

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM – CONSULTATION

Topic: Antisemitism, Supersessionism, and Anti-Black Racism
Convener: Andrew Massena, Loras College
Moderator: Carol Ann Martinelli, Independent Scholar
Presenters: Magda Teter, Fordham University
Respondent: Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary

With the recent rise of antisemitism and anti-black racism, this year's Christianity and Judaism Consultation focused on the connection between these two phenomena.

Magda Teter, in a presentation titled "Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism," argued that antisemitism and anti-Black racism derive from the same source: late antique Christian supersessionism. Teter began by observing that the Catholic Church, during and after Vatican II, dealt with antisemitism and racism as separate issues. This has been a major oversight, Teter argued. For Teter, there exists strikingly similar attitudes toward Jews and Black Americans, despite drastically different historical experiences. Teter provided numerous examples, some of which include age-old views that both Jews and Black Americans are cursed by God, that both are made inferior by God, and that both would wield dangerous power if given the opportunity. These parallel attitudes are not coincidental, Teter argued, but indicative of a common origin in Christian supersessionism.

Teter then argued that the study of racism focuses on power and politics, while the study of antisemitism only focuses on theology. Regarding the latter, Teter argued, this is a mistake that needs correction. Teter traced the roots of supersessionism to Paul, who contrasted Judaism with Christianity, depicting the former as inferior. Augustine reinterpreted Paul in a new political context, where Christianity was no longer a nascent religion, but the religion of the Roman Empire. Soon, Jews were singled out in the Empire with specific legislation, placing them in a subordinate position. The subjugation of Jews through law continued into the medieval period and onward. For example, Pope Innocent III in 1205 stated that Jews were consigned to perpetual servitude, because they crucified Christ.

As for anti-Black racism, Teter pinpointed its genesis to the colonial period. By the eighteenth century, Africa was racialized as black, and Europe was depicted as a triumphant queen. This posture of white (Christian) supremacy, Teter argued, derived from Christian supersessionism, the church's long-held sense of superiority over Jews and Judaism. Europe and the United States deliberated over whether their understanding of equality should include Jews and Black Americans, respectively. As soon as both groups were granted citizenship, there was major backlash, as both groups were seen as perpetually inferior. Teter was clear that Jewish and Black experiences of subjugation were never equivalent, but that the way Christians thought about Jews theologically, beginning in the New Testament period, created a habit of thinking that influenced the way white people thought about non-westerners during and after the colonial period.

Mary Boys offered a response to Teter's presentation, stating that Teter's work is painfully pertinent to our present situation and a stringent assessment of supersessionism. Boys asked whether supersessionism is essential to Christian identity.

To answer this, she traced the evolution of Jesus' movement, from a small band of Jewish followers in the 30's, to a movement that debated the inclusion of Gentiles in the 60's, to a community dominated by Gentiles in the second century. During the second and third centuries, followers of Jesus wrestled with how to define their Christian identity apart from Judaism. The question was extremely complex, as their founder was a Jew and their tradition largely derived from Judaism. Boys stated that the answers the church inherited are of the literary elite, who argued that the Jews crucified Jesus, the Jews misunderstood the prophets, and the Law was abolished. These views gave birth to theological antisemitism in the fourth century.

Supersessionism provided Christians a way to distinguish themselves from Judaism. Considering Christianity's circumstances in late antiquity, Boys proposed, the logic of supersessionism makes sense. It perhaps was impossible for Christians at the time to find a better way of nuancing their identity apart from Judaism. The result, however, has led to a number of problems, including what Teter identified in her presentation. The 2015 document "The Gifts and Call of God are Irrevocable" suggests supersessionism has died, but Boys argued it is still alive and well, and that Catholics have not fully recognized how much it has invaded Catholic thinking. There is still much work to be done. Boys asked how we can explain our differences without denigrating others. Finally, Boys noted that one of the Catholic Church's emphases has been that it possesses the one true faith. Because church authorities were so eager to articulate correct belief, this effort gave way to a sense of superiority. This, Boys believed, does not overturn Teter's argument, but adds another layer.

After Boys' response, Teter reemphasized that Christian theologians over the last sixty years, who have grappled with antisemitism and supersessionism, have left out issues of power in their analyses. If we recognize that such issues are embedded in Christian antisemitism and supersessionism, it will help us see why the domination of non-white people and enslavement happens.

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