

REVIEW

Chris Boesel

*Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference:
Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham*

(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), paperback, xix + 286 pp.

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This book is of primary importance for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and especially for readers of *SCJR*. Christian theologian Chris Boesel addresses the question of how can Christians honor Judaism's enduring covenant without abandoning Christianity's classical proclamations about Jesus: "He is risen" and "He is Messiah"? Boesel answers in what I agree is the most satisfactory way today: to take this as a question of scriptural hermeneutics as much as a question of ethics and doctrine. Once the question is pursued this way, then the answer—of its own hermeneutical weight—leads to an answer, as well, to another question: how can Christians honor other faiths beyond Judaism without dishonoring its own faith? Boesel presents the questions and answers through a disciplined progression of arguments noteworthy not only for their fruit but also for the way the fruit is planted. The book reads very well and it is reasoned with rigor.

Overall, Boesel contrasts two 20th-century approaches to supersessionism and Christology. One, illustrated by the work of Karl Barth, appears initially to define a contemporary version of classic supersessionism: God elected the people Israel, but the Jews rejected God Himself in the body of Jesus Christ. In their disobedience, the Jews have thereby excluded themselves from the community of the elect, which is now identified with the Church. The other, illustrated by the work of Rosemary Ruether, would appear to offer the modern "remedy" to Barth's classic supersessionism (p. 24). Boesel argues that, for Ruether, Christianity is ethically obligated to nullify its supersessionism, whose source she traces to the doctrine of Christ itself. She concludes that, if God's being is fully realized in the person of Jesus Christ, then Christian witness to Christ would require Christian commitment to superseding not only God's covenant with Israel but also all covenants or intimacies with all other non-Christian religious groups. Since she judges this consequence to be ethically intolerable, Ruether argues that Christianity must renounce its faith in the finality of God's incarnation in Christ, or what she terms Christianity's "realized eschatology" (p. 127). In Boesel's reading, Ruether's ethics grant Christianity the right to claim only a proleptic witnessing of God's future embodiment on earth.

The striking argument of Boesel's book is that, despite these initial appearances, Barth's version of Christian supersessionism may, with modest refinement, be used for a more favorable treatment of the Jews. By contrast, Ruether's remedy for Christian supersessionism, despite her claims, generates a more irremediable form of supersessionism. Boesel argues that Ruether's position endorses an ethical universalism in the post-Kantian tradition that disparages particularism (and therefore Judaism), while Barth's position can, without too much difficulty, be refined into an ethically tolerable species of mild supersessionism. Boesel's most dramatic claim is that ethical universalism is irremediably supersessionist because it identifies this single criterion as the "ultimate criterion of religious truth and faith" (p. 154). This implies that all competing claims are not only less preferable, but also unworthy of the rationality that enables us to perceive the

ethical. For the universalist, a position like Barth's seems the most intolerant, because it claims direct human access to knowledge of God, the absolute. Boesel would say that the Christian theologian's claim appears "scandalous" only when it is re-read within the restrictive terms of the universalist's logic (p. 244).

Boesel's interpretive framework is particularly innovative. Rather than allow us to judge a theological argument according to the either/or terms of dogmatic universalism or dogmatic Christianity, Boesel introduces a three-part measure of the ways theologians may argue about such matters (pp. 20-23). In brief, the three parts are:

- "The Sectarian Particular": efforts by any sect or group to adopt its particular or local practices of interpretation as if they applied universally, to all contexts of interpretation and then to judge all other claims according to these practices.
- "The Universal Elsewhere": certain contemporary attempts to remedy the interpretive imperialisms of traditional Christian faith. According to this measure, these imperialisms give voice to "sectarian particulars," which are cured by claims that are the logical opposite of the particular (thus "universal") and of the sectarian (the "elsewhere" or "non-local"). Boesel identifies this universalism as imperialist in itself, comparable to the sectarian particular, because universalism treats its assumptions as self-evident and, in that sense, limited to no particular; it then imposes its particular belief universally.
- "The Particular Elsewhere": the claim by some particular group (particular, even if very large) that its avowedly particular view is true. For Boesel, this claim displays a type of interpretive imperialism, since it does not relativize its truth claims. Unlike the previous two imperialisms, however, this one is ethically tolerable, since proponents can refine it by adding a few protective conditions. For Boesel, Barth typifies the "particular elsewhere" in the way he argues that the good news of Christ implies the bad news of Abraham's faith. One of Boesel's central efforts is to refine Barth's argument.

Boesel focusses on Barth's doctrine of election, according to which Jesus is not merely the conduit of divine goodness, but also the content of God's elective decision: Jesus *is* the electing word. As the electing word, Jesus must therefore supersede the election of Israel since he is the election. Because God's very self is determined by this election, there can be no route to God other than through Jesus. In sum, Barth argues that, in rejecting Jesus, the Jews rejected the conditions of their own election. Boesel repairs Barth's imperialism by re-describing the good news as a doxological proclamation rather than as a belief claim. A belief claim is measured by the either/or terms of standard truth tables: when I say "That is a rock," either it is or it is not. Doxological proclamations are not measured by such terms, because they offer new conditions for making truth claims in the first place! In Boesel's terms, they offer the personal address of a neighbor who heralds an event known only by way of his or her words (pp. 225f.). Such a proclamation provides conditions for making imperialistic claims but is not itself an imperialistic claim. The imperialism of a claim or its universality or particularity are all characteristics of discourses that humans construct in response to doxological proclamations, not the proclamations themselves.

I find Boesel's argument wholly convincing. To extend it, I would say some additional things: for example, using the terms of the philosopher Charles Peirce, doxological proclamations would belong to the category of those "acritical inferences" or "indubitable beliefs" that logically precede any claims of truth or falsity. Logical confusion results when thinkers misapply semantic measures like "true" or "false" and quantifiers like "universal" or "particular." To misapply these measures is to be guilty of a serious category error. So far, I only know of one broad movement of theological argumentation that respects something like Peirce's logic. In a recently published book (*Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*, Grand Rapids, WI: Brazos

[2011]), I label this the movement of “postliberal” Christian theologians, of which there is both an American and British variety, and whose argumentations are analogous to what I consider “post-liberal” Jewish and Muslim theologians. Except for one or two passing footnotes, Boesel does not draw on the work of participants in this postliberal movement. The movement should be significant for Boesel, since its earliest Christian proponents were all advocates of Barth’s *oeuvre* and since they sought, purposefully, to remedy his supersessionism. Also, their movement has for about twenty years been associated with a parallel movement of Jewish postliberals who appreciate the work of their Christian colleagues (see Peter Ochs, “Christian Theology and Judaism,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century, Second Edition*, ed. David Ford, Malden, MA: Blackwell [1997], pp. 607-25; and a different version of this essay in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* [Third Edition], eds. David Ford and Rachel Muers, Malden, MA: Blackwell [2005], pp. 645-62. In the earlier edition, I make claims about Barth and Ruether that complement and provide a Jewish philosopher’s support for the types of arguments found in Boesel’s work.)