

## THE LONG SCHISM

by Michael Giffin

*The Jewish–Christian Schism Revisited*,  
by John Howard Yoder;  
William B. Eerdmans and SCM Press, 2003,  
US\$35.

**T**HAT CHRISTIANITY BEGAN as a sect, which gradually separated from Judaism during the second or even third century of the Common Era, isn't as widely known as it should be. The subsequent closing of both canons and evolution of two distinct theological and ecclesiological and cultural identities—Rabbinic Judaism and Christian Church—still frames the way the subject is approached at the academic level, and religious and secular prejudices still flourish at the popular level. The suggestion that Jews and Christians once shared the synagogues of Palestine and the Diaspora (*Galut*), and the Temple in Jerusalem, had no insurmountable theological barriers between them, and co-existed within some form of pluralistic unity, challenges over 1600 years of deeply ingrained thinking. But the evidence is as compelling as it's controversial.

The central thesis of John Howard Yoder's *The Jewish–Christian Schism Revisited* is that, while “dialogical respect” between Jews and Christians began in the twentieth century, and has continued in the shadows of the destructive 1940s (*Shoah*), much more needs to be achieved. Jews who first participated in the dialogue had to travel more than halfway before they could listen and speak. Christians who participated in the dialogue still belonged to churches that were intrinsically anti-Semitic. Also, as Yoder points out, no one engaged in the dialogue represented the mainstream believers or hierarchies of either religion, or an increasing secular majority. If Western societies as a whole have developed better civil defences for all minorities, that's quite different from actively promoting the reality that what we now call Judaism and Christianity grew from the same cultural soil.

Yoder argues that the Jewish–Christian schism didn't have to be; indeed, he suggests there was no single event that could be called a schism. Instead, there was a space of at least fifty to one hundred years, or even two hundred years, during which a schism hadn't happened and was neither inevitable nor predictable. Why isn't this better known and understood? Part of the reason, according to Yoder, is that we “do violence to the lived reality of history as it really was” if, in our concern to make sense of it after the fact, we “let our explanatory schemes rob its actors of the integrity of their indecision as well as of their decision-making”.

The subject is neither radical nor new. The Jewishness of Christianity has been a subject of academic study, and a focus of clerical training, for generations now. Yoder's intention, then, isn't to produce “unsuspected information” but to reflect on why “much of what we do know” hasn't been “thought through and profoundly remembered”. He suspects that “most of the redefinition going on in the vast scholarly literature still is engaged in making adjustments within the framework of the received schema” but these adjustments simply “weaken that schema without replacing it”. His solution is to propose a synthesis that's academically acceptable and still reaches beyond the confines of academe, perhaps to inspire and galvanise his readers into replacing the received schema.

If his position is contended it's because the subject is contentious, for wide-ranging reasons, and anyone who broaches it must expect wide-ranging opposition. The opposition revolves around supersessionism, a term that refers to traditional claims, no longer universally made, that the Church has superseded Israel as God's people. Yoder doesn't make or support such claims and tries to counter them by associating supersessionism with the Constantinian polity that consciously dominated Christendom from the fourth century until relatively recently—which he believes still dominates the post-Christendom churches in many unconscious ways—and by drawing close parallels between Mennonite polity and Jewish polity, both of which he sees as “free church” polities. But his understanding of the term “free church” is different from ours. To him it means a religion that's both disestablished and able to witness prophetically from the margins of mainstream culture.

It's not that simple, though, since so many people regard supersessionism as intrinsic to the Christian narrative and ascribe it to all Christians, consciously or unconsciously, past or present, established or disestablished, liberal or conservative, regardless of their theology or ecclesiology or cultural practice. Also, no matter how irenic Yoder wishes to appear, he's obviously forced to carry everyone else's baggage as well as his own. That's probably inevitable in a subject where inspired fools rush in to witness where angels fear to tread. Yoder must accept that a significant proportion of Jewish and Christian readers, academic and non-academic, will be suspicious of everything he says, interpret what he doesn't say, and project upon him a range of attitudes he's tried hard to avoid.

**Y**ODER BEGINS by identifying what he sees as the central assumptions of our unquestioned inherited Jewish and Christian identities: (1) In the inter-testamentary period there was a baseline of “normative Judaism”; (2) Jesus rejected “normative Judaism” and was rejected by it; (3) Paul

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also rejected “normative Judaism” and was rejected by it; (4) Both Judaism and Christianity are defined not by what they have in common but by what they reject in each other.

Yoder finds the first assumption suspect, given the insights of Jacob Neusner, because the competing authority structures within Jewish society—Rabbis, Sanhedrin, Herodian puppets, Dead Sea communities, Zealot freedom fighters, Prophets and Preachers, none of whom were more adequately or validly Jewish than others—make it difficult to conceptualise a “normative Judaism” before the second century, during which the legal code (*Mishnah*) was compiled and Rabbinic Judaism was consolidated. For example, the Sanhedrin structure disappeared with the Temple in 70 CE, and the Zealot definition of authority was no longer possible after the collapse of the second revolt in 135 CE. What was left had to be a way of being a believer with neither Temple nor territory, which meant: “structuring a confessing community on non-geographical grounds, an identity that could be voluntarily sustained by a minority of people scattered in lands under other sovereignties”. Two groups within Judaism did this successfully, the Messianists, later called Christians, and the Rabbis.

The second assumption is suspect because, if there was no “normative Judaism” until the late second century then Jesus couldn’t have rejected it or been rejected by it. Nowhere in the canonical accounts of Jesus’ ministry is there a rejection of Judaism as a stream of history or a group of people. When speaking about the Teaching (*Torah*), Jesus’ attitudes are all affirmative. In rejecting certain teachings and scolding certain people, Jesus did no more than all Jewish teachers did, and where he entered into debate it was about the proper meaning of scripture and tradition. As Yoder puts it, the freedom Jesus claimed to redefine “was no greater than the freedom taken by earlier prophets and canonical writers” to redefine, or “the freedom taken by later Rabbis” to redefine.

The third assumption is suspect because Paul didn’t reject Judaism. “All his life Paul kept attending the synagogues, and (when in Jerusalem) the Temple. When they told him to ‘get lost’, he pressed himself on them to the point that they disciplined him as a Jew. He kept provoking that discipline by refusing to leave quietly.” Paul sought to define “one more stream” within Pharisaic Judaism. His stream differed from some others in its loose interpretation of the Way, or legal and ethical meaning of the Bible (*Halakah*). But that wasn’t new, as other streams within Judaism were also loose about interpreting the Way. Also, it differed from some other streams in being open to Gentiles, and in its mode of integrating Gentiles, but that wasn’t novel either. Paul’s stream, like John the Baptist’s stream, continued

to survive within Judaism for centuries.

The fourth assumption is suspect because there’s nothing in the scriptures, or other early sources, to indicate that the Christians of the time weren’t Jews. It’s precisely because Christians *were* Jews that the local Jewish authorities applied standard Jewish disciplinary measures to them: for example, in the Roman province of Palestine, the Sanhedrin had quasi-civil prerogatives that only applied to Jewish subjects; everywhere else, Jewish community leaders only had religious authority over voluntary consenting subcultures. When approaching the issue of the supposedly “anti-Semitic” Gospel of John, which refers to “the Jews” as if they were a hostile separate religion, Yoder believes the term is properly translated as “the Judaisers”, which means something quite different, and in this context may be a code term for “the religious Establishment”. When approaching the issue of Christians claiming Jesus to be the Messiah, Yoder states:

it is not true ... that to affirm the messianity of a man made anyone less Jewish, in the first or second centuries. So this reason, which ordinary Christian thought assumes would automatically have driven Jesus out of fellowship with his neighbours, and all the Christians out of the synagogues, did not actually function that way then.

Similarly, when approaching the issue of Christians claiming Jesus to be the Son of God, Yoder reminds us that within Judaism this was a term used to describe the King. Such a title would have been an offence to anyone who didn’t want Jesus to be King, not because it was considered to be either blasphemy or metaphysical nonsense.

Contrary to popular belief, the eventual split between Jews and Christians wasn’t Christological. When we consider messianic language, we shouldn’t project meanings formulated during and since the fourth century back into the first and second centuries. There’s another consideration here, too, which is whether, properly understood, the high Trinitarian language of the post-Constantinian creeds and the Athanasian theologians should really be regarded as counter to monotheism and offensive to Jews. Yoder does admit that later Jews, and of course Muhammad, certainly took that view, but he wonders whether they were conversing with the right theologians, who argued carefully to distinguish Trinitarian monotheism from tritheism, and he suspects this clash of ideas was between popular oversimplifications and distortions on both sides.

Yoder admits there’s no clear answer but he doesn’t believe there has to be. All serious hypotheses place the beginning of the division no earlier than 135 CE, a full century after the Pentecost recounted in Acts, and other

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hypotheses place it much later. Even after the institutional polarisation of Jews and Christians began, it must have taken generations for the polarisation to generalise, and generations more to complete. Even expert scholars can't determine which of the many steps that finally separated the two sister communions was taken first or by whom. Even when some Rabbis decided to formulate a clear rejection of Jews who were followers of Jesus (*Nozrim*), we can't know how long it took for that rejection to be received, and the rejection can't have been immediate. Even when some Christian writers or bishops espoused anti-Judaism, or enunciated implicit theories of supersession, there were still communities of Jewish Christians who didn't hold that theory, or if they held it as theory didn't implement it by rejecting their own Jewishness.

Yoder suspects the division wasn't finalised before Christians came to political power in the fourth century, when they were able to change not only the resources at their disposal for dealing with adversaries but also the social meaning of their own faith. Jewish Christians survived for centuries more, despite the attacks of bishops who had the support of the Roman authorities. Historians have tended to speak as if Jewish Christians had disappeared but their traces can be found for centuries. The notion of their disappearance only means later historical memory no longer had use for them, not that they ceased to exist. It was the Hellenising apologists who would produce more literature and later be recognised as the Fathers of the Early Church, and of Christian orthodoxy, but Yoder believes their source material comes two centuries earlier, during the century after the writings of Paul.

One can never adequately recuperate the narrative of communities that ultimately died out. The reminder of the experience of Jewish Christians, as historical fact and as theological datum, is salutary if it reminds us that the orthodox perspective we know best, because its heirs came to dominate our culture, was not dominant centuries earlier. When the first Hellenised Christian exegetes were beginning to deny Judaism any place in the ongoing purposes of God, and when the first antagonistic but unrepresentative Rabbis were beginning to restructure their theology with corresponding rejections, there were still, for several generations more, a large number of Jewish Christians who hadn't broken fellowship with their non-messianic cousins, nor ceased to attend the synagogue, nor been told they should, nor ceased to observe the Biblical and Rabbinic rituals (*Kashrut*) for making everyday practices holy by separating the permissible from the non-permissible.

As far as Yoder is concerned, the story of the inter-

action of Jews and Christians in the first three centuries needs to be retold with the awareness that it has been misused for centuries. Any reformulation of the narrative of the Jewish-Christian schism is unsure, when all the available language has been wrongly used and all the identifiable issues have been wrongly defined, to the point where there may be little potential for the kind of trust that allows candid and serious and sensitive dialogue to take place without falling back into the gaping rut.

What Jewish-Christian dialogue needs to take on board, from both sides, is the suggestion that what it means to be consistently messianic or non-messianic is up for grabs. Given what we've gleaned of this hidden historical record relatively recently, Yoder poses a stark question: "Is it not then even more odd that thinkers in both communities should seek to stand by the thesis of an ineluctable incompatibility which is supposed to have settled everything negatively as soon as Jesus was once called 'Anointed' by some Jews?" He believes passionately that we must dare to revise our understanding of the history of this "schism" because it didn't have to be.

**T**HIS BOOK was compiled posthumously from a series of lectures Yoder gave between the 1970s and 1990s. To begin, there's an extensive introduction by the editors, Peter Ochs and Michael Cartwright. Each lecture is followed by a commentary from Ochs, which signposts the ways in which that lecture contributes to Jewish-Christian understanding, alerts the reader to potential supersessionisms lurking among what Yoder hasn't said, and notices strengths or weaknesses in Yoder's parallels between Mennonite and Jewish polity. At the end, there's an extended afterword from Cartwright on the problem of supersessionism after Yoder.

While the editors say they want readers to "enjoy and benefit from Yoder's extraordinary venture in Jewish-Christian understanding", the overall effect of their editorial contributions, and the way they've constructed an academic fortress around Yoder's prophetic text, is an impression that Jewish-Christian dialogue is such a dangerous minefield of unexploded bombs that no one should bother following in Yoder's footsteps to participate in the dialogue. But in spite of their attempt to qualify his heroic if imperfect synthesis with relentless qualifications and warnings, this is still an immensely important book, which deserves to be widely read. It would be wonderful if Yoder's key messages could be summarised and simplified and passed on to the widest possible audience.