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A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity

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Boyarin, Daniel. *A radical Jew: Paul and the politics of identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

When I graduated, in 1951, from the Marist Brothers-run St. Francis Xavier College in Shanghai, I left with a powerful impression of St. Paul, as then taught in the catechism and Church History classes. Whilst St. Peter and his fellow Apostles were portrayed as basically religious idealists, it was St. Paul who was clearly the visionary and dynamic figure who possessed the courage to break away from Judaism in order to found a new religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. It was Paul to whom the accolade "The First Christian" seemed to fit most aptly. Whatever one's religious orientation, there was no doubt that one could not but have immense respect for Paul's towering intellect, energy and leadership.

It was not until sometime later, after having arrived in Australia, and in the course of further reading and discussions with friends - Christians, as well as Jews - that I came across a more troubling dimension about him. These related to his perceived total rejection of Judaism, particularly the basic tenets of Torah, circumcision, and the prohibition of eating certain foods. This, in turn, fuelled the notion of anti-semitism with which he became associated. Although it was the Lutheran movement which was most identified with this virulent view of Judaism, other Christian teachings can also not escape the accusation that the establishment of Christianity is very much intertwined with a feeling of disdain and even hatred of Judaism and the Jews.

As a result, Pauline theology and Rabbinic Judaism grew apart from each other and the two faiths progressively had less and less to say to each other. Saul, the Jew from Tarsus, appeared to have orchestrated a chasm which lasted for centuries.

However, as Father Brendan Byrne, S. J. said in his address at a seminar recently conducted by the Council of Christians and Jews in Melbourne, a "roll-back" of the traditional interpretations of Paul's influence on Christianity's negative view of Judaism started to occur at the beginning of this century. This mainly took the form of either questioning the reliability of Paul's understanding of the teachings of the Torah, upon which his own view of Christ's teaching is based, or whether Christian theology had, in fact, developed a mistaken interpretation of what Paul actually thought and said.

This process of Questioning gained momentum with the general recognition of some form of Christian responsibility for the Holocaust, stemming from the largely anti-Jewish bias of Christian Scripture.

It is against this background that considerable interest was generated by the publication of Daniel Boyarin's book as it was perceived to be traversing new ground in the understanding of the teachings of Paul. For, rather than again question as to what Paul is meant to have said, or if we understood him correctly, Boyarin explores whether, despite of the unattractive baggage associated with him, Paul still does have a relevant message in today's world.

Daniel Boyarin is an Orthodox Jew, the Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of

California, and is generally respected as a post-modern cultural critic. The fact that a scholar of Boyarin's standing should turn his attention to Paul's letters and epistles is a testimony to the remarkable changes which have taken place in the world of Pauline studies. In tackling Paul, he taught himself Greek, and carried out an extensive study of the immense amount of writings which Paul generated. Boyarin's scholarship has earned him a respected place among Pauline scholars. His book on Paul has been extensively, and intensively, reviewed in nearly all the serious theological journals. They comment favourably on his scholarship, but have reservations, like myself, in regard to his conclusions.

Boyarin ascribes to Paul's opposition to the Judaic Law because of Paul's understanding that the Law insists on the "priority and importance of the flesh". He begins his book by sketching Paul's background as a 'Hellenistic Jewish cultural clone' characterised by a "dualistic system which preceeds and is primary over body". Central to Paul's resentments against the "Law" is its carnality, as symbolised by circumcision, as a literal act "which should not mark off the body as ethically distinct from other human bodies". He also deals fully with Paul's attitude for sexuality, arguing that first-century Judaism had become thoroughly anxiety-ridden about it, ea. the Torah commandment to procreate, but also to avoid sexual desire.

The main interest in Boyarin's book lies, in my opinion in its dissertation on identity, more particularly, the reconciliation between universality, on the one hand, and particularisation, on the other. Boyarin has, I believe, identified this as the critical issue of our times. He proposes that Paul, as a radical thinker, is as relevant today, in this respect, as he was two thousand years ago.

Paul, as a sophisticated Diaspora Jew, sensed the mood of his times. The known world was then seething with a large number of sects and religious beliefs. Despite this high degree of fragmentation of society, of which the Jews were just one part, there was a strong striving for some form of unification of thought. All these various ideas yearned for a universal God who would make sense of the meaning of human existence on earth. But only the Jews really possessed a single God and a seemingly coherent view of the cosmos and the place of mankind in it. However, entry into this faith was difficult; circumcision, the prohibition against eating certain foods and the necessity to observe numerous commandments, were real deterrents to vast numbers of Gentiles. Although the more Hellenised Jews of the Diaspora took a more "wordly" and elastic approach to observance, the Rabbis, who were the guardians of the faith, based in Jerusalem, were unwilling to "bend the rules" to accommodate these Gentiles, whose entry into Judaism in substantial numbers would have allowed it to be the basis of a more universal religion.

The famous "apparition" or conversion which struck him on the road to Damascus was apparently the realisation that it would have to be through Christ's message of faith and grace that this universal salvation could be attained. Once possessed of this belief, his zeal knew no bounds. In defence of Paul, it would be fair to state that he did strive to achieve his objective of universality via Judaism. He argued that strict observance of the basic tenets of Judaism may not be as critical as hitherto believed to be. He proposed that they should be considered as no more than allegories for something more spiritual and meaningful than the observance itself.

Paul's universalism is enshrined in that most famous of statements from Galatians 3:28, which Boyarin uses as the centrepiece of the cover of his book. *'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for ye are all one in Jesus Christ.'*

This message of universalism exerted an extremely powerful appeal to the Gentiles who sensed an opportunity for acceptance and inclusiveness in a hitherto exclusive monotheistic society. But to the Jews the spirituality of Judaism had the effect of destroying the tangibility of their world, revolving around the Torah, Temple and the land of Israel. In the end, as we know it, the pull of Paul's universalism overcame the central gravity of Judaism, and Christianity established itself as a separate universal religion.

It is in this final chapter of the book that Boyarin is at his most interesting and controversial. It is entitled "Answering the mail - Toward a radical Jewishness". For Boyarin, too, has an obsession, and that is with Jewish identity today. He attempts to draw on Paul as a resource for cultural critique and renewal. He proposes that Paul be viewed as not only a Hellenised Jew who believed in universal sameness, but as a radical social thinker, a quasi Marxist universalist, even a Jewish thinker, whose thoughts could make an important contribution to the important Jewish issues of today.

To understand Boyarin's pre-occupation with Jewish identity, one has to appreciate that he is writing in the context of the state of American Jewry, where the issues of its identity and continuity are now of paramount concerns. These concerns are also relevant to us in Australia, as they are also, in varying degrees, to all Diaspora communities in open societies, where the forces which have traditionally sustained Jewish identity are disappearing.

American statistics disclose an ever increasing rate of marriages of Jews to non-Jewish partners, which in turn leads to a reduction of community size. This gradual erosion is not due to conscious decisions to quit Judaism, but is, in fact, the result of a process of drift. The anxious question being increasingly asked is, whether Diaspora Jewry, as a distinct ethnic, cultural and political entity has a future! In the flurry of an intensive process of self-analysis, the basic question has even been asked: Does God want Jewish people to continue?

Whilst there is general consensus that the continuity of Judaism, and the Jewish people, must ultimately depend on an inner belief as a distinct religious community, based on the centrality of Torah, there is no doubt that there must be a much clearer conception of what is so special about Judaism, its religion and its way of life. This has led to calls to appreciate that the Talmudic tradition is not as monolithic as many believe it to be, that it does respect and preserves in the commentaries opposing views. Quite obviously, Jewish education must be taught in a more professional and imaginative manner, particularly in ways to appeal to the younger generation. In addition, there have been calls to ameliorate the exclusiveness of Judaism by a greater acceptance of secular Jews, as well as those from "mixed" marriages. After half a century of existence, even the place of Israel in the Jewish world is part of this analysis.

Against this backdrop, Boyarin, in his final chapter, tries to reconcile the Rabbinic emphasis of distinctness with Paul's vision of universality. In doing so, he expresses his concerns with developments in Israel, which he associates with (mistakenly, in my opinion) racist tendencies as examples of extreme forms of Jewish particularism. He sees territory and power as promoting intolerance, and therefore argues for a de-territorialised Jewish Diaspora existence, which, in his opinion, would more comfortably thrive in a multi-cultural environment. Only thus, he suggests, could a meaningful balance be maintained between a particularist cultural and religious existence within a universalist environment of interaction with other cultures.

I find his arguments for a de-territorialised Diaspora identity, entailing a conscious abdication of power to be unconvincing, and I very much doubt that the Jewish people would want to see again a Jewish world without a Jewish state. Jewish helplessness would be an aspect of Jewish existence which Jews would not wish to see return.

It seems clear that the world does not appear ready for a truly universal existence, and recent events in Europe and Africa, tragically demonstrate that, given the opportunity, peoples will opt for ethnic particularity. Unfortunately, particularity is invariably accompanied by intolerance of other particular identities, leading to strife and bloodshed. Paul's idealist vision of universality is still probably too sophisticated a concept for universal acceptance. Particularity still rules the day and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. What still eludes us is the social mechanism whereby differences, when living side by side, can enjoy mutual respect and flourish in a harmonious atmosphere.

Despite the above reservations of Boyarin's conclusions and prescriptions, the concept of the book is both informative and challenging. Informative because the author has made a significant contribution to a better understanding of Paul and his philosophy. To the extent that he has succeeded in correcting the mistaken anti-Jewish bias associated with this towering figure of Christian religious ideology, Boyarin will have played a significant and worthwhile part in reducing religious tensions between Christians and Jews. The book is also very challenging because in using Paul's belief in universality, we are enjoined to think about, and work for, that most elusive aspect of human existence - to respect our fellow human beings and to live in peace with them.