

Redefining Jesus' role seen as possibility in relation to Jews

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Some Christian scholars are in the process of redefining a traditional view of the meaning of Christ in relation to Jews, according to Dr. John T. Pawlikowski, a Chicago theologian.

PAWLIKOWSKI, A Catholic priest who is professor of social ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, described the redefinition in an address at Dauphin Way United Methodist Church sponsored by the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

The professor emphasized at the outset of his talk that attempts at redefining Jesus in relation to Jews are strictly Christian efforts. Jews have their own definitions of themselves, and those definitions are not related to Jesus. Jews' belief in the validity of their religion has no relation to Jesus.

Pawlikowski said definitions which he and other theologians have been developing of the Christ event are necessary, however, in order "to allow for some theological space and ongoing validity for Judaism from a Christian theological perspective."

Pawlikowski said he and other Christians believe they have a biblical basis for moving away from fulfillment theology, or the viewing of Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, to focus on incarnational theology, or the viewing of Jesus as God entering human form.

THE SPEAKER rejected a traditional Christian view that "Jesus Christ somehow fulfilled everything that is good in Judaism, and therefore whatever was good in Judaism was brought over to Christianity so that those people who continued to be Jews are pretty much of an empty shell."

To be honest, however, Pawlikowski said "claims of messianic fulfillment indeed are present in parts of the Gospel in the interpretation of the Christ event, particularly in what we call the Synoptic Gospels; that is, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke."

IN TRYING to solve the dilemma of how Christians can "be authentic and faithful to the witness of Jesus Christ" while still allowing "theological space for Jews," some scholars have adopted what is called "the mystery approach of St. Paul," said Pawlikowski.

Paul, according to Pawlikowski, said "that somehow Judaism continues to have a meaning even after the Christ event." Paul added, however, "he really doesn't know how or why. It's sort of a mystery."

Said the speaker, "Paul, after years of preaching, converting and so on, was forced to come to the realization that whatever the Gospel meant, somehow the Jewish community had an ongoing role in the salvific process.

"I THINK that's an important conclusion, coming where it does — at the end, not at the beginning of Paul's career."

Paul "unfortunately was not able to go any further," said the speaker.

"A number of us theologians are picking up on the process of Paul because he had become an old man and had to die and was not able to finish.

"We are taking up the Pauline reflection to try to move it along and say maybe it's not just a

mystery. Maybe there is some way in which we can understand anew the relationship of Jews and Christians and the role that Judaism might play from a Christian perspective of the Christ event."

PAWLIKOWSKI said Catholics accept "tradition as a source of revelation. The church has a right, does have the ability to further reflect, to amplify, as it were, almost add to the scriptural revelation, not so much to add something totally new but at least to continue processes and work in the biblical tradition."

While the Synoptic Gospels' approach of viewing Jesus is primarily as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies, the Gospel of John and the later writings of

Paul mark "the beginning of a somewhat different Christological approach. That approach does not lay all that much emphasis on the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies but lays far more emphasis on the incarnation.

"IT IS PROBABLY fair to say that the Johannine approach to the meaning of Christ and the later Pauline attempt represent the later thinking of the apostolic church," said Pawlikowski.

He said, "What I would postulate, would try to show, is that there was in the New Testament a kind of subtle shift taking place, a kind of reinterpretation of the Christ event."

The professor contended, from a Christian perspective, that "throughout his message, in many ways Jesus was really laying the basis for what eventually became the notion of the incarnation."

THIS GROUNDWORK was laid by Jesus in living among Pharisaic Jews, who had "a tremendously creative and important influence on Jesus and the early church," Pawlikowski said, adding that Jesus broke ranks with the Pharisees in some areas, nonetheless.

For example, while the Pharisees of Jesus' time viewed God as father, they did not, however, "grant the possibility of as close a link between humanity and divinity" as did Jesus, in the view of Pawlikowski.

Jesus' healing of a man's withered arm on the Sabbath even though the man was not in a life-threatening situation is an indication of Jesus' emphasis on "the utter dignity of the individual person," according to Pawlikowski's view.

THE PHARISEES, Pawlikowski said, would have favored the healing on the Sabbath in a life-threatening situation. Yet they did not approve the healing under the circumstances in which it did take place because observance of the Sabbath "was a way of protecting Jewish identity, not for its own sake but for the sake of the ultimate mission of the Jewish people, which was to bring the knowledge of God to all nations."

Thus in the Sabbath incident, Jesus and the Pharisees emphasized different principles, according to Pawlikowski, who viewed Jesus' actions in this and other examples as a basis for incarnational theology.

GIVING ANOTHER indication of Jesus' laying groundwork for incarnational theology, Pawlikowski maintained that Jesus' forgiving sins and transmitting this power to his disciples shows "the very close relationship between humanity and divinity, which in turn produces this tremendous respect for the individual person."

Pawlikowski presented the view that "the sum total of Jesus' activities was in fact leaning in a certain direction, and whether early or late, I think the Christian community eventually came to see the uniqueness of what Jesus stood for may not so much in fact be that he was the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecy but granted

that he was indeed a person who because of a special relationship with God was now proclaiming a new intimacy, a new closeness, a new link between humanity and divinity which the church later eventually developed in a more profound way into what we call Christian theology of the incarnation."

THE PROFESSOR said his emphasis leaves "theological space" for Jews, and Christians should recover some teachings and practices from their Jewish heritage, including "the teachings of the biblical revelation coming out of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Pharisaic tradition."

Christians also should try to "pick up the sense of community" which Jews feel, as well as the Jewish "sense of history as a source of revelation."

Christians could learn from Jews their "sense of the goodness of creation ... and also the sense of the human person as somehow sharing in the co-responsibility for the creation" in that each person has a responsibility for helping to sustain the earth.

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