Theology’s Messy Orientation: Teaching Jesus’ Incarnation as Antidote to Racism

Abstract

Applying Educational Theorist Pamela Grossman’s notion of orientation and Jewish Education scholar Barry Holtz’s modification of it, I ask in this paper what theology’s orientation is, which is vital for teachers of theology. In light of the answers garnered from such preliminary reflections, I argue that theology is oriented to being particularly open and organically connected to culture and life in all its messiness, connoting the wholeness of the connection between theology and life in all its messiness. This implies in turn that teachers of theology should be ready to acknowledge theology’s open and organically connected nature to life in all its messiness. Such openness and organic connection of theology to life in all its messiness can take its cue from Incarnation of Jesus for his Jewishness, for the Incarnation tells us that Jesus in his humanness was deeply open and organically connected to everything in life in its messiness. It is in this regard that I finally attempt to make a case that such Incarnational orientation of theology tends to play itself out as an antidote to racist discourse, preemptively undermining any attempt to drain Jesus of his Jewishness, thereby cherishing our humanness as such regardless of our skin color.

Theology and Its Orientation

What is the relationship between theology and culture, with teaching theology in mind? While it is almost impossible to give a full answer to the question at hand in these limited pages, here I focus on how the Christian identity is formed under the complex interaction of the two in light of life in all its messiness. In this section, therefore, following Kathryn Tanner and Ted A. Smith, I am making a case that neither theology nor culture is insulated, either from each other or from life in all its messiness; rather, they actively affect each other because each is open to and organically connected with the other, and this means that both theology and culture touch all dimensions of life in all its messiness. How does one know that theology and culture are open to and organically connected in this way then? By means of falsifying a theological movement in which theology and culture are neither open to, nor organically connected to each other, I am

1 I am not attempting here to define neither culture nor theology as I begin my exploration of the relationship between theology and culture. In fact, Kathryn Tanner, in her book Theories of Culture (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1997), 3, takes note of the fact that culture is notoriously difficult to define. For that matter, defining theology would not matter much either here. Instead, I am focusing on how the complex relationship between the two affects the formation of the Christian identity.

2 See footnote 4.
going to make a case for this. What I would like to argue eventually is, following Tanner, that the Christian identity formation “is established from the beginning through the use of borrowed materials.”

Two of the representative examples running counter to Tanner’s argument in this regard, and my argument for that matter, are radical orthodoxy and postliberal theology. For radical orthodoxy, theology seems to be predicated upon the existence of a Christian society parallel with a secular one. Tanner refutes such understanding of theology as follows: “But if the Christian community serves all the functions that a so-called secular society does and is organized along entirely different lines, as Milbank affirms, then Christian communities are still being imagined here.” The point here is that no one can empirically prove the existence of the kind of Christian community Milbank seems to advocate, well bounded and self-contained within itself. For postliberals, one of the mistakes is their presupposition for theological method: “Theology projects onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation requires—a coherent whole. The method of study itself thereby validates the conclusions of the theologian while disqualifying the people and practices it studies from posing a challenge to those conclusions.” The reality is that theology is never a coherent whole, just as culture is never a coherent whole, but always responding to the changing dynamic of life in all its messiness. The presupposition that theology is a coherent whole makes sense only when our lives in the world never change and become static, which is not true at all. This is one reason that I put an emphasis on the openness and organic connection between theology and culture, as both respond to all the possible dimensions of life.

In the foregoing, the main thrust of Tanner’s arguments, at least with regard to this paper, is that both radical orthodoxy and postliberal theology posit “imagined” aspects of the Christian community and theological method respectively, and such imagination is not grounded in the messiness of life. Rather, these approaches picture some idealistic vision for either the Christian community or the work of theology. Interestingly enough, Ted A. Smith also captures these same “imagined” aspects of theology, arguing for the following three points. First, theology should be aware of its own limited standpoints; second, no theology is purely self-contained and bounded whole, but always in conversation with a hodgepodge of diverse cultural traditions and practices; third, theology not grounded in historical reality promises too much, yet achieves too little, while theology embedded in concrete historical reality is more realistic about what can be done, leaving the final redemption up to God. What Smith is saying here could be crystalized in

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3 Ibid., 114.
4 Ibid., 99.
5 Ibid., 76. Still, Tanner finds the postliberal notion of boundary somewhat helpful: “One can still agree with postliberal theology that the identity of a Christian way of life is formed by a cultural boundary. This is not, however, the sharp boundary of independent cultural contents as postliberalism at its extreme imagines. The boundary is, instead, one of use that allows Christian identity to be essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions (notably Judaism).” Ibid., 114.
6 Ted A. Smith, “Redeeming Critique: Resignations to the Cultural Turn in Christian Theology and Ethics,” Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics, 24.2 (2004):89-113. In this article, Smith defines clearly what his understanding of theology’s cultural turn to culture is. In fact, Smith begins his article with what theology’s cultural turn is: “taking the practices, beliefs, narratives, or traditions of a particular community as starting points for normative or theological reflections.” While there could be so many other ways of defining theology’s cultural turn, they all boil down to taking a particular community as the starting point of theological reflections, and it is in this regard that I take Smith’s definition here.
his engagement with Stanley Hauerwas’s theology among others. Smith is sharp in seeing through Hauerwas’s idealized vision of the church, which is nowhere to be found in real life. Smith also discerns that, while Hauerwas idealizes his own vision of the church, he is rather oblivious of his own standpoint, which is neither a theological whole, nor “pure symbols of moral and theological unequivocalness.” Thus, a theology devoid of such pitfalls of Hauerwas’s would be open to critical scrutiny of all kinds. In other words, if one gets as close as possible to what is, rather than to its idealistic representation, one is obliged to abandon any picture of purism, a trap which radical orthodoxy and postliberal theology fall into.

Life is messy, and there is no place for theological purism, if theology is to be grounded on what is. Since I will draw later in this paper a fuller picture of theological purism in relation to theological pride and humility, I abstain from getting into any detailed account here in this regard; for now, suffice it to say that the relationship between theology and culture, sketched here as open and organically connected to each other, reflects that theological purism is not a tenable position given the messiness of life.

In light of this, then, how does one proceed to “teaching” theology? Above all, what seems to be suggested in the discussions thus far is that an understanding of theology has to take seriously the messiness of life, especially in its relationship to culture in terms of setting up boundaries, more toward fluidity and malleability, rather than clear-cut rigor and strictness. This is precisely where I draw upon the Educational Theorist Pamela Grossman’s notion of orientation, the phrase which I have occasionally alluded to from the beginning of this paper without further explanations. In coining the term orientation, Grossman was originally concerned with what bearings teacher’s knowledge of the subject matter might have on teaching a subject, i.e., an academic discipline. Grossman discovered through her research that there was “little or no relationship between teacher’s subject-matter knowledge and either pupil achievement or general teaching performance.” For the purpose of this paper, this means that doctrinal knowledge of the teacher would not matter so much for students’ coming to form their identities. What is important for “teaching” the Christian theology then, especially for identity-formation? At this point, Grossman argues for what she calls orientation, which is “more than a casual attitude towards the subject matter, an orientation towards literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature.” Jewish education scholar Barry Holtz has adopted Grossman’s notion of orientation and applied it to Jewish religious education, and Holtz defines orientation this way:

A description not of a teacher’s “method” in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions… What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain those aims?

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7 Ibid., 101.
8 See footnotes 1, 3, and 16.
10 Ibid., 248.
So then, what is the orientation of theology? Among other things, its orientation could be expressed as being open and organically connected to life in all its messiness. Such orientation of theology, i.e., openness and organic connection of theology to life in all its messiness, can take its cue from Incarnation of Jesus for his Jewishness, for the Incarnation tells us that Jesus in his humanness was deeply open and organically connected to everything in life in its messiness. In the next section, then, I will argue that theological racism as a corollary of anti-Incarnational orientation of theology, after which I will showcase how, among other theologies of Incarnation, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of Incarnation effectively precludes such theological racism.

Theological Origins of Racism and Its Cure: Supersessionism vs. Christ’s Jewish Flesh in the Life of the Trinity in Hans Urs von Balthasar

This section explores the church’s social-theological mis-formation in theological racism through its theology of supersessionism, which is subject to, although not necessarily so, anti-Incarnational orientation of theology. Not only do I argue that theological supersessionism had generated the mis-formation of theological pride, I also contend that Jesus’ Incarnation and his Jewishness understood in the context of the Trinitarian life in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology can be an antidote to theological racism as well as to the pride and the desire for purity coming along such pride.

What is a theology of supersessionism then? R. Kendall Soulen in his *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* has defined a theology of supersessionism as follows: “God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.”12 While this story seems innocent enough, treating the Jews and Israel with perhaps respectful indifference, Soulen nails down his point that it was because of a theology of supersessionism that some German Christians in the 1930s “began to expel Christians of Jewish descent from their pulpits and parishes.”13 Moreover, after the World War II, when the church’s position on the Jews began to change, “one of the most important features of this change has been a critical reevaluation of the teaching of supersessionism.”14

Looked at this way, what seemed at first a dispassionate setting aside of the Jews and Israel from the main stage of God’s work might be perhaps something much more heinous, for it seems hard to deny that behind their motivation for dispensing Jews was a desire for theological purity, namely, Jesus unstained by the mess of Jews, which many scholars assert to be the archetype of theological racism. For example, in her book *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Susannah Heschel explicates well the connection between stripping Jesus of his Jewishness (and thereby getting rid of all the Jews) and racialization.

Rejecting Jesus’ Jewishness and defining him as Aryan was about not only redefining Christianity, but racializing Europe: reassuring Europeans that they were white. Images of Jesus were crucial to racism in establishing the primary criterion of whiteness: Christ

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
himself. It is not the Caucasian male who was the model of the authentic white man, but rather an idealized (italics mine) “White Man,” namely Christ. For the European male to define himself as a “white man” he had to fantasize himself as Christ, a Christ who had to be imaged not as Jew but as Aryan.\(^\text{15}\)

Notice that Heschel points out how Jesus has been idealized as the White Man. In light of our discussions on the relationship between theology and culture thus far, such idealization of Jesus the White Man is possible only when theology regards its work as coherent and whole, oblivious of its openness and organic connection to culture and life in all their messiness, symbolized in Jesus’ Jewish flesh.

In response to this understanding of supersessionism and the according theological racism, I am now looking into three theologians’ arguments not only against such racialization of Jesus, but also for the Incarnation of Jesus in the context of the Trinitarian life as antidote to it, particularly that of Hans Urs von Balthasar. for von Balthasar, Jesus’ Jewishness on the one hand, and Jesus’ universal salvific work on Holy Saturday on the other, cannot exist apart from each other, especially for the purpose of promoting racial peace. The particularity of Jesus’ Jewishness is necessary for the universal salvific work of Jesus Christ on Holy Saturday, precisely because Jesus’ Jewishness is the ground and context for God to open salvation to all, not depending on skin color or any other internal/external condition. According to von Balthasar, Jesus’ Incarnation is where Jesus’ Jewishness and his death not only on the cross, but also in the deepest part of hell on Holy Saturday all come together. In this regard, recapitulation is the most profound meaning of Jesus’ Incarnation. Below I will explicate why this is so.

Drawing upon St. Irenaeus’ understanding of it, von Balthasar puts his own version of recapitulation in perspective. “What he [St. Irenaeus] means [by recapitulation] is this: the second Adam is the repetition, in divine truth, of the first Adam, the Adam who turned away from God… St Paul coined the word ‘recapitulation’ to express the meaning of the Incarnation: it was God’s plan to ‘bring everything together under Christ as Head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth’\(^\text{16}\) While to some this might seem to signal turning back to the universalist aspect of Christ’s work, the notion of recapitulation has as much to do with Israel as it does with Gentiles, for the reason that Christ is placed to be the second Adam is precisely because Israel has miserably failed what God has assigned Israel to be its mission, in place of which Christ has fulfilled the mission of Israel. In this light, Christ and Israel are inseparably related to each other, which is also why the recapitulation of Christ is the meaning of the Incarnation. Anthony C. Sciglitano, Jr. sums up this point nicely: “The credibility of Jesus’ call hinges on the continuing presence of the covenantal context so that what Jesus requires does not come out of the blue as an arbitrary demand… “Recapitulation” for von Balthasar comes to mean that Christ is the concretion of the Covenant from both sides of the relation, the human-Israelite and the divine.”\(^\text{17}\) At the same time, it is in this regard that Jesus’ existence as a Jew is where the encounter between God and humanity happens to the utmost degree, and this is why


von Balthasar calls Jesus to be concrete analogia entis (Analogy of Being), the peak of God-creation relationship.\(^\text{18}\)

Therefore, for von Balthasar, the destiny of Israel and that of the Church are inextricable from each other in the drama of salvation history, just as the destiny of Jesus as a Jew and that of Israel are inextricable from each other, for “the Church remains rooted in the promise and faith of Israel on the one hand, and in Jewish flesh and blood through Christ on the other.”\(^\text{19}\) Building on this point, von Balthasar argues for the justification of Israel and Judaism as God’s people even today, contending that Christians should stop mission work to the Jews.\(^\text{20}\) The implications of this statement are numerous and go beyond the scope of this paper. However, for the purpose of this paper, this is at least a serious attack against the traditional theology of supersessionism (and thus against theological racism). In the last analysis, von Balthasar always cautions that both Israel and the Church should be reminded of God’s “whyless love,”\(^\text{21}\) the ground of which is not on the merits of the objects of love, but on God who is love.

**Concluding Reflections: Theology, its Orientation, and Teaching**

If the orientation of theology is, as has been expounded so far, inherently open and organically connected to life in all its messiness, i.e., incarnational, then teachers of theology should keep this in mind and teach theology accordingly. This is not necessarily to say that teachers of theology should not teach any theology exemplified as anti-incarnational (such as radical orthodoxy or postliberal theology); rather, it should taken as a deep signal to which direction theology should move forward. At the same time, teachers should take into account such incarnational orientation of theology not only when they teach matters of racism versus anti-racism, but also other weighty issues. One of the ways to teach theology incarnationally might be that of teaching it with narrative, for according to Mary Elizabeth Moore, in her book *Teaching from the Heart*, the passions for teaching theology with narrative are “for people to connect with other persons and events across time, to root deeply in the cultural and religious stories of their own people, and to cross boundaries into the stories of other peoples and the earth.”\(^\text{22}\) In fact, connection with people, life, self, and with God is what penetrates through the theme of this paper. Listening to others’ stories and crossing boundaries to make new connections through such stories are very important for teaching theology incarnationally in that they cultivate a sense of solidarity among all the members of humanity, since “the characters are

\(^{18}\) Adrian Walker, “Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as the Master of Theological Renewal” *Communio* 32 (Fall 2005). I am not explaining any further about what *analogia entis* is here, since my readers know and understand it well, and also since I think my point could be understood well apart from going into the detailed account of what it is.


\(^{20}\) This does not necessarily mean that the national Israel established in 1948 is God’s people. Von Balthasar’s logic is more complicated than such a blanket approval of the national Israel. I cannot go into his detailed account as to this matter, considering the limit and scope of this paper. A hint into where he is moving could be found in his intimation of how to interpret Romans 11:26 (All Israel will be Saved) in *Dare We Hope that All Men Be Saved?* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 185.


\(^{22}\) Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 131.
full and embodied; their lives are interwoven, and their ideas and actions are interwoven.”

Eventually I argue that racism, particularly the one originated from theology, is a social ill of one person or group’s illusive desire for purity over against another individuals or groups. Theological racism deriving from a theology of supersessionism shows that one group has a swollen group-identity over against others, and such swollen identity is formed when there is no sense of solidarity between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Once such a sense of solidarity is established, however, the members in the swollen group identity will get to see that the groups they deem inferior to themselves are just as human as they are, finding nothing to feel superior to. It is in this regard that teaching theology incarnationally, i.e., through narrating one’s story and listening to others’ will be an effective antidote to any type of theological purism, and helpful for cultivating theological solidarity, coming from the sense of deep solidarity that we are all connected to one another, and we are all members of humanity, and we ought to love and care for one another.

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23 Ibid., 134.