Modern Judaism* 17.1 (1997) pp. 75-89. But see also Barbara Krawcowicz, "Richard L. Rubenstein and the Death of 'Ghetto Judaism'", *Shofar* 33.3 (2015) pp. 27-45, which argues that the Holocaust was merely an example which crystalised Rubenstein's already existing ideas about the inadequacy of traditional religion.

18 This is a considerably sharper statement than most presentations of Lurianic *tikkun* would make, but it is consistent both with the teaching and its modern history of interpretation, as in Howard Schwartz, "How the Ari Created a Myth and Transformed Judaism", *Tikkun* 28 March 2011 <https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism> Accessed 27 September 2015; Gabriella Samuel, *The Kabbalah Handbook: A Concise Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007) s.v. 'tikkun'. The idea is also present in recent works of Jewish academic theology, such as Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*

(New York: Routlege, 2003); Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God & Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

19 Most Biblical Studies scholars who have heard me make this argument in seminar papers have objected to this understanding of covenant as inconsistent with the treaty format common to the Ancient Near East, which they understand as the template for the covenants recorded in the Hebrew Bible—see, e.g., M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90.2 (1970), pp. 184-203. Judaism, however, is not a static religious system, and as covenant is a central concept within that system, it is entirely reasonable to expect that understandings of covenant have changed over time; the idea of covenant as a mutual relationship is now quite common in Jewish religious and political thought. For an overview of the development of the concept, see Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations & Jewish Expressions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

20 One must of course note that messianic movements in Jewish history have been almost universally disastrous, which ought to give some comfort to strong theists: I'm saying that humanity is responsible for some of the work of redeeming creation, not that we're necessarily good at it.

21 While Christianity contains as much theological diversity as Judaism, this particular reading has been normative at least from the time of Augustine (see especially *Enchiridion* 8).

22 This is the language developed by Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: New York University Press, 1970) pp. 8-9.

23 Explications and critiques of the myth of progress abound, but see especially Yvonne Burgess, *The Myth of Progress* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1996); also Jayne Svenungsson, "A Secular Utopia: Remarks on the Löwith–Blumenberg Debate", in Elena Namli, Jayne Svenungsson and Alana Vincent (eds), *Jewish Thought, Utopia and Revolution* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014) pp. 69–84.

24 See especially Francisco Vitoria, *De Indis et De Iure Belli Reflectiones (On the Indians and Reflections on War)* (1536), ed. Ernest Nys (Washington DC: Carnegie Institution, 1973). See also: Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015); Andrew Porter, "'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionary Enterprise, 1780-1914", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 25.3 (1997) pp. 367-391; Larry Prochner, Helen May & Baljit Kaur, ""The blessings of civilisation": nineteenth-century missionary infant schools for young native children in three colonial settings – India, Canada and New Zealand 1820s–1840s" *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 45.1-2 (2009) pp. 83-102.

25 I am indebted to Fred Clark for spelling out this assumption in the blog post "How Not To Do Evangelism" (13 June 2011) <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2011/06/13/tf-how-not-to-do-evangelism/> Accessed 27 September 2015. I hasten to note that most Christian missionary outreach is nowhere near as clumsy as what Clark critiques, but the basic assumptions operating within it are consistent—and the massive popularity of the *Left Behind* series which provided the occasion for Clark's critique suggests that this model of evangelism is not entirely unpopular.

26 While I have some reservations about Scriptural Reasoning's tendency to flatten out diversity *within* religious traditions, it is particularly well-suited to facilitating the examination of language and concepts which pass *between* traditions.