Magda Teter
Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism

(Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), hardcover, xviii + 389 pp.

PHILIP A. CUNNINGHAM
pcunning@sju.edu
Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131

With this volume, Magda Teter, professor of history and the Shvidler Chair in Judaic Studies at Fordham University, makes a major contribution to the history of intergroup relations. *Christian Supremacy* is far from being of only antiquarian interest: it, tragically, helps explain why the world in 2023 is so polarized, while also posing fundamental and inescapable challenges to Christian leaders and theologians.

Teter locates the links between antisemitism and anti-Black racism in the notion of "white Christian supremacy," which she chronologically charts from Christianity's origins to the present (2). The book's driving thesis is that "the modern rejection of equality of both Jews and Black people in the West is the legacy of Christian supersessionism, a theological concept developed in antiquity and implemented in law and policy when Christianity became a political power—its fruit Christianity's claim to superiority and dominance." This Christian supremacy "turned into white Christian supremacy with the colonial expansion in the early modern era, its Christian identity never lost even if individuals associated with it might not have been devoted churchgoers" (3).

Teter's research as a historian resonates strongly with much recent scholarship, including the works of African American theologians such as J. Kameron Carter, Willie James Jennings, and Reggie L. Williams, who in different ways studied the same interconnections. For Teter, it was a sense of divinely-ordained supremacy that set the stage for the intergenerational enslavement of Africans and the industrialized genocide of European Jews. Teter notably examines the growth of legislation on both sides of the Atlantic meant to keep both Jews and Africans as inferior and subordinate "others." One of the book's strengths is that she regularly offers insightful comparisons of the plights of the two peoples, even while stressing key differences in their experiences.

Another strength is the overarching tale that the book provides. While specialists in one period of the broad history that she spans might quibble with this or that interpretive detail, the power of the trajectory Teter offers is gripping and convincing. To do justice to this sweeping narrative, this review will highlight the book's most salient points by chapter.

After an introductory first chapter, chapter 2 begins the book's chronological presentation with the earliest New Testament writer, asserting that Paul the apostle "was troubled by the idea that there was only one God and the exclusive claims that this was only the God of Israel, asking 'Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?'" (16, citing Romans 3:29). The contrast she finds here would have been more accurate (and less binary) had this sentence read, "the exclusive claims that only Israel was God's people." More importantly, by framing Paul's thinking in the binary categories of Jew / Gentile, Christ-believing / non-Christ believing Jews, and especially faith / law, Teter here projects onto Paul the later Christian supersessionist reading of him that held sway especially after the Reformation. However, Pauline scholars, including such interpreters as Gabriel Boccaccini, William S. Campbell, Pamela Eisenbaum, Paula Fredriksen, John Gager, Lloyd Gaston, Mark Nanos, Krister Stendahl, and Marcus Zetterholm, offer a more complex view of Paul. As the Jewish "apostle to the Gentiles," Paul came to believe that God's raising of the crucified Jesus signaled that the time had come for pagans to foreswear their idolatrous ways and become part of the people chosen by the God of Israel. But they now could do so, Paul insisted, *without* becoming members of Israel themselves by taking on Torah observance. In this view, Paul never "claimed that Jews and their practices were akin to 'slavery'" (18) for *Jews*—they would function that way if *former pagans* flirted with rituals that were never meant for them.

Teter's unfortunate précis of Paul does not detract from her greater point: the impact over the course of Christian history of the biblical theme that the elder brother is destined to serve the younger (Gen 25:23), especially in the writings of the extremely influential (in the West) Augustine of Hippo (19-23). She criticizes scholars who "have tended to read Augustine [only] in theological terms, [since] his language and imagery had a resonance in political and social reality of the time [also]." She sees in Augustine's repeated use of "the language of servitude, slavery, and submission in reference to Jews … an early manifestation of a political hierarchy with Christianity dominant over Jews and Judaism in servitude. Christian supersessionism of early centuries here is shown to be transforming into Christian supremacy" (23-24). She goes on to describe the changes in Roman law after 380 CE that prohibited Jews from having any legal authority over Christians (24-31).

Teter also discerns the seeds of melanin pigmentation bias in the writings of Origen and Jerome. The woman in Song of Songs 1:5-6 who is "black and beautiful" prompted Jerome to identify her as an Ethiopian, who was, in his words, "black and clothed in the filth of sin," in comparison to Christians who, washed clean of sin through baptism, have been "transformed from blackness into whiteness." Teter observes that "the trope of 'the blackness of sin' and the 'whiteness of faith' would … prove a powerful tool … [for] Europeans to justify the conquest and exploitation

of Africans and Native Americans in the early modern period. … [N]o legal framework was devised in Augustine's time to legislate race or color." But Jews were indeed the objects of law codes and became "subjects of derogatory visual representations" (31).

Chapter 3 explores the emergence of a White European Christian identity in the medieval and early modern periods. Christians applied (but out of context) the figure of Hagar, the slave woman (Gal 4:21-31), to both Jews and Muslims, though oddly *Sarah* was, of course, the ancestor of Jews. Teter cites M. Lindsay Kaplan's remark that "the subjection of Jews to Christians serves as a precedent to argue for the proper subordination of infidels to the faithful" (51).

In 1452, for instance, Pope Nicholas V granted King Alfonso V of Aragon and Prince Henry of Portugal permission "to invade, search out, capture and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms … and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery" (48). Soon, Iberian leaders engaged in human trafficking, although it took some time for the slave trade to target black Africans specifically. Nonetheless, by the 1570s, both Portugal and Spain had outlawed the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the New World, which led to Africans becoming the preferred "commodities" of the slave trade.

"Iberian history is thus key for understanding the legal, cultural, economic foundations that would help establish slavery in the Americas," notes Teter (54). In the Spanish colonies, strong religious motivations to convert non-Europeans to Christianity resulted in the "hierarchization of colonial Catholic society" (55). The Spanish legal precedent of *limpieza de sangre*, which maintained Catholic "purity of blood" after the forcible conversion of many Iberian Jews in the late 1300s and early 1400s, helped to establish a "pigmentocratic" society in Latin America (56).

However, in the English and Dutch Protestant colonies in North America that emerged in the 17th century there was little interest in Africans as potential converts. Drawing upon the biblical scene of Noah's cursing the line of his son Ham (Gen 9:20-27), some Christians regarded the dark skin of African slaves as a sign of their destiny to be the slaves of Noah's other son Shem and his heirs, i.e., Europeans. In Protestant colonies, religious institutions excluded Africans, "free or enslaved," Teter observes, "with slave owners actively preventing the conversion of the enslaved Black people" lest they start to demand the same political rights as fellow Christians. Religion thus "came to define 'mastery and whiteness,' giving rise to 'the ideology of Protestant supremacy,' or more accurately, white Protestant supremacy" (57).

The admixture of religious and racial factors is seen in a 1705 Virginia statue: "no negros, mulattos, or Indians, although christians, or Jews, Moors, Mahometans, or other infidels shall purchase any christian servant" (spelling as in the original). Such laws reflect the convergence of two Christian "spins" on biblical tropes: the older brother (Jews) serving the younger (Christians) and the divine curse of blackness and slavery placed upon Ham. They "elevated white Christianity to a position above Christians who were not white and above non-Christians" (59).

The chapter continues with a review of this type of legislation. It concludes by showing how Europeans illustrated the relationship of the various continents and their inhabitants to each other. The female figure of Europa is fair, clothed, sophisticated, and powerful, while Africa and America are shown as dark semi-nude savages. Teter remarks that such images recall medieval portrayals of *Ecclesia* as crowned and triumphant, in contrast to the defeated and blindfolded *Synagoga*. "Europeans became obsessed with Blackness," she writes, "desperate to establish firm differences in the nature of black Africans to justify what Europeans were inflicting on them" (76).

Although Jews were not the main figures in such depictions in this early modern period of colonization, Teter views Claude Fleury's 1681 book, *Mœurs des Israélites* (*The Morals of the Israelites*) as a harbinger of things to come. Fleury emphasized the Middle Eastern origins of Jews. "Written at a time when Europeans were also consuming books about black 'uncivilized' and animalistic Africans, these books helped mark Jews as non-European outsiders," Teter states. "The ingrained identity of Europe as Christian and white did not allow Jews, who had lived in Europe since at least the Roman times, to be accepted as European." Indeed, "Enlightenment thinkers and politicians effectively de-Europeanized European Jews" (78).

The next three chapters address the conflicts over citizenship and rights that arose after the American and French revolutions. In 1782, Christians such as Johann David Michaelis argued that since Jews yearned for a messianic return to Palestine, they could not be loyal citizens in any European country (80). This was a moment, says Teter, "when Jews began to be seen as foreigners in countries in which they had lived for long centuries" (81). A German writer in 1793 felt that legal Jewish equality "put them in an unjustifiably high social position and … denied such opportunities to Christians" (85). Social divisions "were no longer across religious, but rather across newly emerging ethnic and racial lines" (81).

Some Christians objected to Jewish citizenship because religious Jews observed the Law of Moses. If Jews followed different laws than the majority, would they not form a threatening "state within a state"? The expectation that assimilated Jews would "do away with clannish religious opinions" (80) was to some even more dangerous. Such Jews appeared to be French or German citizens, but they were actually infiltrating the national ethos with foreign ideas (87-88).

"The assertion that equality of Jews would be tantamount to 'subordination' of Christian society to 'non-Christian morals' reflected an anxiety about the loss of Christians domination," Teter concludes. "This was a manifestation of the legacy of theological Christian teachings about Jewish servitude, so indelibly seared in European Christian culture" (92-93).

Meanwhile, the "self-evident truths" in the American Declaration of Independence that "all men [sic] are created equal, [and] that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" collided with the harsh reality of slavery. Teter writes that "Black slavery meant utter degradation and cruelty, though enslaved Black people did all they could to retain their dignity and a modicum of agency." She again notes deep differences in the Jewish and Black experience even

while detecting parallels, observing that "Jews were not denied 'human rights' but basic human rights were denied to the enslaved people of color" (96). Importantly, "Jews and people of color challenged, in different ways, American white Protestant hegemony and what was beginning to shape as a white Christian republic" (109). Blacks were clearly not "white," but what about Jews? Eventually, "Jews too came to be seen as outsiders … [b]ut as Euro-Americans, Jews were [usually acknowledged as] citizens, who could use the tools this status provided to push back" (131).

Teter describes the social dynamic of backlash against emancipated Blacks (chapter 7) and against European Jews who had received many legal rights in the Napoleonic era (chapter 8). The notorious *Dred Scott v. Sandford* U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1857 provides a starting point. Speaking for the majority, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney ruled "that the position of Black people as 'inferior,' stigmatized by their color and status, was 'perpetual' and 'enduring,' as intended by the framers of the constitution and early laws of the new country" (147).

The Union victory in the Civil War "did not succeed in overturning the culture that produced *Dred Scott.* The 'white republic,' as Edward Blum put it, 'fell' but it was 'reforged' through the work of Protestant evangelical Christians from the North and South and bolstered by both violence and law" (151). Reconstruction-era voting rights of African-Americans were a particular target of segregationist legislation in the succeeding Jim Crow period, which sought to revive "the blessings of a white man's government and Christian civilization" (174).

At the same time in Europe, by the end of the 19th century, "racial attitudes had become ingrained in European Christian society—Jews were seen as unassimilable 'oriental' aliens, their Europeanness denied" (181). For example, William Marr, in an 1879 pamphlet, *The Victory of Judaism over Germandom*, coined the word "antisemitism" to denote allegedly non-religious hostility to Jews. But Marr wrote in religious language, calling the present situation an "apocalypse," and bemoaning that Jews were "the masters, we are the servants." This, states Teter, "is the exact opposite of the dictum trumpeted over the centuries by European Christians in law and literature that 'the elder shall serve the younger'" (184-85). Rather, "equality granted to Jews signified a release from their servitude and … a usurpation of power and encroachment on the rights of others" (185). These sentiments also flourished elsewhere in Europe. The principal inciter of one *pogrom* (a Russian word) against Jews penned the bogus *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which "described the world of 'Jewish domination,' an imagined effect of the uncontrolled rise of Jews in European society and a clear inversion of the proper order in which Jews were supposed to live in subjugation, servitude with eternal gratitude to Christians" (195).

As large waves of Jewish immigration crashed onto American shores in the second half of the 19th century and first few decades of the 20th century, Associate Supreme Court Justice David J. Brewer wrote in 1905 that the United States was a nation in which "Protestant Christianity was normative" (197). In response to the large number of Jewish arrivals amidst the Jim Crow ethos in which the "reforging" of the white Protestant republic was underway, a series of hotly debated antisemitic incidents occurred in which Jews were banned from certain hotels, resorts, schools,

and social clubs (196-204). In one particularly sensational case, Judge Henry Hilton explained that "when a certain class of people have become so offensive, socially, to Americans," many are willing to "remain away, at a disadvantage, from a favorite resort merely to avoid the company of this class" (204).

Teter finds that George Yancy's remark about African Americans that "the white gaze sees what it constructs" applies to Jews as well: "Whiteness is that according to which what is nonwhite is rendered other, marginal, ersatz, strange, native, inferior, uncivilized, and ugly." When a Jew "entered white Protestant spaces, and while he may have considered himself white and deserving equality, that was not what Hilton, a representative of white Protestant hegemonic culture saw. Hilton saw 'a Jew,' a historical construct of Christian imagination" (204-05).

Teter again stresses that "the position Black Americans were in was not comparable on legal, social, and economic level. … Legal protection against religious discrimination coupled with voting power gave Jews a sense of confidence strong enough to push back" (215). "Unlike anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish bigotry, anti-Black discrimination was structural—it was not only part of the culture; it was also built into the law and justice system" (217). With a touch of the surreal, Teter concludes chapter 8 with the observation that the "pattern of discrimination closed the circle connecting the US and Europe when Nazi legal scholars came to the United States to study US race laws in order to find justification for anti-Jewish laws they wanted to pass in Germany."

In chapter 9, Teter exhibits diverse graphic images of white Christian supremacy in the late-19th to mid-20th centuries: "In the US, cartoons linking Jews and African Americans depicted Jews as tricksters and Blacks as dimwits, easily duped by Jews" (226). Likewise, "in Europe antisemitic imagery was used to drive the point of both Christian Europeans' racial superiority over Jews, and, like the American image of the 'black rapist,' the perception of Jews as dangerous and lecherous villains, endangering the purity of European Christian women" (228-29).

Teter sums up the prevailing post-1945 mood in chapter 10: "After World War II," she says, "Christianity was on trial. But a true reckoning was not possible, neither in Europe, nor in the United States. While some were willing to confront their own complicity or at least that of their society and culture, the majority were not ready for this introspection" (239). Public reaction to the hard-hitting 1948 documentary by Leo Hurwitz and Barney Rosset, *Strange Victory*, provides an example. They declared that "two years after Hitler, the proposition that all men [sic] are created equal is again being whittled down … white landowners may freely band together to bar Negroes from a place to live … Christians may shut out the Jews ... Protestants may ban Catholics" (240). The film was poorly received, and Hurwitz was blacklisted from movies for a decade.

Teter deems that postwar reckoning across the Atlantic was also "rather stunted," marked by a "collective amnesia [that] willfully prevailed in many European countries …now without or with greatly diminished Jewish populations." "In West Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, people quickly moved on, reintegrating some of the war criminals into society." In Poland "antisemitism after the war seem to have become worse than before the war" (254-55).

Certain Catholic clergy, notably Cardinal August Hlond, blamed the victims for postwar massacres of returning Polish Jews and equated Jews with communists. He wrote, "Jews, who hold leading state positions … seek to establish a regime the vast majority of the nation does not want in Poland" (260). Teter concludes this chapter's bleak assessment with these words: "Thus persists the legacy of slavery and servitude, along with the heritage of European white Christian supremacy" (267).

The final chapter 11 turns to "Reckoning with the Christian Legacy of Anti-semitism and Racism." She begins by citing James Baldwin's conclusion that the Third Reich made "obsolete forever any question of Christian superiority." If "the United States," he wrote, "decided to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little," the only result would be an indifference similar to that which European Jews had experienced in the Shoah. The ongoing situation of Sunday being the most racially segregated day of the week shows, Teter thinks, that "Baldwin's challenge has not been taken up" (268-69).

However, she indicates that some progress is evidenced by the issuance of anti-racist declarations by various (white) churches and by the theological repudiation of supersessionism beginning with statements by local and regional European churches, by the 1947 Emergency Conference on Antisemitism in Seelisberg, Switzerland, and especially by the promulgation in 1965 of *Nostra Aetate* by the Catholic Church.

In discussing that declaration, Teter misreads its stress on the church's origins in the Old Testament as supersessionist. By suggesting that *Nostra Aetate* expressed no "positive appreciation for living Judaism or Jews," she overlooks that it notably translated the Apostle Paul in the present tense: "theirs *is* the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises" (Rom 9:4) and that "God *holds* the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance" (11:28-29; emphasis added). It also had contemporary Jews in view when it called for joint theological studies and "fraternal dialogues." Teter is quite right in seeing a "tension between the conciliatory voice of the Second Vatican Council and the voices of centuries of traditional Church teaching about Jews," but she goes too far by arguing that *Nostra Aetate* is so equivocal that the "*Ecclesia* still remained the queen but now *Synagoga* was not to be publicly humiliated" (274-75). One wonders how this shallowness could have produced such a "the depth of impact" that it became "more obvious [only] as time went on" or led to "the relationship between Jews and the Catholic Church [being] transformed" (275).

Nonetheless, Teter nicely charts the evolution of post-conciliar Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism up to the present (275-85). She perceptively comments that "the move away from supersessionism and the reframing of the special role Jews had for the history of Christianity are manifestations of the success of decades of real, honest commitment to dialogue and understanding, and willingness to take painful steps to achieve that." Even more insightfully, Teter perceives the implications of this effort for "Christianity's self-perception of its own theological and

political position" (277-78). Teter comments that the 2015 Joshua Koffman sculpture "*Synagoga* and *Ecclesia* in Our Time" (at the Catholic university Saint Joseph's University) shows that the progress of "decades of dialogue between Jews and the Catholic Church [has] turned that relationship into equal partnership," while also astutely realizing that in "countries with small Jewish communities, and deeper antisemitism and mistrust, the implementation of [*Nostra Aetate*] has been less consistent" (278).

It is thus significant that Teter goes on to quote Bishop Ambrogio Spreafico, who guides interreligious dialogue for the Italian Catholic Bishops. After an antisemitic incident in 2020, he wrote: "Despite the numerous declarations published by the Church in recent years, despite the gestures and words spoken by all the pontiffs of the last fifty years, we must unfortunately conclude that part of the teachings of the Church on the unique and singular relationship of Christians with Judaism has not yet entered into the hearts and minds of some… Only [through education], through the defeat of ignorance and prejudice can we prevent the manifestations of antisemitism that open doors to exclusion and racism" (283-84).

Teter summarizes the entire volume with some succinct final observations that can also serve to conclude this review. "Antisemitism and anti-Black racism," she says, "do not say anything meaningful about Jews and Black people, whose mental effigies were created to play a role in the drama created by dominant white Christian society. … Invented as they are for the needs of Christians, they are the fruits of the seeds planted almost two millennia ago: of Christian supersessionism, Christian superiority, and Christian supremacy. … But change is only possible with a truthful accounting of history and traditions, and an examination of the underlying mental habits history has created" (284-85). This is why *Christian Supremacy* is truly "must reading" for anyone committed to unearthing "the roots of antisemitism and racism."