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Supersessionism: Harsh, mild, or gone for good?

The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) has published: *"The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic – Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of "Nostra Aetate" (no.4)* [Henceforth: *Gift*]. The text 'is not a magisterial document or doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church ... It is intended to be a starting point for further theological thought'. (Preface) I will focus exclusively on one theological question to try to help contribute to the further theological thinking that is called for.

The key move in *Gift* concerns the nature of the covenant made with the Jewish people. According to St. Paul in Romans 11.29, a phrase cited by St. Pope John Paul II in his famous Mainz speech in 1980, the Jewish covenant is 'irrevocable'. *Gift* 39 clarifies that this teaching was not established by *Nostra Aetate*. Rather, it begins with the Pope in 1980 and confirmed in the 1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (121): 'The Old Covenant has never been revoked.' The major contributions of *Gift* is to affirm and clarify some of the implications of the 'irrevocable' Jewish covenant. One serious implication is that Catholic theologies that run counter to this Pauline teaching of 'irrevocability', such as the theologies of supersessionism, replacement and annulment, are now themselves superseded, replaced and annulled. 'Supersede' is used thrice (17, 17, 28), replacement five times - and synonymously with supersede (17, 17, 18, 30, 32), and annulment once (32). In every instance these three positions are strongly rejected. Paragraph 17 defines the 'rot' that has infected Catholic culture:

On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favour until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognised Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true 'new Israel', the new chosen people of God.

There are many definitions of supersessionism. R Kendal Soulen helpfully identifies three particular forms of supersessionism: 'economic', whereby the Jews are no longer needed in the divine plan for humankind; 'punitive', whereby the Jews are seen as rejected by God because of their rejection of Jesus as the Christ; and 'structural', which denotes the canonical irrelevance of the Old Testament in scriptural hermeneutics.¹ *Gift* appears to reject the first two. It intends to reject the third, but that is beyond my remit in this essay.

Gift's condemnation of what constitutes the traditional approach by the majority of 'Church Fathers', most medieval theologians and most theologians up until the nineteenth century is remarkable. Why? First, it is the Catholic Church's own critique of a major theological 'tradition' upheld by Doctors of the Church (Augustine and Aquinas included), major theologians and ecclesiastics. Such a frank admission of rot in the floorboards is bracing and brave, even if belated. Second, if one removes the floorboards, what remains before the house is uninhabitable? In *Gift*

¹ Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), 28-34.

‘fulfilment’ provides the new floorboards. It was a key word in Vatican II.² In *Gift* it occurs ten times in relation to viewing Catholic Christianity as the ‘fulfilment’ of the Jewish covenant (14, 22, 23, 23, 27, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36).

Fulfilment apparently supersedes supersessionism. Fulfilment retains central claims regarding Jesus Christ (that he fulfils the covenant given to Israel in his person – but does not annul it, that he is the saviour of the world, that he is the God-man and thus eschatologically disruptive to all history). But it keeps these claims free of punitive and economic supersessionism. My question: does fulfilment fully escape economic and punitive forms of supersessionism? I shall argue that it does not for a certain form of supersessionism is intrinsic to Christianity – and defensible. What is this ‘certain form’? What follows is not intended unconstructively, but in the desire that Christian theology be true to itself and to its Jewish partner.

Jewish thinker David Novak, in Matthew Levering’s view, holds there are two positions available for traditional forms of Christianity: harsh and mild supersessionism.³ Harsh is equivalent to holding punitive and economic forms of supersessionism. Mild supersessionism is upholding the continuing validity of Israel’s covenant while still arguing that Judaism is ‘best’ perfected and properly ‘fulfilled’ in Jesus Christ. In Novak’s words: Christianity ‘solves the problems of Judaism better than Judaism can do without Christianity because Christianity provides the savior to whom Judaism has always looked.’⁴ Novak and Levering recognise this inevitable mild supersessionism as intrinsic to Christian orthodoxy. I would agree. However, in contrast to the notion of an inevitable mild supersessionism, there are Catholic and Jewish scholars who argue that fulfilment could and should exclude mild supersessionism.⁵ They argue their case on three grounds. First, if Jesus is the cause of all salvation, including the Jewish people who do not follow Jesus, this invalidates the salvific covenant that God makes with the Jews for, in effect it makes the Jewish covenant redundant in or on its own terms. Second, if the perfection of the Jewish covenant fulfilled in Jesus involves its non-practice by Jews who follow Jesus, then this has in effect made that original covenant redundant.⁶ Third, if supersessionism is fully renounced, there can be no grounds for mission to the Jewish people.⁷ I will examine each point in turn to see if *Gift* can overcome the objections.

² It is used seven times in *Dei Verbum* and twenty times in *Lumen Gentium*. In the post conciliar *Dominus Iesus* it is used eight times. In some instances it refers to non-Christian cultures in general, but the majority of times to the Jewish culture of Jesus’ time.

³ Levering, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue and the Life of Wisdom*, (London: Continuum, 2010), 26, 40, 132. Novak’s book referred to is *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*, (New York: Oxford, 1989), 16f.

⁴ Novak, *Talking with Christians. Musing of a Jewish Theologian*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005), 164.

⁵ For example Catholics Didier Pollefeyt and Marianne Moyaert, ‘Israel and the Church: Fulfillment Beyond Supersessionism?’, in eds Pollefeyt & Moyaert, *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), 159-83 who argue the first and third point.

⁶ See Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos, 2005), 181-212, argues the second point.

⁷ Pollefeyt & Moyaert, ‘Israel’, 174-81.

The first objection is rejected. *Gift* holds it is not possible that Judaism could be salvific in its own terms without reference to Christ. This claim undermines 'the foundations of Christian faith'. (35, and ff). The notion of two independent paths to salvation was rejected at Vatican II. Some would argue this is a *de fide* teaching.⁸ It was rejected in the CRRJ's 1985 *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism*: the Church and Judaism cannot be represented as 'two parallel ways to salvation', but that the Church must 'witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all.' (No. 1, 7). It was rejected in *Dominus Iesus* 14 (2000).

However, there is one implication in this rejection that must be registered. The notion that in dialogue, the 'other' (Jewish in this case) must recognise themselves in the discourse of their partner (Catholic in this case) is impossible for Catholics.⁹ No self-respecting Jew thinks they are 'saved' by Jesus Christ. Some Jewish scholars think this rule would also be impossible for Jews to follow.¹⁰ Self-description can never be granted unquestionable epistemological status. Consider the man who claims: 'I do not believe that there is any meaning in language'. If I understand his self-description correctly, then implicitly it contradicts the self-description. If supersessionism was defined as a failure to accept the self-description of a Jewish person (which it is not) then *Gift* would be guilty. This does not suggest that self-description isn't important and indeed vital for engaging with the real 'other'.

The second objection that fulfilment reverts to supersessionism is that if the perfection of the Jewish covenant fulfilled in Jesus now involves its non-practice when Jews follow Jesus Christ, then this in effect makes that original covenant redundant. It may be helpful to pursue this point by recalling Thomas Aquinas' distinctions that the Old Law is made up of the moral, ceremonial, and judicial law.¹¹ Here, I leave the judicial aside. The moral continues after the coming of Christ as it contains both natural and supernatural elements that are validated by Christ. The law is not superseded, even if transformed in its understanding and the claim that it is embodied in Jesus's life. However for Thomas, the ceremonial law, the requirement for right worship, is invalidated/superseded, because Jewish worship looks forward to the messiah - but the messiah has come. Hence, practicing the

⁸ See my *Vatican II. Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 59-112.

⁹ This is stipulated by Polyfelt and Moyert and also Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*, (New York: Oxford, 1989), 17, 55. Polyfelt and Philip A. Cunningham end up stipulating this rule while contradicting it in 'The Triune God, the Incarnate Logos, and Israel's Covenantal Life', in eds. Cunningham et al, *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), 183-202, acknowledging they have to contravene the stipulation (193).

¹⁰ Jon D. Levenson, 'Must We Accept the Other's Self-Understanding', *The Journal of Religion*, 71, 4, 1991, 558-567.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a-IIae q. 90 – 108. There are many studies of Aquinas on this issue. See especially the internal Catholic debate between Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple. Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) and Matthew A. Tapie, *Aquinas on Israel and the Church. The Question of Supersessionism in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

ceremonial laws after Jesus' coming is a denial that he is messiah. It is mortal sin, both dead and deadly.¹²

If *Gift* is taken at face value, it would imply that the ceremonial law of Israel is still valid, because irrevocable. *Gift* says: 'The first Christians were Jews; as a matter of course they gathered as part of the community in the Synagogue, they observed the dietary laws, the Sabbath and the requirement of circumcision, while at the same time confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah sent by God for the salvation of Israel and the entire human race.' (15) This raises the following three questions that are understandably not resolved in *Gift*, but raise the question of a vestige of supersessionism remaining.

First, Mark Kinzer, a messianic Jew, asks: why does the Church not encourage Jewish Catholics to keep the ceremonial law if it is eternally valid? While the ceremonial law only applies to Jews, not gentiles, Kinzer argues that the acceptance of the Jewish covenant requires a bilateral ecclesiology that makes way for both: 'Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians, the *ecclesia ex circumcissione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus*, one Church originating from Judaism, the other from the Gentiles, who however together constituted the one and only Church of Jesus Christ.' (*Gift*, 15)¹³ The document employs these distinctions, but they seriously challenge Catholic ecclesiology. It hints at recognizing this in acknowledging that the *ecclesia ex circumcissione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus* remain today 'a qualitative definition of the Church' (43) even if quantitatively insignificant.¹⁴ The logic of this recognition could – and even should - require a kind of 'ordinariate' granted to Hebrew Catholics, as was granted to Anglicans who wished to be in communion with Rome, to keep their own spiritual patrimony intact. But this new possibility that presents itself as a result of overcoming supersessionism raises a disturbing question for the future of Jewish - Catholic dialogue. Why?

What of those Jews who encourage dialogue with Christians but object to 'Jews' who retain their Jewish religious identity while following *Yeshua*? David Novak says *Yeshua* Jews are Rabbinically disqualified, not in their belief that Jesus is messiah, but because 'the Christhood (incarnational/trinitarian status) of Jesus of Nazareth is not an option within God's everlasting Covenant with the people of Israel. Jewish Christians are still Jews, but they are no longer practicing a religion Jews regard as part of Judaism.'¹⁵ Will the Catholic Church risk a break of good relations with Orthodox Judaism by accepting the validity of Messianic Jews especially those, like Kinzer, who seek communion with Rome?¹⁶ The logic of the present Catholic position, diplomacy and numbers aside, demands equal attention to both Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews – and primarily in my view, the promotion of Hebrew Catholics who wish to practice Torah.

The last point on this second question is about two different ways of construing fulfilment. The fulfilment of the moral law in Christ leaves the law intact, still practiced and still equally true and valid for both communities. This is why Catholics and Jews can participate in social action together

¹² *Summa*, 1a-IIae q. 103.4.

¹³ Kinzer, *Post-Missionary*, 151- 180 uses the same terms as *Gift* accepts.

¹⁴ I'm indebted to conversations with Kinzer who indicated the importance of para. 43.

¹⁵ *Talking*, 223. Contrary to Novak's position is Michael Wyschogrod, 'Letter to a Friend', *Modern Theology*, 11, 2, 1995, 163-241 (whole issue, including Novak's reiterating this point).

¹⁶ Kinzer seeks communion with 'Christians' in general, and in *Searching Her Own Mystery*, (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), he shows a special concern for engaging with Catholics.

on a wide range of issues. However, the fulfilment of the ceremonial laws, according to some of Thomas' contemporary supporters such as Levering, means that Jewish ceremonial worship does not require practice by Jewish Christians. It is fulfilled in Christ, not superseded. The ceremonial law is intact and valid in a new form of worship; in the worship of Christ. This 'Christic practice' is not true or valid for Jews who in good faith do not know the truth of the gospel, a position that Thomas did not imagine but Levering does. Most Jews would understandably say that this Christic practice is not recognizably Jewish ceremonial law. Thus from their point of view the ceremonial law has been superseded. Some Catholics concur. In this Thomist move, does fulfilment really bypass economic supersessionism or is it best categorised as mild supersessionism, something which is unavoidable and unnegotiable? It seems unavoidably mild supersessionism, unless all Catholics who are Jews are required by the Church to practice ceremonial Torah. This issue needs much discussion.

Our final challenge is: if supersessionism is fully renounced, there can be no grounds for mission to the Jewish people. *Gift* is confusing at this point (perhaps unsurprisingly as there are contrary positions within Catholic culture on this matter). *Gift* 40 says:

The Church is therefore obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views. In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.

The first line is profoundly true, but raises the issue whether Islam, acknowledged by *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 16 to 'along with us adore the one and merciful God', also thus requires a different manner of evangelization. The second line is puzzling. It does not follow from the first. It seems to be contrary to Vatican II. At the Council, LG 14 -16, indicates that other than separated Christians who confess Christ and are trinitarian, the Church's mission is towards *all* those who do not know Christ. LG 16 acknowledges different types within this group: those who know God (Jews and Muslims), those who believe in a transcendent, those who are not 'religious'.¹⁷ Furthermore, to what other religion is there a 'specific institutional mission' in contrast to the disavowal made here? The Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Sion Sisters of Zion was devoted to the conversion of the Jewish people and sanctioned by the Church (in the late 19th century). They now practice through an inversion of their founders' aims. There are no religious orders that were founded to convert Buddhists and Hindus and there is no specific institutional mission towards Buddhists and Hindus. The third line adds further to the confusion. Personal sensitive and thoughtful witness is enjoined, and two paragraphs later, witness is rightly seen as a form of mission: 'Christian mission and witness, in personal life and in proclamation, belong together' (42). *Gift* seems to propound a position that holds: no institutional mission by the Catholic Church to the Jewish people is legitimate; only individual personal mission. This is a curious distinction in Catholic theology as the Church is understood to be the person of Christ first and foremost, and secondly the people who constitute the unity of the Body of Christ, who partake in the ministry of Christ. Its institutional character is integrated into its personal sacramental character. Constructively, one might argue that perhaps there is an inchoate and visionary recognition that the gentile church cannot partake in mission to

¹⁷ See D'Costa, *Vatican II*, 122-30.

the Jews as this would signal the erasure of Jewish identity. Only a Jewish ecclesia *ex circumcissione*, which does not yet properly exist in the Catholic Church, could sensitively carry out institutional mission that is not 'bad news' for the Jewish people. This is the hidden logic of *Gift* in my view.

The value of *Gift* is that it opens up so many new questions – and for this, I for one, am most grateful. These will certainly move us into a new era, an era where the challenge is whether Christian supersessionism is harsh, mild, or gone for good? I'd argue that mild supersessionism cannot be eradicated at the level of the claim that Jesus is the Jewish messiah who has come to fulfil Israel, even if that fulfilment is finally eschatological, although inaugurated in history. Novak's view that Christianity 'solves the problems of Judaism better than Judaism can do without Christianity because Christianity provides the savior to whom Judaism has always looked' cannot be bypassed by orthodoxy. This entails witness and mission, but of a special kind which cannot spell the eradication of Jewish identity. The level of Jewish identity within Catholicism for those Jews who follow Christ is the complex litmus test that requires clarification. But if mild supersessionism exists within a genuine acknowledgement of the irrevocable covenant, then it also entails spelling out how Jewish theology and practices today, in their staggering diversity, genuinely illuminate, question and add to Christianity's worship of and love of the triune God.¹⁸

¹⁸ I am grateful to Professor Anna Sapir Abulafia, Dr Eliana Corbari, Rabbi Dr Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Fr Peter Hocken, Dr Mark S. Kinzer, Dr Edward Kessler, Professor Matthew Levering, Professor Didier Pollefeyt, Archbishop Kevin McDonald, Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet, Professor Marianne Moyaert and Fr. Henry Wansborough OSB for comments on an earlier draft or conversations on this matter. None of them are responsible for the views expressed which are my own.