

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

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I.

In 2014, Gavin D’Costa published *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), a study of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council about Jews and Muslims. In a forum on this volume, I raised several critiques, including that D’Costa had largely ignored—and even dismissed as “non-doctrinal”—the significant post-conciliar developments in Catholic teachings about Jews, stopping with the often inchoate openings made at the Council.¹ With this volume, D’Costa turns to these post-conciliar teachings, working with his characteristic densely-argued systematic methodology through the various documents about Jews and Judaism issued by popes, Vatican offices, and occasionally national bishops’ bodies. He analyzes not only what have emerged as authoritative Catholic teachings about Jews but also probes their boundaries, identifying trajectories that he expects or hopes will manifest themselves in the future. The volume is therefore not only retrospective but also constructive in its study of doctrine and an enormously important contribution.

The opening words of the book’s Preface signal this change in focus. D’Costa writes, “This book presupposes that doctrines matter and that doctrines that matter

¹ Ruth Langer, “A Jewish Response to Gavin D’Costa: *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*,” *Louvain Studies* 40 (2017): 274-75.

most always give rise to further doctrines. Doctrines are fecund.”² Thus, as he explains, the biblically grounded doctrine that “surfaced” without elaboration in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 4 that God’s covenant with the Jews is “irrevocable” was only first applied to contemporary, post-biblical Jews by Saint Pope John Paul II in 1980. “Unfolding” this doctrine has been a difficult process and is still ongoing. Over these years, further “doctrinal trajectories, ...all deeply contested,” have also become important (vii). The volume’s five substantive chapters map and analyze the evolution of the central claim and its emerging trajectories up through the 2015 publication of “‘The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29)” from the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

Chapter one directly addresses the doctrine of God’s irrevocable covenant with the Jews. The pre-conciliar understanding had been that this covenant was revoked and superseded. This had wide implications for Catholic teachings about Jews. Consequently, the new affirmation of God’s covenantal relationship also unsettles other received teachings and creates the trajectories D’Costa then develops in the book. This chapter discusses two crucial meta-trajectories. Validating only biblical Judaism fails to engage with Jewish self-definition, as called for by the 1974 “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4.” A specific acknowledgment that post-biblical, i.e., rabbinic and hence contemporary, Jews remain in this unrevoked covenant enters papal pronouncements first in 1980. Its reiteration by subsequent popes and in official documents, D’Costa says, generates enough cumulative authority to “count for... a development of doctrine” (20).

The chapter concludes by addressing the language of supersessionism and fulfillment. D’Costa grounds this argument in the doctrinal requirement that all Catholics are required to assent to the truth that all salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who is the Jewish messiah and the embodiment of the fullness of God’s truth. Therefore, those who assert that God’s covenant with the Jews is irrevocable must understand that this covenant is ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ. “Soft supersessionism,” he says, “is necessary to Catholicism” and is “best called ‘fulfilment’ to avoid confusion” (25-26).

Chapter one lays the theological groundwork for subsequent chapters, in which D’Costa moves progressively more deeply into unpacking the intersection between living Jews and today’s Judaism, and specific aspects of the unrevoked covenant and its fulfillment in Christ. Chapter two considers the “ceremonial laws, the religious practices deriving from the Mosaic covenant” (27). Though jettisoned by the early Church as not salvific, they are today recognized by Catholics as central to Jewish covenantal life. How might Catholics reconcile the irrevocability of this covenant with the universal saving mission of Christ and the Church? D’Costa argues that a “fulfillment thesis” best resolves this dilemma (55). God desired the existence of rabbinic Judaism and its teachings, at least until the Church’s mission

² Note, though, “Doctrines can develop, but they cannot contradict previously held teachings. That is error, not development” (34).

to the gentiles is complete. At least until then, Jews who cannot accept the Christian message are “invincibly ignorant,” meaning that they are not sinners, culpable for their remaining outside the Church (39-43, 48, 54, 58-61). D’Costa also explores a related trajectory: the Church, he says, can now accept the Jewish ceremonial practices of groups like Hebrew Catholics and Messianic Jews; “Judaizing” is no longer a sin (53).

Unlike many rethinking Christian theologies of Judaism, D’Costa observes that assertions about God’s irrevocable covenant with the Jews that ignore questions of the land of Israel “will sound hollow” (65). He therefore devotes chapters three and four to this often politically and theologically fraught issue. He examines first the evolution of Catholic teachings about the biblical land promises themselves and then the question of how these apply in today’s political reality. He argues that the trajectory of Catholic post-conciliar teachings points to the logic and possibility of “a minimalist theological endorsement of the land of Israel as part of God’s promise to his people” that he calls “minimalist Catholic Zionism.” This position is theologically and theoretically rigorous and consistent with magisterial teachings, cautious in its assertions, but also neutral in addressing Israeli and Palestinian points of conflict (67-68, 141-42). He recognizes that current “socio-political problems” may make it “nearly impossible” for the Church publicly to teach this position. Nonetheless, his argument, he says, is grounded in “theological truths,” and “Catholics officially believe in miracles” (114).

II.

Jews asking for serious Catholic engagement with the covenantal role of the land in Judaism can sincerely applaud the incremental progress D’Costa’s study enables while respecting the limits placed by his characteristic careful engagement with Catholic doctrine. However, D’Costa does not find authoritative Catholic teachings that similarly address Jewish concerns about missionary activity.

D’Costa turns in his fifth chapter to a key question that has arisen in dialogue in recent decades as a corollary of the Catholic validation of Jewish covenantal life. A pillar of Catholic self-understanding is that the church has a missionary mandate to bring all of humanity to Christ. However, if God’s covenant with the Jews is irrevocable and hence saving for them, are Jews to be the object of evangelism? For Jews, this is a critical question with a painful history. D’Costa begins by demonstrating that he has heard and sought to internalize the historical Jewish communal perception of mission as seeking the extinction, immediate or ultimate, of the Jewish people. For Jews, genocide lurks, even on those occasions when the Jewish objects of mission are not murdered. D’Costa therefore asks, “Can Christian mission be credible in the shadow of the Shoah?” (144).

D’Costa seeks to harmonize this ethical concern with the magisterium’s explicit teachings, discussed at length, that Jews are indeed included in the mandate to evangelize all peoples (164-83). However, because of both this history and

God's irrevocable covenant with Israel there must be a modified manner of Christian witness.³ D'Costa proposes a path forward that accounts for the mandates that Catholics include Jews in their mission (or witness) and that they do so in a way that is indeed credible in the wake of the Shoah. His key suggestion is that, because of the irrevocable covenant, this witness and the hoped-for conversion resulting from it must not eradicate Jewish identity (151). In other words, the Church must no longer be complicit in genocide or in lesser forms of violence, including against Jewish identity, which must remain intact.

How can mission not threaten Jewish identity? D'Costa points to specific cases, past and present, where Jewish and Christian identities have been merged, where the Jewish covenant was "contained" within Christianity. The most important model was the Jewish Christ-followers of the early church, before Judaizing became heretical (181-82). The earliest followers' distinct missions to Jews and to gentiles could be revived, he suggests. Today's Messianic Jews and Hebrew Catholics are similarly Jewish followers of Christ. Discussion about the implications for the Church and for the Jewish community about recognizing this distinct *ecclesia ex circumcision* are in their infancy, D'Costa indicates—and indeed, his discussion here, though anticipated earlier in the book, is comparatively brief (183-186).⁴

III.

As a Jew, I find this trajectory quite troubling and challenging to our dialogic process of reconciliation. D'Costa is sensitive to the historical pain that Christian mission has caused the Jewish community. However, as long as mission shapes Christian thinking about Jews, it creates a barrier to deep Christian-Jewish interreligious understanding. I recognize that mission has explicit New Testament authority and is central to Christian self-understanding. But competing for adherents undermines dialogue. A prerequisite for authentic dialogue is the establishment of a safe space in which the participants seek to understand the other's otherness. They seek mutual understanding rather than probing for weaknesses in the other so as to change them. Otherwise, because participation in dialogue today is voluntary, it becomes something to avoid. Historically, power imbalances made interreligious encounters with Christians situations of danger for Jews; today Jews are freer to walk away. "Mission" does not conceptually accommodate legitimate religious competition let alone co-existence.

D'Costa suggests here that a solution to the Catholic conundrum might be found by a focus on categories of people who already straddle the boundaries between our communities. Jews who accept Christ or Catholics who live culturally

³ Witness, not mission, is the correct term, because mission applies to situations where Christians are dispelling false gods or idols (151). However, the practical difference is minimal. An invitation to conversion still motivates the witness, if more subtly.

⁴ D'Costa discusses the impact this process might have on the recovery of the early Christian community's Jewish roots, particularly in the realm of liturgy (185). Scholarly understandings of the nature of Jewish liturgy in the first centuries of Christianity have been evolving in recent decades; Christians asking this important question need to be alert to the state of Jewish liturgical studies.

Jewish lives preserve a Jewish identity acceptable to today's Church. Their Jewishness, he says, remains. However, this would be a Catholic definition of what proper Jewish identity entails. It would not meet the powerful formula for cross-communal understanding expressed first in the Vatican's 1974 "Guidelines": that Catholics "must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."⁵ In other words, D'Costa's lifting up those inhabiting the boundary between Jewish and Christian identity as Jews ignores the traditional halakhic and even liberal Jewish definitions of Jewish identity.

Who is a Jew? What constitutes Jewish identity? As D'Costa knows, there is no single answer to these questions. Jewish identity is a complex amalgam of ethnicity, culture, peoplehood, and religion. These mix and play out in myriad ways. One normally becomes a Jew by birth. Conversion to Judaism is like adoption or naturalization into this extended family. For those born as Jews, the elements identified by western culture as "religion" are part of a larger familial / ethnic culture. Fundamental Jewishness is not dependent on their choice to believe, or, say, to eat Jewishly. Neither chicken soup nor speaking Hebrew makes one a Jew. (Conversion does require active affirmation of Jewish religion though.) Just as Catholic doctrine understands baptism to be a one-time irrevocable sacrament, valid independent of actual faith, Judaism teaches that anyone born or naturalized into the Jewish community irrevocably retains a "Jewish identity." In this sense, *de jure*, Jews who adopt another religion do remain Jews, indelibly.⁶

But the reality is not so simple. Both Jews and Catholics historically have grieved (and more) over boundary crossers who left their communities, labelling them apostates, while welcoming those who join them as converts. Our age of dialogue, spiritual seeking, and intermarriage challenges us all to accept, *de facto*, those leaving our communities with (greater) equanimity and validation of personal choice. If a Jew can become a Catholic, then a Catholic can become a Jew. This challenges the concept of indelible identity.

It is here that our different understandings of identity create confusion, though. To Jews, the Catholic who becomes a Jew should become culturally, ethnically, and religiously a Jew. Straddling the boundary suggests that the conversion, the naturalization, is incomplete. Most Jews project this understanding onto Jews who become Christians, even if they retain culturally Jewish identity markers. Classically, apostate Jews were considered sinners and banished from Jewish society (though legally they were still *de jure* Jews). Today, instead, we respect their free

⁵ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4," (Rome, December 1, 1974), Preamble (<https://www.cccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/guidelines>).

⁶ This is a very complex topic whose nuances shift with historical circumstances. This understanding emerged in the era of the Crusades in response to Christian missionary pressures and is mostly still the decisive understanding. For a detailed analysis, see Itzhak Brand, "A Jew Who Has Sinned: Nationality, Society, and Religion – A Tripartite Halakhic Analysis [Hebrew]," in *Jewish Identity*, ed. Asher Maoz and Aviad HaKohen (Tel Aviv University Law Faculty, 2014), 13-47, here 17-19 (https://law.tau.ac.il/sites/law.tau.ac.il/files/media_server/law_heb/Law_Society_Culture/books/zehut_vehudit/IshakBrend.pdf).

choice, considering their Jewishness nominal unless they choose to repent and return.

D'Costa mentions Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod's challenge to Paris Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger. Wyschogrod asked how Lustiger understood himself to be a *Jewish* cardinal (184, n. 106).⁷ Wyschogrod did not challenge the authenticity of Lustiger's Christianity; rather, he wondered if Lustiger, with his Christian faith, could possibly agree to live a life defined by Jewish law (*halakhah*), not as exterior cultural acts but as religious acts commanded by God. Without this connection to Torah, any Jewish identity markers, while they may be *culturally* Jewish, are no longer *religiously* so. Any ethnic subgroup within the church has analogous cultural identity markers. Think of an Irish wake or an Italian Sunday dinner.

Thus, a Hebrew Catholic is religiously a Catholic, even if she eats kugel or prays with a tallit. However, a Catholic who becomes a Jew must theologically choose a life according to Torah and some version of the rabbinic interpretations of it. For the vast majority of the Jewish community, that includes an understanding of God and God's expectations that is other than the key teachings of Christianity or Islam. For the vast majority of the Jewish community, acceptance of Jesus as God incarnate and as the Messiah whose death and resurrection enabled an otherwise unattainable salvation from sin are the key markers of being a Christian. "Jewish religious identity" embeds a different set of beliefs about God and messianic expectations incompatible with Christian creeds.

Thus, there is still work to do. Jews might be comfortable with no active Christian mission or with a deferred mission. But Christian support for groups that seek to convert Jews religiously while retaining Jewish culture is, if anything, more insidiously threatening to Jewish existence than overt active mission.

To invoke the late Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, it is when we honor the "dignity of (each other's) difference" that we truly affirm one another.

IV.

The brevity required for a review does not do justice to the nuances and complexities of D'Costa's arguments throughout this volume. This is a courageous book, taking on several of the largest looming, and unresolved issues arising from the implications of the teachings of Vatican II and subsequent Vatican documents of various degrees of authority. As he concludes, "These are modest findings and fragile arguments" (190). Nevertheless, they are arguments about crucial issues, and any further contributions to Catholic discussions about God's irrevocable covenant with the Jews or the trajectories that arise from this affirmation will need to engage deeply with D'Costa's discussions.

⁷ Michael Wyschogrod, "A Letter to Cardinal Lustiger," in *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 202-210 (original publication as "Letter to a Friend," *Modern Theology* 11 [1995]: 165-171).