

REVIEW

Gavin D'Costa

Vatican II:

Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

James L. Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University

Gavin D'Costa has given us a painstakingly exhaustive analysis of the documents of the Second Vatican Council related to the Catholic Church's view of non-baptized persons and, more specifically, of Jews and Muslims. I will restrict my comments to the material on Jews.

While D'Costa's argumentation is often convoluted, he has a great deal to say of importance to anyone committed to Jewish-Catholic relations today. He takes great care in restricting his comments to the doctrinal content of the Council documents themselves. But this book, at least in what it has to say about Council teachings about Judaism, is very much an argument against the views of the former head of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews Cardinal Walter Kasper (who is never mentioned in the book) and other Catholics who insist the Catholic Church should not seek to convert Jews to the Catholic faith. (Opposition to targeted missions to Jews is current Church policy). As D'Costa rightly recognizes, there are serious theological challenges involved in justifying this renunciation of missions to the Jews. He argues, among other things, that there is no basis in the documents of Vatican II for the claim that Catholics should not seek to convert Jews. Further, he argues that the Council does not rule out supersessionist theologies of Judaism. He even goes so far as to claim that the Council is ambiguous about the validity of the Mosaic Covenant today.

At work throughout this book is D'Costa's certainty that the Catholic Church has never reversed itself about anything of *doctrinal* importance. Theological opinion may change, along with liturgical texts and Catholic preaching and behavior. But doctrine grows out of an unchanging "deposit of faith" (a term that appears ubiquitously in D'Costa's argument) and is infallibly taught by popes and bishops (e.g., p. 2, 56). A reversal in teaching would indicate that the Church was once wrong about a doctrine, which is, for D'Costa, impossible. Once taught, a doctrine can never be untaught. A doctrine, however, can develop. For example, a teaching that was implicit in an earlier formulation of doctrine can be made explicit in a later formulation. Or what was at first merely a theological opinion can later be authoritatively taught by a pope or a council as official doctrine. This conviction provides the framework for D'Costa's interpretation of what the Council said about Jews and Judaism.

D'Costa argues that the Council's teaching on Jews can be boiled down to three issues. First, not all Jews at the time of Jesus, nor Jews since that time, can be held collectively guilty for the killing of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Jewish people are not to be understood as rejected or cursed. The author briefly acknowledges the shameful history of Christian violence against Jews and the support it was given by the Church, but anti-Judaism and antisemitism are beyond the purview of his book. Catholics may have a notorious history in promoting the blood-libel against Jews, but the Church has never taught as *official doctrine* that the Jews are collectively guilty of Christ's death. Not a few commentators read the fourth section of *Nostra Aetate* as a repudiation of what Jules Isaacs famously called "the teaching of contempt." D'Costa, in contrast, argues that this text is simply an explication of what is implicit in what the Church has always taught in keeping with the deposit of faith: in the first century, some Jews were in fact responsible for the death of Jesus while others were not responsible. Today, no Jews are responsible, as the Church has always implied, at least in its official doctrinal teaching. This allows D'Costa to conclude that section four of *Nostra Aetate* is

“discontinuous” with the long history of Catholic anti-Jewish polemics and theology, yet “continuous” with Catholic doctrine (p. 158-59).

Second, in accordance with Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the Council taught that God is faithful to his covenant with the Jewish people out of love for their ancestors. D’Costa considers this a “recovery” of the deposit of faith, since the Church has neither affirmed nor denied this in the past, despite the fact that it is testified to in the Letter to the Romans (p. 153). D’Costa is also quick to add that the Council said nothing about whether or not the Jewish people have been faithful to this covenant. The deposit of faith is simply silent regarding this question. This allows D’Costa to argue that the supersession and even abrogation of the “Old Covenant” by the “New and Eternal Covenant” remains a theological possibility for Catholics. He also acknowledges that, to the extent that Judaism has traditionally been affirmed as a preparation for the Gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*), the Council gave some support to a theology of Christian faith in Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish faith. On this issue, D’Costa is critical of those who see in *Lumen Gentium* 16 a doctrinal teaching that affirms the validity of the Mosaic Covenant. D’Costa laments the fact that some Catholics have gone so far as to affirm the validity of Judaism as a means of salvation.

Third, he argues, the Council taught implicitly that the Church’s missionary mandate includes the Jewish people, while respecting their religion and their freedom to choose their religion and forbidding any coercion in this regard. The Gospel is to be proclaimed to all peoples. The Council made no exception for Jews. Though presumably Walter Kasper’s contrary views are in mind here, he is never mentioned.

D’Costa’s devotion to doctrinal continuity leads him to criticize those who interpret *Nostra Aetate* as a “u-turn,” a “rupture,” or an “about-face” in Catholic teaching about Jews (p. 154). This is seen, for example, in his discussion of the views of Gerald O’Collins. According to O’Collins, the

Second Vatican Council marks a disavowal of the Church's teaching on the Jews at the Council of Florence (1431-1449). At Florence, the Council Fathers taught that "no one remaining outside the Church, not only pagans, but also Jews... can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" The teaching of the Second Vatican Council, therefore, is unprecedented for its direct conflict with the teaching of the Council of Florence. D'Costa rejects O'Collins' conclusion, arguing that Vatican II does not contradict Florence. This is because, at Florence, Jews were presumed to have chosen damnation for themselves by willfully rejecting the truth of Catholic faith. At Vatican II, in contrast, the Jewish people were considered to be "invincibly ignorant" of Christ and therefore not necessarily damned (p. 155). ("Invincible ignorance" is a medieval theological principle that has come in for considerable development in the last one hundred and fifty years. "Inculpably ignorant" or "ignorant through no fault of their own" might be a better translation from the original Latin.)

Though D'Costa is largely focused on (one might say preoccupied with) issues of doctrinal continuity, the book deserves a wide readership. As I said above, D'Costa's book can be seen, at least in its material on Judaism, as a challenge to Catholic theologians who claim that the Church after Vatican II should have no mission to the Jews and who reject supersessionist theologies of Judaism. D'Costa has given us an alternative reading of Vatican II, which figures so centrally in discussions of Jewish-Catholic relations today. If Jews are not in need of conversion to Christ, Catholics must ask themselves: are there two separate and equal covenants? Can Catholics subscribe to covenantal pluralism as a model of Jewish-Christian relations? I am by no means in full agreement with D'Costa's minimalist interpretation of the Council's teachings, but he has done Catholics (and Jews) a service by offering us this careful textual analysis that calls the conclusions of some other Catholic thinkers into question. Catholics should ask their Jewish friends to be patient while we fight over the best way to tidy-up our theological house. D'Costa's book, rather than cleaning

the mess up, goes very far in making clear that there is, in fact, a theological mess to clean up.