

Norbert Reck
***Der Jude Jesus und die Zukunft des
Christentums: Zum Riss zwischen Dogma
und Bibel: Ein Lösungsvorschlag***

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Norbert Reck is well-known in Germany for his writings on post-Holocaust Roman Catholic theology and Jewish-Christian relations. Most recently he coordinated the collaborative project of the “Gesprächskreis Juden und Christen beim Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken” [Discussion group of Jews and Christians at the Central Committee of Germans Catholics]. The group produced *Von Abba bis Zorn Gottes* [From Abba to the Wrath of God] (Patmos 2017), which moves alphabetically through a variety of topics in order to dislodge anti-Jewish tropes. In *Der Jude Jesus und die Zukunft des Christentums*, he links the failure of Christianity to address anti-Judaism more broadly with its loss of credibility in Europe. He argues that the eradication of theological anti-Judaism is a matter of Christian survival rather than mere decency and propriety toward the Jews after the Shoah. The vitality and integrity of Christian doctrine and practice is at stake. Addressing the roots of anti-Judaism can revitalize Christian observance in Germany where church membership hovers just around fifty percent and weekly worship attendance is in the single digits. How did this happen, he asks, and how is it connected to theological anti-Judaism?

To understand the seeds of this crisis, Reck turns to the 19th century. The first three chapters chronicle the rise of historical consciousness that ruptured the unity between dogmatic theology and biblical exegesis, which increasingly embraced the historical critical method. The Christ of faith and the historical Jesus were pulled apart, as scholars and their audiences critically examined both “what happened” and also how the Creation, the Exodus, the Virgin Birth, the miracles, and the Resurrection could have occurred in history. In the United States, this tension led to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and the rise of Protestant fundamentalism, with its creationism and dogged resistance to natural science and history. In Europe, the

Bible was “demythologized” and stripped of wonder and enchantment. Many left the churches and retreated into skepticism and secularism.

The historical realization that Jesus was born a Jew, taught as a Jew (within the matrix of Second Temple Judaism), and died as a Jew prompted three responses. First, it could be ignored, as Jesus was appropriated and molded in the image and likeness of the particular community that heard his message. Second, his Jewishness could be used as foil and antithesis to enhance and clarify conflicts and antagonisms important to the Christian interpreter, such as militarism or pacifism, modernism or anti-modernism, clericalism or anarchy, or hypocrisy or legalism. Against such Jewish backgrounds the Christian message always shines. Reck proposes a different path that accepts the Jewishness of Jesus as relevant and meaningful rather than random and extraneous to the Christian faith. The Jewishness of Jesus is more than an accidental ethnic identity but constitutive of an unfolding covenantal story that began when G-d liberated the slaves from Egypt and asked the people of Israel to pledge their children to the observance of covenantal obligations from generation to generation. The centrality and continuous retelling of this covenantal story provide the clues for healing the rift between history and dogma in Christianity. Following Foucault's discourse analysis, Reck reclaims the Exodus as the underlying matrix of stories about the Messiah, about the meaning of sacrifice, and of miracles such as Jesus' walking on water.

Foucault's “discourse analysis” is the bridge that Reck uses to traverse the dichotomies of “Jewish” and “Christian,” this-worldly and other-worldly, political and spiritual, temporal and eternal, and historical and dogmatic truths. Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith* rather than Foucault's discourse analysis may have offered a better bridge, but the point is well taken: “Faith” is necessarily and always expressed in symbolic language and described in myths that are, as Tillich put it, “symbols of faith combined in stories about human-divine encounters” (*Dynamics of Faith* 1957, 56). As “discourse,” Reck says, the truth of faith becomes dialogical, contextual, embodied, and pluralistic rather than dogmatic and apodictic. Dogmatic truth emerged because the Christian church decontextualized, de-historicized, and de-temporalized the story of Jesus Christ. This did not happen in the Jewish interpretative tradition, which continued to look to history as the place where G-d is revealed, wrestled with, and sought after. The stories of faith come alive in their telling and retelling in the *Beit Midrash* [houses of learning] and in the family where stories are transmitted. By contrast, the Church developed an understanding of faith as assent and acceptance of stories as truth. For instance, the story of the Virgin Birth turned into dogma that must be swallowed whole without questioning and understanding. This, Reck points out, no longer works in modern democratic societies, where people have the choice to leave rather than be forced to “believe” stories whose meanings they no longer understand. The cognitive dissonance created by critical thinking and historical consciousness can no longer be ignored by clergy and academics, who have indeed learned to decode the symbolic language of dogmatic theology back in seminary.

The recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus compels several shifts. It brings the Jewish tradition of story-telling into the church now conceived of as an assembly

of mature, responsible, and thoughtful people who work out the presence and meaning of God through the canon of biblical stories. The recovery of Jewish his/story reminds the Christian church that the will of God shall not only be done in heaven but also on earth, in the form of concrete obligations to do justice and to live responsibly in particular places. Miracle stories, such as Jesus' walking on water, are not to be "believed" as improbable historical events but rather seen as invitations to trust the power to reach for the extraordinary and to defeat doubt and despair. Reck proposes a theocentric Christianity following the Jewish storyteller from Nazareth who announced the impending kingdom of G-d with its vision for justice and unceasing care for the neighbor, the sick, and the destitute as the unchanging core of truth in Christianity. Releasing Jesus from anti-Judaism, Reck concludes, the church will find his powerful stories to articulate and facilitate new conversation among people about their faith and fears and their hopes and desires for more justice and meaning in this, concrete, historical moment.