

Christian teachings of Contempt
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Good morning. First a couple of introductory remarks. I am a Christian ethicist, and president of a traditionally Christian seminary which has a long history of interfaith commitments and education. So while I am quite involved in interfaith work as it pertains to education and ethics, I am by no means a specialist in specifically Christian teachings of contempt. What I will do is simple. I will lay out a few introductory remarks that will I hope be grist for the mill of a vigorous conversation among us.

The case has been made for at least 50 years that Christian contempt for Jews has often been a constitutive element in Christian theology and self understanding, so much so that for some Christians, feeling contempt for Jews is or has been part of being Christian. This dating back, as we know, to the origins of Christianity in Judaism and the Christian propensity to build itself up (and at the same time negate its own history and origins), by understanding itself to be the definitive interpreter of the Hebrew Bible and history, and by making accusations against Jews based on such things as reports in Christian scripture in which Jews are described as involved in turning Jesus over to the Romans.

Although to me personally none of these kinds of accusations have ever made any sense (no more sense than for instance, the argument that women can't be ordained clergy because the disciples were all men), and, coming from a progressive protestant family, I was well into my teens before I even heard this contempt expressed for Jews coming from the accusation of "Jews killing Jesus", these teachings of contempt are something I as a Christian have to know about. I have to investigate these teachings, and be concerned about and mourn their massive consequences in history and I have to be able to be alert to their teachings in contemporary Christian theology and Christian actions. So, in a real and active sense Christian teachings of contempt are something I have to take responsibility for.

What does it mean to take responsibility for Christian contempt of Jews? It means as I have said, first of all recognition and awareness. It means also commitment to correct contempt wherever it is found - in writings, prayers, sermons, actions of all kinds, in relationships, and it means an adamant refusal to reproduce it in any way. It also means an honest attempt to address the consequences of this contempt - big and small - and to develop fruitful and mutual relationships with Jews in both abstract and concrete ways.

What does it mean to take responsibility for Christian teachings of contempt in this time and place, in a conversation with Jews and Christians and Muslims? In regards to Islam, the Christian teachings of contempt are different in origin and nature, than the teachings of contempt related to Judaism. In regards to Islam I think that many of the Christian teachings of contempt have historically been related to the fierce competition

and bloody history between two expansionist religions. Today, the contempt some Christians teach related to Islam have much to do with recent history and in the mind of many Christians, who are often ignorant in regards to Islam, a false identification of all of Islam with violence and with hatred towards Christianity. Alas, there are plenty of theological treatises, and ample historical examples of Christian contempt for Islam that have wreaked havoc and violence on Muslim communities in various places and moments in time, and that continue to justify heinous and hateful acts and attitudes, and render relations between Muslims and Christians fraught with negative and painful memory and a history of mutual suspicion.

Here again the Christian must investigate, must know the history, which most western Christians don't, must refuse to participate or reproduce teachings of contempt, and must call out those - like the pastor in the southern USA - who engage in teachings or acts of contempt. Here too, Christians must take personal and corporate responsibility and work actively against contempt of Muslims, and just as actively for mutual and respectful relations between Christians and Muslims.

At the end of the day, sadly, confronted by yet another prolonged example of Christian misdeeds of contempt, the Christian must ask herself whether this frequent contempt for the religious other, this propensity to "other" others, and thus render them more easily objects of hatred and exclusion, is built into Christianity to such an extent that in order to engage in moral and mutual relations with Muslims or Jews (and there are others) one must abandon the Christian tradition altogether. Yes, one must ask oneself if one must cease being a Christian in order to engage in the kinds of relationships of mutuality and respect that one's Christian moral tradition has insisted are one's moral obligation to develop.

In this light, it is not surprising that many Christians have a kind of nostalgia for the pre-Constantinian era in which we like to think or to imagine, that since Christians were neither in power nor powerful, the faith community in its relations with others was not so corrupted by hubris or puffed up by contempt of others, or if tempted, was powerless to act on it.

In other words in the face of all the historical evidence and contemporary evidence of contempt for both Jews and Muslims, the Christian must ask herself about the real possibilities of not only confession and forgiveness but of change that are built into Christianity itself. Here I have to say that both in the Hebrew scripture we share with Jews and in specifically Christian scripture, one finds abundant theological, moral and even sociological resources both to understand hateful attitudes and behavior towards others on the part especially of groups, and importantly, moral resources in terms of an understanding of moral obligation, responsibility and moral principles, that are antithetical to all these teachings of contempt and that judge the thought and condemn the behavior that result from these teachings.

Here you know what I am thinking of - Scriptural warnings about human egoism and the considerable human capacities of self aggrandizement; the seemingly infinite ability of

humans to see ourselves and our motives in the best possible light, to lie to the self and others; our sinful propensity to replace God with idols of power and wealth or to conveniently remake God in our own image, and claim God for ourselves alone. The American Christian moralist Reinhold Niebuhr devoted much of his life to the behavior of groups and the exploration of our self-inflicted and excessive concerns for security and fear of mortality, that, he insisted, lead to our capacity for hypocrisy especially in groups, as we inside build each other up, reassure each other, and increase our solidarity within the group by negating whoever we see to be the other outside the group. In groups, says Niebuhr, we are capable of behavior that the vast majority of us as individuals would never engage in.

In Christian scripture one also finds as a central moral theme the injunction to love the other without reserve, and not just those one chooses to love, but especially those society considers to be unlovable. Humans have this capacity of love and also the moral obligation to use it. Love of the other means love of all of humanity in a way that defies and transcends human tribal, ethnic, religious, difference.

It was Hannah Arendt who first impressed upon me the importance for human communities to be able to begin again; to not repeat cycles of violence and hatred, to start afresh. Arendt located this capacity in the human ability to forgive. According to its own self-understanding, Christianity possesses this ability in terms of forgiveness of the other and also in terms of forgiveness of the self. Since God forgives, however awful one's sin might be, one is able to face one's own sins or the sins of the group, to beg forgiveness, make amends, to move forward, to change.

In some interesting ways the teachings of contempt are, though the analogy is not at all perfect, like genes that get activated when a certain complex group of factors interact in a certain way - including both given attributes and environmental ones. Teachings of contempt are certainly there in the Christian tradition and also extraneous to the tradition in surrounding cultures, the two being always permeable and accessible to each other, and sometimes indistinguishable. Given the right historical moment, the right combination of unscrupulous leaders, people, power plays, self-interest, insecurity, economics, ideologies, and whatever else, they can be activated. So in order to combat them, the work we have before us inside the Christian tradition continues to be formidable. But the work we have to do is also outside our tradition, with other traditions and society at large and that work is also formidable. Christianity, like Islam or Judaism cannot be abstracted from the world, rather it is always found within in the world itself, and dynamics in the world can help trigger the teachings of contempt or hinder their potency.

So we are left with two perennial questions. How do we together help each other separately fortify in our traditions the antidotes to contempt- that which encourages self-knowledge and self-critique, honesty with the self and others, love of the other and outrage at injustice wherever it is found. And the second question is how together and

separately do we act in the world to help insure the conditions are not there to activate the capacity for contempt in any of our traditions.

One important avenue of action between and within our religious traditions is, it seems to me, to do our homework to find, to study, to make visible, the many historical and contemporary examples of individuals and groups who have and are creating an alternative history, one of cooperation, mutual respect, and, yes, even love between our religious communities and thus are living out moral teachings in our traditions that are every bit as present and, depending on us, can be every bit as potent as are the teachings of contempt. The Abrahamic Forum of the ICCJ can be, is, one such example.