Othering the Jews from the Church Pulpit

Gunnar Haaland

Introduction

While I was a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem back in 1996–1997, I attended a lecture by an Australian rabbi on the topic “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People, and Good Things to Bad People?” The audience was predominantly Jewish; I may have been the only Christian present. Before answering this question from a Jewish point of view, the rabbi briefly addressed the approaches of other world religions to this enigma. I cannot recall precisely what he said about Hinduism and Buddhism, but I think it was something about karma. I cannot remember exactly what he said about Islam either, but I think it was something about everything happening being the will of God. What presently concerns me, however, is what he said about Christianity. Unfortunately, I hardly remember anything of what he said in that case, either, but I do remember that he presented a Christian view on the problem of evil that was entirely new and alien to me. I was amazed. Either this rabbi had a far more profound knowledge of Christian theology and philosophy of religion than I had, or his presentation was fundamentally flawed. My conclusion was—and still is—that he did not really know what he was talking about when it came to Christian theology. And I suspect that a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist might have reached a similar conclusion with regard to their religious traditions. On the other hand, his presentation of the Jewish view of why bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people was insightful and convincing. There were hardly any doubts that Judaism provides the best and most profound answer to this problem.

From time to time, I hear Christian preachers do comparative religion in a similar manner from the pulpit. To be sure, the conclusion is always that Christianity has the most profound answer to whatever theological, philosophical, or existential problem. But when you do comparative religion in this manner from the pulpit, this conclusion is already your premise at the outset.

Far more frequently than doing such surveys of a number of world religions, however, Christian preachers and educators comment upon just Christianity and Judaism. No Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist—or secular humanist for that matter—ever appears in the narratives of the gospels, whereas there are Jews all around. Christian preachers and teachers simply cannot avoid relating to Jews and Judaism.
This article concerns such current theological constructions of Jews and Judaism. First, I examine a recently published Danish children’s Bible and then I move on to some samples of homiletic commentary from my home country, Norway.

Theoretical Perspectives

Christian constructions of Jews and Judaism may be analyzed by using Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism” and the more general notion of “othering” within postcolonial theory. Such constructions are first of all crafted within a highly uneven power relation by representatives of Norway’s and the West’s dominant religious tradition. Second, they are usually based on myths and prejudices rather than on current scholarship. Third, they hence tell us more about current Christian theology in Norway than about ancient Judaism in the land of Israel.

As the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth has pointed out, identity is shaped by confrontation with the other. Ethnicity is not primarily a matter of basic characteristics and core features, but a matter of creating social boundaries. We understand and define ourselves by pointing out what separates us from others. Hence the theological construction of the religious other is an integrated element of Christian identity formation and self-definition. When I analyze descriptions of Jews and Judaism within Christian preaching and teaching, I am analyzing an aspect of Christian self-definition at the same time. And if I challenge a specific mode of presenting Jews and Judaism, I challenge a particular mode of Christian self-definition at the same time.

In addition to these general perspectives, I analyze my material in relation to The Ten Points of Seelisberg, a landmark statement on Jewish-Christian relations from 1947, as well as to Katharina von Kellenbach’s typology of three main motives in Christian anti-Jewish discourse: Jews as scapegoats, Judaism as the antithesis of Christianity, and Judaism as prelude to Christianity.

Images of Jews in a Recent Children’s Bible

For anyone interested in current interpretation, adaptation, and application of biblical texts, children’s Bibles represent important and conspicuous material with numerous possibilities for critical scrutiny: the selection of certain biblical narratives at the expense of others, the combination of these smaller narratives into a larger narrative, the retelling of each specific text, and—not the least—the provision of illustrations that accompany, illuminate, and enhance the texts.

This section presents and briefly discusses some samples from a recent Danish children’s Bible, De Mindstes Bibel ("The Bible of the Smallest Ones"), published in Norwegian in 2008. The illustrations in this Bible are different from everything else I have seen within the genre, as they completely depart from the regular patterns of “authentic” clothing and “realistic” scenes. The innovative and thought-provoking illustrations as well as the vivid paraphrasing of the biblical texts have been strongly appreciated. The book was offered the 2008 design award for children’s books by Foreningen for Bokhåndværk ("Society for Book-Making") and has received several laudatory reviews.

There are three pictures that I find particularly relevant for the discussion on stereotypes and prejudice in this volume. Figure 15.1 shows Jesus’s antagonists in...