

## CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM – CONSULTATION

- Topic: Anti-Black Racism, Anti-Semitism, & Islamophobia Today:  
Interrogating the Role of Supersessionism in White Supremacy
- Convener: Matthew Tapie, Saint Leo University
- Moderator: Nicole Reibe, Loyola University Maryland
- Presenter: Heather Miller Rubens, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies
- Respondents: Fatimah Fanusie, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies  
Benjamin Sax, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies

Nicole Reibe welcomed online attendees and announced the title of the session, Anti-Black Racism, Anti-Semitism, & Islamophobia Today: Interrogating the Role of Supersessionism in White Supremacy. Heather Miller Rubens delivered the keynote talk. Fatimah Fanusie and Benjamin Sax, served as respondents. The scholars shared their reflections on the session topic with attention to their scholarly background and practical experience of leading interreligious dialogue initiatives at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (ICJS), in Baltimore, Maryland.

Rubens began her presentation with a call for Catholic theologians to continue the important work of exploring religious and racial difference in both theologies and in practice. Some examples of this work include *Gaudium et Spes*, as well as current reckonings with slavery and reparations by Catholic institutions. Some of this work has indicated that Catholics are complicit in racism. Rubens argued that Catholics need to better attend to how racial and religious hatreds overlap in particular cultural and political contexts. Catholic theologians have a lot to offer but they also have blind spots. Racism and antisemitism are not competing arenas of hate and should not be thought of as separate. Rubens then shared about her background as a Catholic historian of Judaism, and how wrestling with the interreligious mission of the ICJS helped her see the need to examine the interrelationships of these isms. Rubens explained that the Black Lives Matter movement and the election of Donald Trump required ICJS to respond to the relationship between racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Rubens then talked about the interrelationship of racism and religious bigotry. Rubens cited the work of Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter to argue that Christian supersessionism is the foundation of modern racism. According to Rubens, we can better address the logic of racism if we are aware of the problem of supersessionism. She also stated that Jewish–Christian relations have room to grow. Rubens said that Jewish–Christian relations emerged after the Second World War as a European Christian project (necessarily so) and asked what this means for the discipline today. For Rubens, Jewish–Christian relations should add work in anti-Black and anti-brown racism; and the discipline’s relationship to liberation theology should also be examined. She concluded with reflections on the political challenges facing the ICJS, and how confronting antisemitism and Islamophobia are now viewed as partisan activities. In this divisive political climate, dialogue is no longer assumed as a force for good. However, an available strength of Jewish–Christian relations is that it emerged in response to Nazism and against the backdrop of ethnic nationalism. She asked how the

political context of the history of Jewish–Christian relations is relevant to today’s challenges.

Fanusie, who is also a historian, responded to Rubens by suggesting that analysis of racism and Islamophobia requires a historical perspective. To understand the overlap of racism with other isms theologians should understand the historical origins of racism. For instance, racism in American history should be approached through the historical context of the legal categories of white and Black, which emerged in the seventeenth century. This historical view helps avoid bifurcation of othering where groups are defined as only victims and robbed of their ability to act. She argued that twenty-first century examinations of race only in theological terms are inadequate; such examinations must be grounded in history. Another point Fanusie made is that the history of the interpretation of scripture is very important since these interpretations have been used to reinforce racial categories. So religious examination of these isms requires an awareness of both the history of racism and the reception history of scripture, especially as these scriptures have been deployed to support racism.

Sax then said he wanted to orient the isms Rubens and Fanusie discussed to the work of the ICJS to engage various fluid identities of persons on the ground in dialogue groups in Baltimore. The problem is that these personal identities are, at times, ambiguous. Therefore, the broader issues of culture and society should also be considered by theologians engaged in dialogue about racism. Sax said that the real challenge is that the goal of dialogue is not exactly clear. Is it possible for some to transcend self-identity in the context of dialogue with the other? Whiteness, race, and other forms of “identity” complicate this process of dialogue. Dialogue can be plagued by what Sax calls a phenomenology of hate where competing forms of suffering become unproductive. These competing experiences of suffering force dialogue into a debate about who’s suffering is greater. This is further complicated by the question of which voices are elevated to the dialogue. Sax said that ICJS is, at times, not sure how to engage in productive dialogue given these challenges, and that their staff debate these issues. The problem is that the suffering is real for dialogue participants but it is not clear what role the experience of suffering plays in dialogue.

Reibe then moderated a discussion between Rubens, Fanusie, and Sax. In this discussion, Fanusie reiterated the significance of historical context for understanding the development of racial attitudes, especially in the church and university, and the African American experience of these attitudes. In her view, historical awareness can help mitigate the challenges to dialogue outlined by Sax. Sax explained, citing the work of Sarah Schulman’s *Conflict is Not Abuse*, that his view is that claims about competing suffering serve to shield individuals from criticism and conflict. Sax said the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is an example of this problem. He said the interlocutors involved in these disputes often share a deep sense of a perceived or real persecution. In Sax’s view, dialogue can sometimes pit us against one another. Reibe then opened the floor to several online attendees who made extended comments. The meeting concluded with words of gratitude for the participants in the conversation.

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