

Gavin D'Costa
*Catholic Doctrines on the
Jewish People After Vatican II*

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This review was adapted from an invited panel presentation “Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People After Vatican II: A Panel Discussion with Gavin D’Costa” at the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology Annual Meeting (November 2020).

This is an impressive and significant book, but before engaging its substance, I want to offer a few words about the perspective I bring to this task. The most obvious but also the most important point is that I am neither a Catholic nor a Christian nor, for that matter, a theologian. I am a liberal rabbi and though I have an academic degree in Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, much of my career has focused on what I might call interreligious advocacy rather than academia. As an outsider, then, on several levels, I am particularly grateful for the clarity with which D’Costa leads the reader through the complicated interplay of history, documents, levels of authority, and other matters related to the establishment of doctrine within the Catholic Church.

I concur with D’Costa’s assertion that “methodologically Jewish voices cannot be the basis for Catholic doctrine” (13). Thus, as a purely theological or religious matter, I would not offer an opinion about whether supersessionist, fulfillment, or dual covenant theologies best reflect the teaching of the magisterium. I do believe, however, that it is appropriate to ask questions about the practical implications of doctrine when it has the potential to impinge directly on my life and the life of my community. Catholic doctrine becomes my concern when it adversely affects the way that Catholics view Jews and Judaism and especially when it leads to behavior by the Church or by individuals that is detrimental to the Jewish community, as has been the case in the past.

In light of that history, the exploration of neuralgic topics like supersessionism, covenant, the land and state of Israel, and mission demands great sensitivity. In regard to the land and state, this sensitivity must extend not just to Jews but also to Palestinians and others. I commend Dr. D’Costa for the care and awareness with

which he addresses all these issues, especially when he knows his conclusions may be controversial or even offensive. When I raise questions below about possible practical implications of some of D'Costa's conclusions (many of which the author himself acknowledges), these should not be seen necessarily as critiques of the conclusions themselves, but rather as an attempt to move the discussion beyond the understandably theoretical nature of the book.

For the remainder of this review, I will focus attention on a few aspects of D'Costa's discussion of supersessionism. D'Costa draws a distinction between soft supersessionism and fulfillment. I follow the logic of D'Costa's preference for the term "fulfillment" over "replacement" or "rejection" because of the supersessionism implied by the latter, and I appreciate his admission that even "fulfillment" might be supersessionist in a "loose sense" (26). I do wonder whether using the term "fulfillment" might inadvertently serve to obscure its inherent soft supersessionism and thus the problem of supersessionism itself. I suggest that preserving "supersessionism" with a modifier such as "exclusive" and "inclusive" (or "extrinsic" and "intrinsic," to use the language of John Paul II¹) might be more precise and also more instructive as a theological concept, inasmuch as it demands that the terms be unpacked and explained.

Similarly, regardless of whether he uses the term "fulfillment" or "supersessionism," D'Costa does not shy away from the view that there is some fundamental "lack" in the Jewish covenant, even if it has enduring value after Jesus (178). Though of course I do not consider my tradition to lack anything, as *Dabru Emet* states, there are "irreconcilable differences" between Jews and Christians; we make conflicting truth claims. At the same time, we know that general knowledge of *Nostra Aetate* is spotty in the Church and the idea that Judaism is lacking, in its hard supersessionist sense, still persists. In the book, this "lack" is carefully couched in the author's broader positive and respectful approach to Jews and Judaism which is integral to his theology. He therefore offers an affirmative alternative to the negativity of replacement supersessionism. And yet perpetuating that idea Judaism is lacking still makes me uneasy; it would need to be taught very carefully in order not to reinforce old ideas. One of the perennial topics of discussion, and frustration, at Jewish-Catholic consultations is the need to better inform Jews and Catholics about how relationships have developed since 1965.

In his discussion of the "efficacy" of biblical / Jewish "ceremonial" law in light of the enduring covenant, D'Costa raises the possibility that at some point the Church may have to define which "cultic acts" are, in fact, effective (27). Even if this question is an inevitable outcome of D'Costa's argument, in practical terms it strikes me as perhaps a step too far. On what basis are cultic acts deemed to be effective? What is the status of those that do not meet the standard? Equally problematic is the comment that "Christians have an enormous amount to learn from the religious practices of Rabbinical Judaism *when* their practices and beliefs derive

¹ Address to the Great Synagogue of Rome, April, 13 1986.

<https://www.cejr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/jp2-86apr13>

from the covenant never revoked” (56, emphasis added). Finally, D’Costa under-
 statedly points out that “identifying which forms of contemporary Judaism have
 these characteristics is problematic; this question has not been adequately ad-
 dressed” (187). This raises the possibility that the Church might at some point
 decide that one form of Judaism is (forgive me!) kosher while another is *treyfe*
 (non-kosher). Once again, I do understand how this arises from D’Costa’s line of
 thinking, but I have to question the appropriateness of the Church’s deciding which
 expressions of Judaism are covenantal.

In this regard, the discussion of the “ceremonial law” reflects either a misun-
 derstanding of Jewish categories or (and?) the overlay of Christian / Catholic
 categories on the *mitzvot* that do not reflect classic Jewish self-understanding. From
 a Jewish perspective all 613 *mitzvot* are equally authoritative and covenantal; the
 fact that some *mitzvot* cannot be observed for circumstantial reasons (e.g., the de-
 struction of the Temple) does not change their essential authoritative status.
 Furthermore, there remain what might, in this view, be considered “non-ceremo-
 nial” *mitzvot* that are observed by Jews today and that are understood to be integral
 to the covenant. Since “ceremonial” is not a Jewish category, how would the
 Church decide which laws are “ceremonial” and which are not? If this distinction
 is Catholic, it is not methodologically sound to apply it to the Jewish tradition.

In the same passage cited above, D’Costa writes, “The Vatican has consist-
 ently developed conversations with religiously practicing Jews and not those who
 identify as Jewish who may be secular, atheist, or agnostic” (13). This is not en-
 tirely accurate and draws attention to another terminological problem. The
 International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC, of which
 I currently serve as vice-chair) is the official dialogue partner of the Vatican’s Com-
 mission for Religious Relations with the Jews on behalf of the global Jewish
 community. IJCIC is a consortium of Jewish religious and *non-religious communal*
organizations. Some, though not all, in the Orthodox Jewish community avoid
 what they consider to be “religious” dialogue, based on their reading of Joseph
 Soloveitchik’s 1965 article “Confrontation.”² There has also been a discussion
 among Jewish studies scholars of late about the appropriateness of the term “reli-
 gion” and even the term “Judaism” when applied to Jews and their traditions.³
 Delving into the various meanings of the words “religion” and “Judaism”—and
 “Christianity” for that matter—might be a fitting agenda for future Jewish-Catholic
 consultations.

One of the underlying concepts in the book is that “the full authority of the
 magisterium stands behind the biblical teaching that the covenant with biblical Is-
 rael, God’s people, is irrevocable.” The differences between the pre- and post-

² See this Boston College Symposium, “Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: 40 Years
 Later” (2003).

[https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/in-
 dex.html](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/index.html)

³ See for example, Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, NJ:
 Rutgers University Press, 2018).

Vatican II church do not reflect “doctrinal discontinuity”; rather, “the epistemological presuppositions of each group differ” (188). By contrast, it is common in the Jewish community to refer to *Nostra Aetate* as heralding a “sea-change” or a “Copernican revolution” in the Church, perhaps because, as D’Costa himself notes, Jews “are not wedded to any theories of continuity that Catholic scholars might hold regarding the magisterium” (viii). After reading this book, I wonder if the language of “change” and “revolution” represents a Jewish perspective rather than a shared one.

This book provides a comprehensive synthesis of Catholic thinking on the most significant questions raised by Vatican II regarding Jews and Judaism: what are implications of the claim that God’s covenant with the Jews is irrevocable, and how does that claim co-exist with the belief that “all salvation causally comes from Jesus Christ”? The “modest findings and fragile arguments” (190) offered here point toward approaches that demand further discussion among Catholics themselves and between Jews and Catholics, especially if the discussion becomes more practical. I have given some example of this above; there are certainly others, especially the matter of mission, that could prove quite contentious. This raises another question that is admittedly beyond the scope of this book: in light of the relationship with the Jews that has developed in the years since *Nostra Aetate*, what role, if any, would the awareness of Jewish sensitivities play in how the Church might proceed from theory to practice on such matters?

This is a rich, informative, fascinating, and provocative book that will be accessible to both specialists and students. While D’Costa prizes doctrinal continuity, he also demonstrates how much the thinking of the Church has developed since *Nostra Aetate*.