

Gavin D’Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 240.

by *Raffaella Perin*

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul writes that Jews are still loved by God “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”¹ In the past centuries, Catholic theology on Jews’ role in the economy of salvation neglected to recognize the irrevocability of God’s promises to the Jewish people, preferring an interpretation of the relationship between the “old” and the “new” covenant in terms of “supersessionism.” It was not before the Second Vatican Council that the Catholic Church began the “aggiornamento” of its own theology and doctrine with regard to Judaism: a rethinking that began with the publication of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and that continues nowadays.

The book by Gavin D’Costa, a renowned British Catholic theologian, is part of the wide debate on this topic and, as the author states in the preface, its purpose is to examine the “doctrinal trajectories” in the contemporary age of the developments of the application of Paul’s teaching by the ecclesiastical magisterium. From a methodological point of view, the author circumscribes his analysis to the teachings of the magisterium, taking into account their different degrees of authority.

In the first chapter the author discusses the content of the unrevoked covenant with reference to Rabbinic and contemporary Judaism instead of Biblical Judaism. D’Costa argues that while during the Second Vatican Council the horizon in which the Fathers worked was still that of Biblical Judaism, it was Pope John Paul II who first began to speak of contemporary Jewry with the recognition that the Old Testament’s gifts and promises are still valid. Consequently, his successors did the same.

In order to answer more fully the question of the content of these promises, in the second chapter the author examines the value that the Catholic magisterium has given over the centuries to Jewish cultic rituals. He argues that there is no

¹ *Rom*, 11:29, <https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/english-standard-version/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/55/110001/119999/ch/cof5384f2006e13e66c65ffi135c765ce>, accessed June 26, 2022.

discontinuity nor doctrinal contradiction with past ecclesiastical pronouncements in the current claim that these rituals are alive and life giving, and that, as the 2015 text of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews states, “Jews are participants in God’s salvation” through these practices. In the context of Catholicism’s internal concern for the preservation of tradition, the author wants to demonstrate that there has been no overturn of the previous magisterium, because doctrine cannot contradict previous teachings, at most it can develop them. To this purpose, D’Costa argues that the previous tradition “operated with very different assumptions about the epistemic conditions of Jews and this meant a very different appraisal” (p. 28). D’Costa dusts off Thomas Aquinas’ theory of “invincible ignorance,” according to which, in regards to what one is required to know, “it is not imputed as a sin to man, if he fails to know what he is unable to know” (*Summa Theologiae*). He applies this theory to the epistemological condition in which Jews would have found themselves, and on the basis of which the ecclesiastical magisterium acted. The reasoning works, but only within a logical-theological system, namely, it is valid only within the space of a formal theological demonstration. Instead, it seems evident that outside this logic (i.e. if we exclude the fundamental assumption that D’Costa wants to demonstrate, namely that the magisterium does not contradict itself), by historicizing theology, we can clearly see the doctrine’s transformations on the issue of (the relationship with) Judaism in conjunction with cultural, social and political changes to which the Catholic Church, like any other earthly institution, is subject. In short, the theory of “invincible ignorance” risks sounding paternalistic and does not withstand the test of history: it would have to be proven that the Jews of the rabbinic era were prevented by circumstances (?) from knowing the truth of Christ.

As a corollary to this argument, the author considers three binding doctrinal teaching documents published in three very different periods of the history of the Church: Eugene IV’s bull *Cantate Domino* of 1442, Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici Corporis* of 1942 and the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus* of 2000. In the first document there is a long passage which says that after the coming of Christ Mosaic Law no longer has any meaning, and that whoever claims otherwise commits mortal sin; the second document maintains the sole exclusive salvific efficacy of Jesus Christ and states that no

salvific grace can be dissociated from Christ, a concept reiterated in the third document. The texts examined lead D’Costa to answer the question of the value for salvation of Jews’ ceremonial laws and ritual practices in these terms: when these acts are performed sincerely, as acts instituted by God, they are efficacious, but not sufficient in themselves for salvation. For Catholic theology it is necessary to believe in Jesus Christ and the Trinity to attain salvation, despite the fact that Rabbinic Judaism, now and always, participates in the mystery of God’s saving history. In this sense the magisterium seems to prefer the “trajectory” called “fulfillment theology.” It will be necessary to return to this later.

A key point of the whole question is addressed in the third and fourth chapters: one of the (irrevocable) promises of the covenant with the Jewish people is that of the promised land. The author therefore wonders whether this promise also falls within the new doctrinal perspective of Catholicism, and if so, whether the current political configuration, the State of Israel, can be accepted by the Catholic Church not only from a political-diplomatic point of view, but also on theological grounds. D’Costa sees in some recent documents of the Catholic magisterium what he calls a “minimalist Catholic Zionism.” Among these are the *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985); a speech by John Paul II to a Jewish audience in Brasilia (1991); the preamble to the Agreement of 1993; and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s report, *The Jewish Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001). The author highlights those parts of these documents in which the magisterium seems to use theological and scriptural elements to support a Catholic Zionism. In the chapter dedicated to the “Key Terminology Regarding this Question” (pp. 69-70), besides the clarifications regarding the use of phrases “Promise of the Land” and “Land of Israel,” it would have been useful to clarify the use of the term “Zionism,” which the author takes from the historical-political sphere and transposes into the theological one without specifying to which Zionism it refers and without the term appearing in any of the cited documents. If, however, by “Catholic Zionism” the author means that from 1985, as a consequence of the revision of Rom 11:29, there has been a theological endorsement of the return of the Jews to Palestine, and assuming but not granting that this is indeed the case (D’Costa’s interpretation is not the official one nor has it ever been adopted by the Holy See), then why, after the official recognition of the State of Israel by the

Vatican, would the Church have felt the need to further confirm the theological basis of this endorsement?

The author offers an attempt to interpret the Catholic magisterium on the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism with the (certainly noble) intention of underlining the possibility for Catholics to relate to Jews in a more “repentant, humble, positive” way (p. x). It is understandable that a Catholic theologian would use the hermeneutics that is familiar to him. But when it comes to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity theology seems insufficient. Catholic theology based its relation to Judaism on supersessionism, which for centuries negatively affected relations between the two religions with harmful consequences for the Jews. The mechanism that was implemented consisted in interpreting concepts from a religion other than Christianity from an internal point of view, that is, starting from concepts proper to Christianity. Judaism was not defined as it defined itself, but as its adversaries defined it, with the result of considering historical truth some Christian theological notions of history: for example, that God put an end to the covenant with the Jewish people; that the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem symbolizes God’s decision to put an end to the Jewish religion; that God condemned the Jewish people to dispersion and deprived it of its land following its refusal to believe in Jesus. Anti-Judaism meant that from the refusal of the Jewish religion to recognize the revelation of Jesus Christ came the need for a supposed divine punishment of the Jews in human history, with a practical and political implication that consisted in placing the Jews in a subordinate socio-political situation.

After the Second World War, and particularly in recent decades, great efforts have been made on both sides to try to build a Jewish-Christian dialogue. An indispensable condition has been the mutual recognition that they are two different religions. It follows that these two different religions have two different readings of “the promised land.” Jews believe that the land is not only a promise, but a gift and that they have the right to choose how to live, incarnate and interpret this promise, according to their own interpretation of the Torah. Christians have a different relationship to the same land. In the New Testament there are very few references to the land of Israel apart its holy sites, first of all the holy city, Jerusalem. Far more important is the message of “territorial universalism” contained in *Jn*, 4:21-24: Jesus says to the Samaritan woman “neither on this mountain nor in

Jerusalem you will worship the Father” because “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.”² Seeking in Catholic theology the basis for recognizing the right of the Jews to live in what they believe to be their promised land, means leading the relationship with Judaism back to a paternalistic logic while continuing to read Jewish history in a Christian key.

On the contrary, political and not theological recognition of the State of Israel not only guarantees respect for the autonomy of Judaism and the right to self-determination of Jews as a people, but also guarantees Catholics and the Holy See the freedom to make political judgments about the State of Israel without incurring anti-Judaism or worse, antisemitism, as when, for example, Catholics and the Vatican attempt to support Palestinian rights. In other words: it is one thing to criticize the Israeli government or the settlers for the violence perpetrated against the Palestinians in the light of the respect for human rights, and quite another to express the same criticism on the basis of theological reasons according to which these acts of the Israeli government would compromise the election of the Jewish people, with an inevitable anti-Jewish judgment. I fear that this is the inevitable consequence of defining Catholic Zionism, as D’Costa suggests, as “Catholic theological support for Israel as a manifestation of God’s love for his people” (p. 142).

This does not mean excluding the religious element completely: the Church welcomes, and recognizes as still valid, the triad “Torah, people, land” as constitutive elements of the covenant according to Jewish tradition, but the link between Christianity and Judaism lies in the people, not the State. It should also not be forgotten that not even Jews are unanimous in recognizing the State of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical promises. On the other hand, faced with a State that is increasingly sending out dangerous signs of religious Zionist hegemony, the Church will tend to defend the rights of Catholics and will not renounce their religious freedom in places it considers holy.

In the last chapter of the book the problem of salvation is addressed: what role remains for Jesus Christ in this new theological-doctrinal perspective? Should there be a mission to the Jewish people as there is to non-Christians? Should Jews

²<https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/english-standard-version/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/53/40001/49999/ch/d781c69a71f84c786e079f4bbdb13981>, accessed June 26, 2022.

who have become Catholics renounce the promises of the Mosaic covenant? These questions have polarized a wide-ranging debate. On the one hand, there are theologians who consider Jews in an “inclusive” perspective (Judaism as the root of Christianity), on the other hand there are those who support the existence of two ways of salvation, one valid for Jews and one for Christians. Focusing on the magisterial documents, out of coherence with the declared methodological boundary traced by the author, and simplifying greatly, we can look at the choices made by the recent pontiffs. Paul VI, with the publication of the new Missal in 1970 and the reform of the Good Friday liturgy, approved, along with the universal prayer that includes the one for the Jews, the theory of “fulfillment.” Under John Paul II, despite the strong impulse towards a Jewish-Christian dialogue, there is not much difference. Benedict XVI-Ratzinger in October 2017, in a text published in the journal *Communio*, wrote that the theory of substitution “goes in the right direction but in its individual parts must be rethought,” and on the question of Zionism he clearly stated:

At the basis of this recognition [of the State of Israel] there is the conviction that a State understood in a strictly theological sense, a State of the Jewish religion, which would want to consider itself as the political and religious fulfillment of the promises, according to the Christian faith is not thinkable in the historical dimension and would be in opposition to the Christian understanding of the promises.

Recently, Pope Francis stumbled into the logic of opposition, provoking criticism both in the Jewish and the Catholic world. During a homily at Santa Marta in August 2021, the pope said:

The Law, however, does not give life, it does not offer the fulfillment of the promise because it is not capable of being able to fulfill it. The Law is a journey, a journey that leads toward an encounter... Those who seek life need to look to the promise and to its fulfillment in Christ.

These words are clearly in contradiction with the attitude Francis held until then with regard to Jews, but also with the push for ecumenical and inter-religious

dialogue that he has always promoted. One can wonder who wrote this text, maybe not the pope himself, but nonetheless he read it. One explanation might have to do with the reigning pontiff's relationship with theology. His pronouncements do not have absolute value, both for the form and the occasions in which they are given, and because the aim never seems to be that of a doctrinal definition, but rather pastoral. In this sense, the 2015 back-and-forth between Cardinals Gerhard Müller and Walter Kasper, respectively former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, appears emblematic. The guardian of orthodoxy, in an interview with the French Catholic newspaper *La Croix*, claimed that his own dicastery was responsible for offering “theological structuring” to Bergoglio's pontificate. Kasper, Francis' theologian of reference, responded: “We must reject the arrogance of European theology and stop believing that we can teach this Pope. Instead, it is he who teaches us: even a European theologian can learn a lot from Francis, from his gestures and his words.”

In conclusion, in this book D'Costa deals with an extremely sensitive and complicated subject with clear language and never assertively. He gives his point of view, perfectly aware that his interpretation could sound controversial. D'Costa's book has the merit of relaunching the debate, of leading to further reflection on an issue that seems far from finding a definitive solution. The dialogue among scholars from different disciplines (history, theology, political science, etc.) offers the possibility of avoiding dogmatism and outcries, which for centuries have accompanied the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It remains to be understood to what extent the ecclesiastical magisterium will be willing to accept in full, and above all when, the contributions of the new studies on the topic. On this, once again, history will tell.

Raffaella Perin, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

How to quote this article:

Raffaella Perin, review of *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II*, by Gavin D'Costa, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 21, no. 1 (2022), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13328