The Gentile Problem: A Work in Progress

by Samuel Hux (September 2017)

Calvary, Marc Chagall, 1912

"The victim is guilty." That's a common judgment in this and the past century. It has much to do with psychoanalytic modes of thought, as in: "The oppressed have a way of 'creating' their oppressors; the sadist often responds to an implicit invitation from the masochist." But it has much to do with popular modes of non-thought as well, as in: "It's her fault; she really wanted to be raped." And I think that ought to make us reconsider our received wisdom. The rapist *will* rape; he's

the guilty party. The sadist doesn't need a masochist; he's an independent actor in his moody solipsism; he's the guilty party.

At a rather more sociological level there's another common judgement in our time: "The victims are guilty . . . of being a problem." Were they not a problem they would not be victims. How so a problem? A good question. Who *is* and who *has* the problem? If we do not like you, are you the problem we have, or are we the problem you have? Somehow, the latter would seem an equally-just conclusion. But if we change the literal terms we use, you can seem clearly to be the problematic one; and history and language have allowed us to do just that. Consider the specific case I have in mind.

Change the rather aggressive word *problem* to the somewhat more pensive *question*. Instead of saying "You are a problem" we say "You raise a question by your being which we must cope with (probably at your expense)." Both may mean the same thing ultimately but the latter (minus the under breath parenthesis) sounds ever-so-much-more thoughtful. German has given us the phrase *die Judenfrage*, "the Jewish Question." The clear implication: "The Jews raise a question by their being which we must cope with." But, by the logic suggested above, *who* raises the question, who *has*, who *is,* the problem? Why can't we call the whole familiar thing "the Gentile question"? And if you'll indulge a moment's linguistic play . . .

There is no native word in German for Gentile; the state of being Gentile is just a given. Instead, there is the word *Nichtjude*, "not a Jew." So if you coin the word *Nichtjudenfrage*, and translate loosely and creatively, you come up with the truth: *Not* a Jewish question. Nonetheless, it's been a problem *for* the Jews, because an astounding number of Gentiles *do* and *have had* a problem.

That problem, in its passive and aggressive forms, is the occasion for this article.

In brief: We live in an age of brutality in which a particularly valuable idea of culture gets the shortest of shrifts. The western world, in general, has no sense of the *necessary union of the intellectual and the ethical*: no sense that culture and morality are not *just-quite-naturally sunderable faculties or dispositions*. The specialist imperatives of our age reveal themselves in the limits of profession, of course; but they reveal themselves in the dissociations of judgment as well. Chicken or egg? It hardly matters. By our standards we might judge a murderer to be "cultivated" if he's well-read enough. Or if he listens to *Lieder*. (That allusion ought not to suggest that the Nazis exhaust that dissociation of faculties: they were, rather, the deadly epitome of a trend. Consider for example Hitler's architect, munitions minister and, in effect, slave labor czar Albert Speer, who H.R. Trevor-Roper said was culturally and intellectually "in Hitler's court" utterly "alone," and whom Trevor-Roper judged to be, and for that ironic reason, "the real criminal of Nazi Germany.") And the absence of that idea of culture as a union of intellectual-aesthetic apprehension and ethical behavior accounts in no small way for this age of brutality.

But *absence* is perhaps too strong a word. For that unitary idea of culture is what, I contend, characterizes the Jewish tradition—quite beyond a religious creed and/or an historical experience. Jewishness—clearly I am speaking "in the ideal"—is, I propose, the marvelous exception to the ethos of sundered faculties. And, unfortunately, that's a problem. A people who represented what is best in our civilized traditions became the victim of those who took the dissociating tendencies of the age to fulfillment. There's a dreadful logic to the events of the 20th century.

But that logic did not spring *ex nihilo*. National Socialism as it truly was—distinct from the various left-wing nationalisms and national syndicalisms and anti-Semitic populisms of which

its earliest supporters and critics thought it the historical epitome—did spring from Hitler's mind, and that birth is a sort of "out-of-nothing." But once born it needed nurture—and a warm atmosphere was ready. Whence and how that atmosphere?

I don't expect any hesitation to accept my harsh words for Nazidom in this rather lengthy essay, for words cannot be harsh enough. But I expect some hesitation about my characterization of the dissociation of ethics and cultivation as "The Gentile Question." If to the possible charge that I am dismissing an old "question" by loading a new one I have to answer: so be it. It's also true that no one is suggesting neutralizing or getting rid of Gentiles, of which I am one. (Nor am I making some ethnic argument: individual Jews may be "Gentile" in this respect.) And even if one accepts that separation of ethics from cultivation as the nurturing atmosphere for the abominations of the age, I expect considerable hesitation about my *speculations* (and that's what they are, no more . . . *and no less*) that the separation of cultural assumption and moral action is related in some more than incidental manner to the longest and greatest debate in Christianity (save perhaps the nature of Jesus and the Resurrection): the problem of St. Paul's soteriology (doctrine of salvation).

Paul famously argued in Epistle to the Romans *and elsewhere that salvation was not achieved through Good Works, that while Good Works pleased the Lord, salvation was not their reward, and that salvation was through Faith, and Faith alone.* Which, read or twist it how you wish, has to suggest a relative devaluation of Good Works, of ethics that is.

I hasten to insist there is no attempt here to lay the Nazis at St. Paul's feet. I have no such intention. (Never! Paul is in fact an intellectual hero of mine, which is another and here irrelevant story.) My intention is much more tortuous and inexact: to suggest that the relative devaluation of Good Works could well have been a first step in Christendom's, or

"Gentiledom's" rather, *cutting ethics loose from cultivation as a mere disposition*—with consequences no one could have foreseen.

Now, *I* have a problem, which I'd do well to face up front. For I have here a considered surmise—that the abominations of the age were facilitated by a divorce of ethics and cultivation which was facilitated by the relative devaluation of Good Works in Pauline Christian theology—which I cannot *prove* by any empirical test. But in a sense the problem is a greater one for the insistent empiricist himself who would, by his skeptical disposition (often tyrannically skeptical), invalidate a great deal more intellectual discourse than he suspects. Something Erich Heller said in *The Disinherited Mind* seems to the point.

> It is impossible to destroy an analogy 'empirically,' however much 'evidence' is assembled for the campaign. All historical generalizations are the defeat of the empiricist; and there is no history without them. Apply the strict empiricist test to the concept of 'nation,' 'class,' 'economic trend,' or 'tradition,' and the concept dissolves into a host of unmanageable *minutiae.*

If I cannot *prove* my surmise to a skeptic's satisfaction, I request a certain freedom from that debilitating "rigor" (so perceived) of the most confining reaches of academic scholarship ("Germanic" scholarship, one might say) in which every statement must be seconded by accumulations of previous scholarship judged sound and not dangerously speculative before one may with confidence advance to the next statement. Any such endeavor is doomed in any case in intellectual and cultural history. For while one may document that B picked up such and such an idea from A because he said he did, or may semi-document same because B, who is known to have read A, formulated such and such in such a suggestively similar or provocatively contradictory way, ideas are in fact not always passed on *as* ideas. As often as not, they travel as muted

assumptions and fuzzy dispositions, and are thus much less subject to empiricist rigor. We are thrown back then into the world of Heller's caveat—where I prefer to be anyway.

Which is another way to say this is, rather than a scholarly article, an "an essay"—which ideally presents not merely conclusions but exposes the actual *processes of thought.* If the heavy gunnery of Germanic scholarship is missing, the lonely gunner is visible throughout. No place to hide.

Furthermore, the essay tends toward what the French call *haute vulgarisation*. "High popularization" is directed not to the specialist scholar (although of course he or she is welcome) but to the serious, educated, general reader. And it's directed in a specific way; that is, not as a demand for agreement, but as an invitation to somewhat relaxed discourse about significant matters: a conversation, as it were, of which the essay itself is only half.

So, now, onward to my half . . .

St. Paul's elevation of Faith over Good Works has bred enormous theological difficulties.

For instance, to what degree was the relative devaluation of Works an inspired rhetorical strategy to free the followers from a too-legalistic adherence to Mosaic Law and all those Deuteronomic dos and don'ts of daily observance? To what degree was it a modest correction of the too-self-reliant and potentially prideful apparent good sense that you work your way into God's good graces through being your brother's keeper? Or: what are the odds we miss the point altogether by miscomprehending Faith in the first place?

Paul Tillich judged that we did. Tillich defined *faith* not as "belief" (as when one believes in spite of insufficient rational or historical evidence: "a leap"), but as "ultimate concern," meaning both (1) a concern which *is* ultimate—"unconditional, independent of any conditions of

character, desire, or circumstance . . . total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no 'place' to flee from it" (*Systematic Theology*, volume I)—and (2) a concern *for* the Ultimate, the Unconditional. Ultimate concern is not a process we can initiate. It "happens" when we are seized by the Ultimate and cannot help but respond with that "restlessness of the heart," a "passion for the infinite" (*Dynamics of Faith*), already implanted there in us pre-seizure. (Which process/event corresponds roughly to "irresistible Grace.") Faith as ultimate concern—not a cognitive leap—is experienced then as a restless desire for union felt to be reunion with that "to which one essentially belongs and from which one is existentially separated." As such, the "concern of faith is identical with the desire of love: reunion with that to which one belongs and from which one is estranged." Since "the immediate expression of love is action," that means *Works*. Works are implied in Faith as ultimate concern. But how the Faith compelling love for the Ultimate necessarily translates into love compelling action toward neighbor—Works, *ethics that is*—is a problematic affair. But, for now, Faith as "belief in things without evidence" implies no "direct dependence of love and action on faith," as Tillich argues, correctly it seems to me.

Now, the brilliance of Tillich's theology reminds us of what we knew already. This is vintage Tillich and heroic labor. Faith as ultimate concern is more attractive and engaging and perhaps profounder than Faith as belief-in-spite-of. But it is *not* Paul. Paul's Faith, *belief,* is Karl Barth's: "the gift . . . in which men become free to hear the word of grace . . . in spite of all that contradicts it" (*Dogmatics in Outline*). The priorities of Pauline Christianity are sufficiently clear: Faith *over* Good Works.

Carl Jung, of Protestant background, once said that Catholicism was more stable than Protestantism in that it walked on two legs, Faith *and* Good Works, rather than hobbling

on one, Faith. By and large, Catholicism has, through complex theological exercises, managed to build up the musculature of the second leg. And by and large Protestantism has, while preaching Paul with a vengeance, tended to ignore just as often its own preachings in favor of more compelling stuff more appealing to parishioners: *Think good / Do good / Be good* sounding from the pulpit in no way secondary to *Keep the faith*.

Now, if there's no such phrase as *by and small*, let's invent it. For in the *by-and-small* there was a radical tradition of urges to special spiritual condition removed from biblical ethical commands which lived on in a kind of too-literal "Pauline" imagination: the tradition of "antinomianism." *Antinomianism* in a religious context is the belief that since the Elect receives faith and salvation through God's free gift of grace and not through any personal moral effort (pure Paul), it follows *first* that the Mosaic Law has been superceded or rendered irrelevant, and *second* that the saved is free of mundane moral obligations, which is certainly a putting of Works in their place.

The first antinomian of the first disposition (a half-way antinomian so to say) was Paul himself. I'm convinced he surely had no wish to debunk the ethical even while arguing it did not win you salvation. Indeed, his ambivalence about Jewish law seems in part an odd suspicion that it aroused sin (as if sinful human nature had to be *aroused*): "I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet!" But, considering the fact that the Mosaic Law is nothing if not an ethics (one without which Christ's teachings about earthly behavior are unimaginable), it's ultimately a matter of tone; and Paul, in his revolutionary urgency, often becomes atonal: we are *discharged* from the law, *dead* to it, no longer its *captives.* So, some might be excused for listening to the Pauline dissonance more than the Pauline word and imagining an invitation to antinomianism of the

second disposition: the saved are free to sin.

One of the early challengers of Christian orthodoxy was the 2nd-century theologian Marcion. Although there were rumors—probably spread by his enemies—that he was a seducer of virgins, Marcion was evidently a nice boy who didn't go all the way. But he went pretty far. Marcionism would have rid Christianity not only of Mosaic Law but of *all* Jewish impurities, and would have cast out not only all gospels save a modified Luke, but the Old Testament in its entirety, as well. Mistake: well it was avoided.

The 16th-century German reformer Johannes Agricola proposed the extreme antinomian position as clearly as possible. "Art thou steeped in sin . . . ? [No matter.] If thou believest, thou art in salvation. All who follow Moses [the Mosaic Law] must go to the devil. To the gallows with Moses." This in theological disputation with his two great Lutheran contemporaries, Martin Luther himself and Philipp Melanchthon.

In a good history of Christianity, from Marcion to Agricola and beyond, one finds antinomian curiosities—from 2nd-3rd-century Adamites on. And one finds this or that group or thinker charged with antinomianism, indicating its persistence as reality or threat. To New England Puritans, the followers of saintly Anne Hutchinson were "antinomians," which couldn't have meant much more than "anarchists." Luther was often charged with it, even though he disputed with Agricola. Because of its emphasis on Good Works as a way to salvation, the *Epistle of James* was to Luther "an epistle of straw." As for the Mosaic, "We do not wish to see or hear Moses . . . They wish to make Jews of us through Moses, but they shall not." Which while not as circumspect in tone as Melanchthon's words to the same effect—"It must be admitted that the Decalogue is abrogated"—is still not quite as maddened as Agricola's fulminations. Which fulminations, "To the gallows with Moses," become historically laden. I am not suggesting Luther was thoroughly antinomian, but I grasp the nature of

the suspicion.

But this is quite heavy and there is a lighter side. When you examine the "sins" antinomian sects practiced, freed as they were of the law, they're often comic. The habits of the Adamites were quite charming. Stripping things down to essentials, and having been born again, they preferred communal worship in their birthday suits. And should you forget formal -isms and -ites and look to some idiosyncratic contemporary manifestations: the chronicler of randyism, John Updike, has been called an antinomian. Note his novel *A Month of Sundays*, in which Episcopalian priest, lusty as a sailor, has a girl for every Sabbath. Pardon me if I don't take this kind of "antinomianism" with proper seriousness.

Strong antinomianism, call it—not silliness, not nudity, not incontinence, but sadistic violation and even murder—tends not to be formalized in sect or group. The strong antinomian tends to be a freelancer. And when he *is* of a sect, it tends to be a sect of his own devising, like that of the saint of Jonestown. (Remember Jim Jones, 1978?) In any case, the antinomian is special, his spiritual status extraordinary; speak not to him of Works and laws which may be suitable for lesser types like us. Ethical behavior O.K. enough for the *hoi polloi* is not binding upon him: perish the crude thought.

Now, although these radical notions are not endorsed by formal Christian *doctrine*, for even formal antinomianism was a single- and simple-minded misreading of Paul (no matter how much Paul left himself open, as original thinkers often cannot help but do), it is only defensive question-begging to protest that it is outside the Christian *tradition*