Race and the Story of American Judaism

Abstract
This paper considers how American Jews might retell the story of Judaism in America to more directly confront the centrality of racism to America’s foundation, and thus, to an extent, to American Judaism itself. An undeniable, but virtually unthought fact of the history of Jewish immigration to America is that Jews came to identify and be identified most closely with former slave owners (whites) rather than former slaves (blacks). As a number of scholars have shown, Jewish identity as white was not inevitable, but created through a process of racialization. How might American Jews today confront the problematic nature of their imbrication in whiteness, tell their story differently, and thus better position themselves to confront the ongoing reality of American racism? This paper will attempt to chart an answer to these questions.
Most U.S. Jews, like most white Americans, would be horrified to see ourselves as participants in and supporters of racism, and this paper will argue that this very aversion to seeing oneself as an agent perpetuating racism has been and remains a powerful factor in preventing U.S. society from acknowledging and responding to its racism. At the heart of this problem is the fact that white U.S. Jews, like other whites, have been hesitant to see whiteness itself as a problem—to see whiteness as a set of structures that continues to reproduce the vast inequities that are the very heart of U.S. racism.\(^1\) Whiteness is too often perceived as simply a biological fact and the reproduction of whiteness through unfair housing markets, educational inequalities, unequal employment, and an enormous disparity in inherited wealth, is not even grasped as the kind of thing that can be both embraced and resisted (Lipsitz 1998). Identifying racism solely with overtly hateful attitudes and failing to see it as also support for the structures that reproduce inequities, has allowed most white people, including white Jews, to sincerely believe themselves to be anti-racists even as they play key roles in reproducing inequality.

This paper argues that white American Jews in particular would do well to see whiteness as a problem and our investment in whiteness as racism. I further suggest that for white American Jews to see our identity as white as a problem is to see our identity as American Jews as a problem. Judaism and whiteness have become mixed together in America and this paper seeks to name the harm this has done to Judaism and to ask how we might tell the story of Judaism and America differently in the service of more honestly wrestling with U.S. racism.

\(^1\) Here and elsewhere I am especially indebted to George Lipsitz and his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* in defining “whiteness.” Although I do not discuss his work directly here, I am also highly influenced by Joe Feagin’s *The White Racial Frame* for its understanding of whiteness. I also wish to acknowledge the pivotal role that my conversations about race and religion with my departmental colleague, Catholic theologian Karen Teel, have played in allowing me to think about whiteness as a problem.
Part I: American Judaism and the Possessive Investment in Whiteness
At present, the overwhelming majority of white Jews, like most other progressive white-identified communities, do not challenge what George Lipsitz has described as a “possessive investment in whiteness” even as many white Jews use historical and ongoing support for greater civil rights as a marker of their anti-racist identity. “Despite intense and frequent disavowal that whiteness means anything at all to those so designated, recent surveys have shown repeatedly that nearly every social choice that white people make about where they live, what schools their children attend, what careers they pursue, and what policies they endorse is shaped by considerations involving race” (Lipsitz, vii). White-identified Jews in America are full participants, for better and worse, in white America and white society’s self-perpetuation.

There is nothing new in this diagnosis of how Jews have fit into the U.S. racial landscape, except perhaps for the rhetorical emphasis on “whiteness as a problem;” it is substantially consistent with the assessment James Baldwin made approximately fifty years ago while writing about black anti-Semitism. “The Jew profits from his status [as white] in America, and he must expect Negroes to distrust him for it,” wrote Baldwin in 1967. Moreover, Baldwin continues, “The Jew does not realize that the credential he offers [to demonstrate his anti-racism to the Black], the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro's understanding. It increases the Negro’s rage.” And it does so understandably, for past suffering does not make participation in oppression today less probable or less odious.

Unfortunately, most American Jews have, more or less, internalized a white identity, weaving it together with their Jewish identity. Whiteness and American Judaism have become interwoven. When Jewish communities declare that “America has been good to the Jews,” we also silently and unintentionally say that becoming white has been good for the Jews. When
we praise America for refusing to give anti-Semites the power over Jewish lives that they so long wielded in Europe, we forget that the price of this was whiteness and thus participation in white exploitation of Blacks. The price of freeing ourselves from anti-Semitism was more or less accepting the view of white gentile elites that Jews were more like them—the white, Christian elites—than Blacks. The psychological identification with whiteness, and thus white Christian elites, even if incomplete and uncomfortable for many Jews, has been, I submit, a terrible violence to Jewish identity, at least insofar as Jewish identity is bound up with identification with the oppressed. In arguing this, I follow historian Eric Goldstein, who has emphasized that becoming white in America was “slow and freighted with difficulty, not only because native-born whites had a particularly difficulty time seeing Jews as part of a unified, homogenous white population, but also because whiteness sat uneasily with many central aspects of Jewish identity” (2006, 1). Goldstein attempts to retell the usual story of American Jewish history as less one “of successful adaptation and transformation” and more “a story of hard choices and conflicting emotions” (Goldstein, 4). I wish to explore here what we might consider the theological costs of American Jews becoming white and coming to see ourselves as white—not what this did to Jewish psyches, but what this did to the symbolic heart of Judaism itself.

**The Theological Price of Whiteness**

In the process of empathetically interpreting but ultimately condemning black anti-Semitism, Baldwin names these theological, existential costs of whiteness with remarkable precision: “In the American context, the most ironical thing about Negro anti-Semitism is that the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man--for having become, in effect, a Christian” (1967). To state what is hopefully obvious, Baldwin is not suggesting that to be a Christian is *a priori* a bad thing, but he is playing on the fact that for most Jew there is no mainstream religious identity as fully incompatible with Judaism as Christianity.
To become a Christian in the sense Baldwin invokes it here is to symbolically abandon Judaism. This is the ultimate force of Baldwin’s critique: in becoming white, Jews may have not only joined (even if unwittingly and unwillingly) in black exploitation, but abandoned, precisely, Judaism. While Baldwin critiques black anti-Semitism, he does not wish to blunt the critical perspective on Jewish prosperity in America that a black lens can bring to Jewish life. I also do not wish to blunt the force of this critique: for me, Baldwin convincingly argues that America has, in important ways, menaced the very survival of Judaism even as it has protected Jewish people.

How can I be a descendant of slaves sensitized to the suffering of those most vulnerable when I identify not with the community of former slaves, but of former slave masters? Politically and economically becoming white in America has been good for Jewish people, good for the life chances of our children and the wealth of our communal institutions, but what Baldwin helps me see is that theologically it has created an existential threat to Judaism as an ethical system and a moral community. There has, in a sense, been a mass forced conversion from Judaism by American Jews, but most Jews have not noticed this yet. Thankfully, we have spiritual friends, like Baldwin, and, as I will shortly discuss, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who have called our attention to this threat.

The threat posed to Judaism’s ethical and moral health by whiteness is a particular version of a more general problem: how can the individual or minority community respond when the nation-state of which it is a part becomes a force of oppression? A. J. Heschel spoke eloquently to this religious-and-civic question in his 1972 televised interview with Carl Stern. Heschel put the question this way: “How can I pray when I have on my conscience the awareness that I am co-responsible for the death of innocent people in Vietnam?” and followed these words with a bold assertion about the nature of life in a democracy: “In a free
society, some are guilty, all are responsible.” I do not read Heschel here as saying, as my students sometimes interpret him, that he cannot and should not pray—which for Heschel was “to praise [God], to sing, to chant” (1972)—because of the awareness of his co-responsibility in the murder of Vietnamese people. Rather, I take the question as precisely a question, a question meant to stalk us like a bad conscience: if prayer is praise, how can I praise God when I am so proximate to destroying the very image of God that each Vietnamese person represents? How does the hope for redemption implicit in praising God survive alongside the reality that one finds oneself co-responsible for murder? How are we worthy to praise the Creator and how can we carry the weight of prophetic hope when we discover that the society we claim as our own is retarding rather than advancing the coming of the messiah? The more general form of the question that Heschel raises here in particular relation to Vietnam and to prayer is: how can I be a Jew in the face of the responsibility for violence I bear as a member of American society? Identifying whiteness as a problem and ceasing to invest in it, I submit, is one way to respond to this question.

Ultimately, responding to this question in any manner at all requires telling the story of Judaism in America differently. The following question has been pursued me for some time: How might American Jews tell the story of Judaism in America differently to more directly confront the centrality of racism to America’s foundation? How might American Jews tell the story of becoming American and thus becoming white without eliding the violence this involved to both Jewish values and black bodies? These are the more particular questions I wish to focus on for the remainder of this essay.

Part II: Retelling the American Jewish Narrative
The story of Judaism in America is usually told as a story of triumph: in Europe Jews were the core other, were politically disenfranchised, and were regular victims of anti-Semitic
violence, but, in America, this changed. America embraced Jews and allowed diverse forms of Judaism, and arguably a distinctly American Judaism, to thrive. Jews, in other words, have vouched for America as a true land of opportunity and, often enough, Jews have even imagined American itself as a promised land. The question of how American Jews should retell this American Jewish narrative with a critical awareness of whiteness as a problem, seems appropriate at a moment when white America has veered slightly closer to acknowledging the extent to which black lives don’t matter here—that is, closer to acknowledging that the problem of American racism is as profound in “New York City as it is in Jackson, Mississippi” (Cone 2007) and that racism, rather than a cancerous growth, is a foundation of the American nation (Feagin 2013) and even a source of its wealth (Baptist 2014). But my particular road to this question and through this question also matters and I must review it here. This road is shaped, on the one hand, by my encounter with the founder of black theology, James Cone, especially his recent book The Cross and the Lynching Tree (2011), and my subsequent reading of James Baldwin’s fiery short 1967 essay “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic, Because They’re Anti-White,” which I have already cited several times. On the other hand, it is shaped by my reflection on the pivotal tragedy of recent Jewish history, specifically my reflection on Susannah Heschel’s documentation of the relationship between German Protestant theologians and Nazi Anti-Semitism during and after the Shoah (2008).

Let me begin with Cone, revisiting Baldwin along the way, and then turn to Heschel.

Religion in America and the Lynching Tree
James Cone’s The Cross and The Lynching Tree is a moving call to fellow American Christians to tell the story of American Christianity differently by bringing together the central symbol of Christianity, the cross, with a central symbol of post-slavery U.S. racism, the lynching tree. Cone is speaking to Christians in particular, but he is also speaking to Americans of all religions or no religion and calling us to remember lynching for the sake of
avoiding a “fraudulent perspective” on the nature of American society (2011, xiv). His book convinced me that Jewish Americans, too, need to remember the lynching tree. But just as Cone finds special reasons for Christian Americans to go beyond simply remembering lynching by calling them to connect the cross and the lynching tree, I find reason for Jewish Americans to go beyond simply remembering lynching by connecting central symbols of Judaism today—such as mythical slavery in Egypt and the historical fact of the Shoah—with the lynching tree in the specific sense that Baldwin means it.

Cone’s argument is not so much that it is necessary to connect the cross and lynching tree to understand the wrong of lynching and racism, but that a failure to connect them suggests a failure to know the cross in the first place. That is, a failure to connect them, for Cone, signals a failure to realize the basic “meaning of the Christian gospel for this nation” (2011, xvi). Lynching, Cone reminds us, was a systematic vehicle of terrorism used to control Blacks after the end of slavery. As such, lynching was structurally similar to crucifixion, a means of terrorism used by the Romans to control conquered populations. Both cross and lynching tree were spectacles dramatizing the ultimate power of the oppressors over the oppressed. Despite these and other similarities between the crucifixion of Jesus and lynching, these two evils are not generally thought together. Indeed, the extent, pervasiveness, and legacy of lynching, not to mention modern forms of lynching like the prison system, are often forgotten entirely in public discourse.

For Cone, the tendency of Christian Americans to forget lynching is a symptom of a deeper malaise. Cone calls the cross “the great symbol of the Christian narrative of salvation” but laments that “this symbol of salvation has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings. . . . The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks” (2011, xiv). For
Christian Americans to recover the true cross, for Cone, requires connecting the cross with “the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings” and, if one is an American today, that means connecting the cross with the lynching tree. As I read Cone, at the core of his argument is the belief that what it means to be a Christian is different in different historical moments but that all legitimate forms of Christianity attend to the suffering of human beings and connect that suffering with the suffering of the cross.

The more fundamental theological idea that Cone here defends is that true religion is hopelessly and invariably concerned with the oppressed, especially the oppressed neighbor. This theology of divine concern for the oppressed is brought together with a historical truth about the U.S. and about the bounty America has brought to so many people: the riches of the U.S. were created in no small measure on the backs of Black slaves and continue to be generated on the backs of their decedents and other communities that white Americans denied entrance into whiteness. I do not read Cone as saying that all Christians must respond to all form oppression by linking them with the cross, but rather that when the oppression of a particular people becomes as central to a nation as the enslavement and lynching of Black Americans is to the U.S., then that oppression must become a central concern of Christians residing in that nation. For Cone, the evils symbolized in the lynching tree are simply too central to American life for it to be conceivable that a U.S. Christian seeking to make the cross a living symbol by connecting it with modern day oppressions, would fail to connect the cross and the lynching tree. “[U]ntil we can identify Christ with a ‘recrucified’ black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy” (2011, xv).

It seems to me that a similar argument to the one Cone makes in the Christian context
becomes necessary in the Jewish American context, at least for Jewish Americans who understand Judaism as, among other things, an ethical mandate to responsibility for the stranger. If the central narrative of Judaism is the narrative of the exodus and if a core act of Jewish identity is asking our children to identify with the Egyptian slaves and transform their own liberation from that slavery into a paradigm that foreshadows the liberation of all peoples, then it seems essential to me that Jews in particular confront the ongoing legacy of U.S. slavery by connecting the mythical enslavement in Egypt with the lynching tree. Yet this identification alone, for most American Jews, would be insufficient because for many of us, the central evil that must be remembered to preserve Jewish religious and ethical identity is not the mythical enslavement in Egypt, but the historical imprisonment and extermination perpetrated in the Shoah. Or, to put it another way, the idea of being “descendants of Egyptian slaves” becomes an actual force in the identity of many Jews today through remembrance of the Shoah. If remembrance of the Shoah is to serve this religious purpose then it too is in need of being made living by connection with ongoing forms of oppression. Remembering here names a moral act that is less about recalling past events than being mythical present at them in a way that allows the moral force of the events of the past to speak to us today. In sum, if Cone is right to call the Christian to know the cross in part through the lynching tree, then the theological correlate in the Jewish context is to make central narratives of Jewish identity—the exodus narrative and the remembrance of the Shoah, at minimum—theologically relevant in part through an existential confrontation with the lynching tree.

At least, it seems to me, drawing together mythical slavery in Egypt with the historical evils of the lynching tree and the Shoah is one tangible way to tell the story of Judaism in America differently. For American Jews, it seems to me, connecting mythical slavery in Egypt not only with the Shoah, which is a kind of theological given, but also the lynching tree is made theologically essential by American Judaism’s imbrication in whiteness. At the same
time, it seems impossible to adequately bring together the Shoah and the lynching tree in this manner—impossible to hear the commanding voice that has issued forth from these distinct atrocities\(^2\)—without a confrontation with whiteness as a problem. Seeing the Shoah together with the lynching tree would require recognizing that becoming white was more than just a challenge to Jewish identity, but a deep violence to some of the most essential impulses of Judaism. It would require recognizing that the ongoing Jewish investment in whiteness, both in terms of identity and actual material resources, is potentially a perversion of Jewish ethical ideals. Above all, it would require doing this with attention to the historical specificity of the lynching tree. How did American Jewish identity as white become shaped by frequent Jewish silence in response to lynching? Most of all, how does our ongoing identity as white rehearse that silence in the face of contemporary lynching—the lynching perpetuated by our prison system, for example?

Telling the story of Judaism in American differently so as to better remember past racism would, at least, mean speaking about the American part of “American Jewish identity” as at least as much a problem as a source of pride. Jews have long connected America with Zion, seen the U.S. as a sort of promised land, and, for Jewish bodies, it has been a kind of salvation.\(^3\) But, if the U.S. has allowed Jews to thrive materially, it has exacted a moral price: it has demanded Jewish participation in whiteness. It has “freed” Jews to identify with the former slave owners and specifically not the former slaves. Telling the story of Judaism in America differently will require confronting this darker part of the success of American Jewish life. It will require recognizing in a new way that America never became a nation of free people and that the freedom and financial prosperity it bestowed to Jews and other white-identified immigrant populations that have thrived here, was a freedom often purchased at the

\(^2\) I allude here to Emile Fackenheim’s notion of the “commanding voice of Auschwitz” (1970).

\(^3\) [Add note on Jewish American identification of the U.S. as Zion]
price of participation in (which is to say expansion of) oppressive structures that have reproduced generations of racial inequality. To draw together the Shoah and the lynching tree in the service of following the central Jewish mandate to remember slavery in Egypt and identify with, precisely, former slaves, is, in sum, to see America as the house of bondage. Better, it is to realize that America is the house of bondage.

**America is the House of Bondage**

And this is precisely what James Baldwin called American Jews to do: to know that America is the house of bondage, for if America is the house of bondage to any people, it is the house of bondage full stop. “God is either the father of all men or of no man” (Heschel 1972).

Earlier in this essay I cited Baldwin explaining that, “The Jew does not realize that the credential he offers [to demonstrate his alleged anti-racism to the Black], the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro's understanding. It increases the Negro's rage.” Baldwin goes on to explain this rage as follows, “For it is not here, and not now, that the Jew is being slaughtered, and he is never despised, here, as the Negro is, because he is an American. The Jewish travail occurred across the sea and America rescued him from the house of bondage. But America is the house of bondage for the Negro, and no country can rescue him. What happens to the Negro here happens to him because he is an American” (1967). How can Jewish revelry in the American project be anything but an offense to those who have known America only as the house of bondage? And how can it, in an important sense, be anything but an offense to Judaism?

So what might it look like to tell the story of Judaism and America with the knowledge that America, too, is a house of bondage? What would it look like to probe the central narratives of American Judaism—I have emphasized mythical slavery in Egypt and remembrance of the Shoah—in the shadow cast by lynching trees in New York or Mississippi or California? Baldwin’s essay presents one model: it would mean, among other things,
recognizing the difference in the way America remembers Black suffering and Black
resistance and how America remembers Jewish suffering and Jewish resistance. Baldwin
observes, “The Jew is a white man, and when white men rise up against oppression, they are
heroes: when black men rise, they have reverted to their native savagery. The uprising in the
Warsaw ghetto was not described as a riot, nor were the participants maligned as hoodlums:
the boys and girls in Watts and Harlem are thoroughly aware of this, and it certainly
contributes to their attitude toward the Jews. . . . But, of course, my comparison of Watts and
Harlem with the Warsaw ghetto will be immediately dismissed as outrageous” (1967). Such a
dismissal was perhaps once the norm, which is precisely why we now do well to see the
Shoah in the shadow of the lynching tree and in so doing see the great value of, indeed the
ethical mandate to, remember the evils that have been inflicted upon Jews in a manner that
sensitizes us to the suffering of our neighbors. To bring the lynching tree and the Shoah
together in the manner I am calling for here is precisely not to engage in disciplined historical
comparison, though that would be valuable, and even less to say “we have both known
suffering,” though this is also true in a fashion. To bring the lynching tree and the Shoah
together in the manner suggested to me by Cone and Baldwin is to bring these two evils
together in the service of seeing the world around us with moral clarity: it is in the service of
knowing more honestly the moral stakes and pitfalls of being an American Jew. It is, per
Cone, about the challenge of making the symbols of our religious life meaningful rather than
ornamental. This entails, of course, the work of the historian, but it goes well beyond it; the
histories that historians bequeath us must, must be made our history. And that act of historical
remembrance, of making a story our story, is always theological work, religious work, and it
exceeds the task of the historian strictly understood. It is the task, rather, of turning history
into living myth, into moral memory embodied in daily life and ultimately into Jewish
identity.
Before I close by turning to the historical work of Susannah Heschel on the Shoah and its aftermath, and the theological questions her work inspires, let me review what I hope to have accomplished so far. I have begun with the truism that Americans are loath to acknowledge the extent of our racism, as study after study has shown, and I have followed many others in observing that this poses a barrier to actually overcoming U.S. racism. I have argued that this problem takes place in different ways in different white American communities and, as a Jew, I have tried to explore how U.S. Jews might escape this trap of empowering racist structures by refusing to critically examine our own unwitting support for racism. I further argued, following race theorists like Lipsitz and Joe Feagin, that part of the problem is a failure to see whiteness itself as a problem. To see whiteness itself as a problem, I argue, ultimately means retelling core narratives about Judaism in America in profoundly different ways, and thus the second half of the paper turns to the question: how might American Jews tell the story of American Judaism differently and in a way that does not elide the realities of racism? I answer, in conversation with Baldwin and Cone, that American Jews would do well to learn to enliven and make meaningful central symbolic act of Judaism such as retelling the exodus narrative and remembrance of the Shoah in part by thinking these evils together with the lynching tree.

Finally, I have suggested that connecting the exodus, the Shoah, and the lynching tree in this way requires recognizing the U.S. as a house of bondage. It requires, in sum, overcoming our deep resistance to the notion that Judaism in America, to the extent it has become a white religion (which seems a very large extent indeed), has become complicit in U.S. racism. Above all the challenge is to see that racism in America and religion in America have become intermixed despite a national disavowal that white Christianity had much to do with slavery, with Jim and Jane Crowism, and with the racist structures of today. White Christians have their own particular challenges in confronting the disturbing ways U.S.
religions have become integral to U.S. racism, and white Jews like myself have ours. Christians also have religious resources, what Cone names as “the cross” that can help Christians confront U.S. racism, and Jews, too, have our resources, the unique way in which Jews read history itself as the theater of divine action and our ability to turn past wrongs into moral responsibilities. When I speak of bringing together the exodus, the Shoah, and the lynching tree, I mean to call upon the power of the Jewish imagination to read its own history in a manner that can be liberatory for all peoples and ultimately all creation.

The Shoah and the Lynching Tree
Case in point: Thinking the Shoah and the lynching tree together would mean, among other things, taking the moral insights about the nature of evil and resistance to it that reflection on the Shoah can provide and using those insights to see more clearly the evils that beset us today. Take, for example, my argument in this paper that Jews would do well to see American Judaism as ethically and theologically compromised by its uncritical consideration and even embrace of whiteness. As a corollary, I have argued that essential to seriously addressing whiteness as a problem is recognizing its imbrication in American religion, and, for Jews, this means recognizing that Jewish religion and racism have sometimes been partners. This is painful and so we might ask: is it really essential to draw such vivid connections between American Judaism and American racism? Might we not better heal past wounds by emphasizing what Jews did right: Jewish support for civil rights and so on?

This is precisely the kind of story and question about American Judaism that I think can be positively transformed by following Cone in a Jewish version of his call to connect the cross and the lynching tree, namely by allowing the exodus, the Shoah, and the lynching tree to interpret one another in exploring questions about racism and our contemporary response to it. Consider, for example, a problem that Susannah Heschel identifies in her book, The Aryan Jesus (2008), in the way that most German historians, theologians, church officials, and
scholars of religion have remembered the Shoah: an impulse to exculpate Christianity—both generally and in the concrete form of particular Christian political parties, particular Christian institutions, and particular Christian theologians—from the now obvious evils of Nazi racism by disavowing affinities between Christian theology and racism. This impulse is understandable enough: if Christianity is to function in the life of the Christian as an inspiration to, among other things, a moral and ethical life, it could seem necessary to the Christian to say that Christianity itself, whatever that means, was not guilty of supporting Nazism. Such a theological move could be innocent enough if it were only a matter of holding an ideal, yet-to-be, aspirational Christianity as innocent of the crimes of anti-Semitism, but this is not what happened historically, as Heschel shows. A long citation from *The Aryan Jesus* will be helpful:

The sharp division made by most historians, theologians, church officials, and scholars of religion between Christian theological anti-Judaism and modern racial antisemitism has fostered the postwar myth that theologians did not contribute to the Nazi murder of the Jews, and also the widespread notion, common among Jewish theologians as well, that Nazism represented an anti-Christian pagan revival movement. As the texts discussed in this book indicate, however, the boundary between theology and race was highly porous... Theologians gravitated toward racism as a tool to modernize Christianity and to demonstrate that its principles were in accord with those of racial theory. In addition, they considered racial theory a tool to grant scientific legitimation to religion: racial claims of an inherent societal hierarchy reinforced religious beliefs in God’s creation of a natural order and hierarchy of plants, animals, and humans within it. ... Racism itself can be seen as a form of incarnational theology, centrally concerned with moral and spiritual issues, but insisting that the spiritual is incarnate in the physical (2008, 286).

In sum, the Christian disavowal of the manner in which Christian institutions constructed, perpetuated, and enthusiastically supported racism, including in its genocidal form as Nazi antisemitism, has gotten in the way both of recovering the facts of history and, more importantly, of the story those facts might tell—an ugly story of a long and dark chapter in Christian history which, one might speculate, is necessary to address in order to move past.
From the Jewish perspective, the necessary response to the reality of Christianity’s imbrication in antisemitism and racism more broadly, is, at very minimum, an owning of the problem. I think I likely speak for most Jews, and at least many Jews when I say that few things seem more obvious from where Jews stand than that German Christians need to acknowledge the ways that Christian identity was often forged through antisemitism, and specifically the role this played in the Shoah. It seems obvious from where Jews stand that to suggest that centuries of “Christian theological anti-Judaism” were largely irrelevant to the form of antisemitism that enabled and fired the Shoah, strikes us as obscene.

Heschel, however, does not only document the infuriating failure of the postwar church in Germany “to come to grips with the responsibility of Christian theology for antisemitism and for the Nazi’s disenfranchisement, deportation, and murder of the Jews” (2008, 287). Heschel also tells us about “a remarkable number of German theologians” who “have made concerted efforts not only to take responsibility for the church’s role in the Holocaust, but to formulate new theologies and christologies that affirm Judaism. . . . The Holocaust, in this view, was a wound in the heart of Christian theology and a profound challenge to its moral authority” (2008, 287). Again, I will risk speaking for Jews, which I of course have no authority to do, in saying that it is these theologians, the one’s who admit the brokenness of Christianity and its contributions to antisemitism, that we Jews would prefer. It is Christian braveness to acknowledge its antisemitism rather than Christian declarations that it is distant from antisemitism that strike Jews, or at least strike me, as admirable. And if this is what I admire in relation to Christian responses to the Shoah, then I perhaps have an answer to the query about whether American Jews at this present moment would do better to emphasize the admirable moments of Jewish opposition to American racism or acknowledge that, in becoming white, American Judaism, like American Christianity, became imbricated in American racism and remains so to this day.
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