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## THE RETURN OF CHRISTIAN SUPERSESSSIONISM<sup>1</sup>

I am drawing here on the 90-page introduction to an essay collection in progress: **PEACE & FAITH: CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**, coedited by Cary Nelson & Michael Gizzi [Please note: In order to make the oral presentation comprehensible, I eliminated the citations for quotations; they are supplied here.]

On January 26, 1904, Theodor Herzl met with Pope Pius X to seek the Pope's support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Cardinal Merry del Val, the Vatican Secretary of State attended as well. According to Herzl's account in his diaries, which is not disputed, the Pope's reply was blunt: "We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem—but we could never sanction it. The soil of Jerusalem, if it was not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of the Church I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." After Herzl elaborated on his argument, asking that the religious issue be set aside in face of the rise of anti-Semitism, the Pope added that "The Jewish religion was the foundation of our own; but it was superseded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot concede it any further validity."

Over a hundred years later, Pope Benedict XVI on his 2009 visit to the Holy Land would not only endorse the Jewish state's right to exist ("Let it be universally recognized that the State of Israel has the right to exist, and to enjoy peace and security within internationally recognized borders.") but also commend the two-state solution and give that form of peace something like biblical status by

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invoking Isaiah 42:6: “let peace spread outwards from these lands, let them serve as a ‘light to the nations’” (Herzel *Diaries* 1602-4).

Benedict’s statement is fundamentally aspirational, a contextual prayer, rather than a theological declaration. In one of the little recognized features of what remains a substantially hierarchical church, even a Pope’s statements in and of themselves do not necessarily possess the ultimate doctrinal authority. But they obviously carry practical weight in encouraging how Catholics worldwide are urged to think. And the Catholic Church still has the capacity to influence world opinion and how some Protestant denominations see religious issues. The complex web of Vatican divisions and agencies also speak with varying degrees of authority. However, papal statements carry inertial, incremental force when they build on, amplify, or reinforce central elements of evolving theology.

Benedict’s prayer most centrally reinforces the impact of 1965’s *Nostra Aetate*, widely regarded as the single most positively transformative document in Jewish/Christian relations in centuries. To understand how we got from Pius X to *Nostra Aetate* and Benedict’s prayer requires some history. We need particularly to review the distinction between hard and soft supersessionism. And we need to recognize that supersessionism returns in several different ways, most of them grounded in fundamental attacks on the existence of the Jewish state, though not in warranted critiques of Israeli policy. The return or revival of supersessionism—I add revival because it never really went away--is partly in the replication of supersessionism’s structural features and partly with the echoing of its implementing anti-Semitic tropes. Thus, when Rutgers faculty member Jasbir Puar revives blood libel accusations by saying Israelis are harvesting Palestinian organs or deliberately stunting the growth of Palestinian children, she helps facilitate a structural and temporal claim that the Jewish state’s covenantal and moral authority have been superceded. Christian BDS advocates tend to make the moral

and theological arguments in tandem. That is apparent in the Presbyterian publications analyzed in the background reading you received. Part of what I am going to do today is to give you the arguments and tropes that will enable you to recognize the correspondences between supersessionism and the demonization of the Jewish state, though I'm not going to be able to document all those correspondences.

### **MODIFYING SUPERSESSIONISM**

Within a few hundred years of the establishment of the Christian church, a temporal narrative coalesced to define Christianity's relationship with its Jewish sources. R. Kendall Soulen summarizes this story in which the church supersedes or replaces Judaism:

God's abiding commitment to creation passes through the flesh of the people Israel in the Old Covenant and ultimately lodges with irrevocable finality in the one Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth. But with that the vocation of the people Israel reaches its foreordained goal and comes to an end. In the process, God's commitment to Israel's flesh is revealed as only a passing stage on the way to god's truly abiding commitment, which is to Christ and the community of salvation in its spiritual form. (54)

This encapsulates "hard" supersessionism, the theological position that largely defined the church until the mid-1960s, when formal efforts to moderate supersessionism in an alternate theology began to emerge, producing what has come to be known as "soft" supersessionism. In "The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought" David Novak distinguishes between the hard and the soft versions of supersessionism. Eugene Korn has summarized the difference:

“Hard” supersessionism (i.e., the doctrine that the new covenant replaced the Jewish covenant and that, after Jesus, God rejected the Jews in favor of the church) was the longstanding Christian teaching regarding Judaism and the Jews. The “new Israel” has invalidated the “old Israel,” and the new covenant of the spirit rendered the Mosaic covenant limited temporally, i.e., during the time the Jerusalem Temple stood. The concurrent validity of the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant (i.e., “soft” supersessionism,” the doctrine that the church has grafted onto the living tree of the Jewish people, that the new covenant is the ultimate fulfillment of the still-living Jewish covenant) with its implication that there could be concurrent validity to both the Mosaic and the new covenants, was entertained by only a few early Christian thinkers, but ultimately rejected by early normative Christian theology, which was so heavily shaped by Augustine’s hard supersessionist understanding of covenantal history. With the advent of the new covenant of the spirit, the Mosaic covenant became meaningless, even an obstacle to future salvation history . . . . according to hard supersessionism, if Christianity is true, post-Temple Judaism must be false—or at least dead. (“The People Israel” 163)

As Joseph D. Small points out, “categories of promise (Old Testament) and fulfillment (New Testament) have served to downgrade the life and faith of Israel to the status of a religious preface” (128). As Edward Kessler wrote earlier, “fulfillment easily slides into replacement and substitution theory is alive and well in the pews” (Reflections”). Fulfillment still leaves us in supersessionist territory.

As Steven McMichael writes, “by the time we get to the end of the Middle Ages, the standard theological position was that only the moral commandments of

the old covenant were to be observed and everything else of the old covenant was null and void in terms of its religious and salvific efficacy” (58). “The Old Testament plays a role purely to point (usually in a way that erases itself after pointing through allegory and typology) to what is known in the New” (D’Costa 24). “The Torah and Jewish tradition” Novak adds, “are now past memories rather than living norms” (“Covenant” 67). “For hard supersessionism,” he explains, “the old covenant is dead. The Jews by their sins, most prominently their sin of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, have forfeited any covenantal status” (66). Indeed, from this perspective, the failure to embrace Jesus as the Messiah led to the Jews being cast out of the land of Canaan. “Hard supersessionists,” he continues more bluntly, “treat Jews who are not Christians as if they were dead. To hard supersessionists, it is almost accidental that Christianity came out from the Jewish people and their Judaism at all . . . . Whereas hard supersessionists look to Christianity as emerging *ex nihilo*, as it were, soft supersessionists look to Christianity as emerging *de novo*” (67). “*Ex nihilo*” suggests Christianity has no predecessor; “*de novo*” implies Christianity emerged from a preexisting reality, namely Judaism. Yet even soft supersessionism aims to displace Judaism by negating the covenantal promise through its spiritualization, thereby erasing the value of Jewish attachment to the Holy Land and transferring its sacrality to Christianity. “The ‘land’ of Israel is only a symbolic pointer towards a very different land, a ‘heavenly homeland’” ( D’Costa 92). In the process, Christianity promotes a corrupting self-aggrandizement: “imagining that it has replaced Israel, the church becomes susceptible to distorted, idealized images of itself” (Small 136).

The church’s self-aggrandizement is facilitated by a carnality/spirituality binary imposed on the opposition between Judaism and Christianity, with the church “declaring itself the ‘new spiritual Israel’ that had superseded the old carnal

Israel in God's election and design" (Soulen ix). In that model, "the old carnal Israel existed merely as a temporary foreshadowing" of the spiritual reality to come (Soulen 11). It was always thus: "the 'spiritual' church is destined from all eternity to replace carnal Israel in God's plans" (Soulen 19). "Israel corresponds to Christ in a merely prefigurative and carnal way, whereas the church corresponds to Jesus Christ in a definitive and spiritual way" (Soulen 29). "The Old Testament dispensation has *redemptive power solely by virtue of its reference to the future coming of Christ*" (Soulen 27, italics in original). Yet as the word made flesh, Jesus's physical presence troubles the binary in ways that cannot easily be overcome by invocations of mystery. Michael's Wysogrod's compelling declaration that Israel "is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation" (*Body* xv) stands as a definitive rejoinder in that debate.

It was largely inevitable that supersessionist theology would lead to the triumphalist teaching of contempt toward Judaism. Supersessionism embodies the assumption that "the stature and truth of Christianity is founded on the rejection of Judaism" (Magid 106). Indeed, Jewish ritual observance is declared not only dead but deadening, a destructive force. As Soulen writes, "supersessionism has shaped the narrative and doctrinal structure of classical Christian theology in fundamental and systemic ways" (3). It may be the case that "this idea is arguably so deeply rooted in Christianity that it cannot easily be excised, if excised at all" (Magid 108). Gavin D'Costa argues that soft supersessionism in some form "is necessary to Catholicism" (26). Yet "genuine Jewish-Christian dialogue cannot take place until the erasure of Judaism implicit in supersessionism is somehow mitigated" (Magid 108). The Catholic Church, along with mainline Protestant churches, has followed the route of theological mitigation. Founded on that historic work, both institutional and individual behavior can be reformed, substantially purged of

contempt. A rapprochement of sorts can follow from a position that Christians and Jews can agree to disagree theologically.

Supersessionism is now experiencing a resurgence in the rise of anti-Zionism, though it never actually disappeared. *Nostra Aetate* sought to put an end to supersessionism's single most malicious abiding prop, the conviction paired with fantasies Jews were poisoning the wells and murdering Christian children to give warrant not only to anti-Semitism but also to group murder in pogroms. And that warrant for homicide, of course, was the conviction that Jews killed Jesus. Prompted at first by Palestinian Liberation Theology and its key advocates, notably Jerusalem-based Anglican cleric and founder of The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center Naim Ateek, a series of anti-Zionist tropes created contemporary analogues to deicide. As he stated in 2001, "It seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him." Palestinians were appointed living victims of Jewish organized crucifixions under the slogan "Christ at the Checkpoint," suffering as Jesus did. Absurdly, Jesus himself was characterized as a Palestinian by some, including PLT theologian Mitri Raheb. Echoing an Ateek reflection, the US Methodist church issued a book-length anti-Zionist manifesto, *Israel-Palestine: A Mission Study for 2007-2008*, that transferred a recurrent Christian challenge—"Who moved the stone" blocking Christ's tomb and facilitated his resurrection—to Israel. The state of Israel has placed a boulder blocking Palestinian liberation. Who will remove that stone?

Unlike the BDS movement in Christian churches, the secular BDS movement has little interest in religious supersessionism, but it certainly embraces a secular equivalent. Any moral authority Israel may have possessed in the wake of the Holocaust has been eradicated by Palestinian victimhood and superseded by Palestinian moral authority. More broadly, any moral authority progressive Zionists worldwide might have possessed is now null and void. The argument put

forward by Steven Salaita and Nora Erakat—that Zionists should be cast out of all progressive causes and organizations—draws on the same currents and implicates most Jews in the process.

The broad context for these themes is our understanding of how theology did and continues to evolve across the whole range of Christian churches. The narrower context is in how attitudes toward the Abrahamic covenant play out when Christian churches reflect on the status of the Jewish state, particularly when confronted by the Christian wing of the BDS movement. Christians are haunted, as Benjamin Ish Shalom puts it, by the possibility that the return of the Jews to Zion is “a religious event transcending accepted historical political categories.” The possibility remains prominent for Christian BDS. As Gary Anderson writes in “The Return to Zion,” it is difficult for Christians to avoid asking “How is one to understand the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel in our own day theologically? The challenge for the religious believer has been whether or not to understand it as part of the eschatological fulfillment of scriptural promises.” As detailed readings of a series of texts will suggest, the Christian BDS movement in effect embraces various versions of hard supersessionism. In their view, not only Israelis but also Zionists worldwide have transgressed against the moral code on which the ancient Jewish covenant was conditioned and have thus lost whatever land guarantees the covenant included, since Zionists are essentially crucifying Jesus once more in the person of suffering Palestinians. That trope leads to the demonization of the tiny Jewish state as the new Roman empire.

Among Americans who apparently believe God’s covenant with the Jews is conditional upon their behavior, one of the most prominent is former US president Jimmy Carter. In his 1985 book *The Blood of Abraham*, he recalls attending a Sabbath service at a kibbutz in northern Galilee during his 1973 trip to Israel. He was shocked that there were only two other worshippers (25). When he meets with

Prime Minister Golda Meir toward the end of the trip, the experience still troubles him. He tells her about the Sabbath service and remarks what seems “a general absence of religious interest among the Israelis.” Then he gives her a theological warning for the present: “I commented that during biblical times, the Israelites triumphed when they were close to God and were defeated when unfaithful” (29). In the feedback loop that operates with supersessionism and its collateral concepts, the belief that the state of Israel has abrogated the covenant between God and the Jews reinforces the conviction that Christianity has superceded Judaism.

A detailed argument fusing the supersessionist theological and political arguments that Israel’s conduct has voided the Jewish people’s right to the land can be found in Walter Brueggemann’s influential 2015 book *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. A professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia and a minister of the United Church of Christ, Brueggemann regularly advocates for the BDS movement. He describes Israelis as “a covenant people and a state that relies on military power without reference to covenantal restraints” (56). There are two separate questions here, each relevant to the claim: (1) whether Israel exercises restraint in responding to military action from Hamas, the paramilitary terrorist group that has controlled Gaza since 2007; and (2) whether the government of Israel conceptualizes restraint in terms of its biblical covenant. The answer to the first question is *yes*, within limits, as evidenced by the care Israel has taken to minimize civilian deaths during armed conflict. The answer to the second question is *no*, as Israel applies the ethical principles embodied in whole centuries of Jewish tradition, rather than self-consciously trying to emulate covenantal restraints. Brueggemann wants to conflate the two questions, as his book demonstrates, so that he can bring down the wrath of the prophets upon Israel. Drawing on passages in Deuteronomy, he wants us to “conclude that the land is given to Israel unconditionally, but it is held by

Israel conditionally” (29). Brueggemann and the BDS movement want us to believe the covenant has been broken anew in our own time.

In the 1970s and 1980s, though new versions of soft supersessionism began to appear, Jews concerned with these distinctions often experienced “soft” supersessionism as supersessionism nonetheless, even if interfaith dialogue is often facilitated by the shift to soft supersessionism. Pope John Paul II’s 1980 declaration that the covenant with the Jewish people had never been revoked effectively gave the soft supersessionist trend a crucial boost. As Mary Boys and others have pointed out, declaring that the divine covenant with the Jews has not been revoked “leaves open . . . what the positive implication might be,” since “to assert that the ‘old covenant’ has not been revoked carries little import if there is no theological reason for the existence of Judaism after the coming of Jesus Christ” (104, 82). “The result is the evisceration of the God of Israel in Christian theology” (Soulen 55). “The Jews were simply a vestige of an earlier age of religious consciousness, and their eventual extinction could be expected with the gradual advance of Christian civilization” (Soulen 2).

Given that soft supersessionism aims to change centuries of theology and rectify the severe human consequences it has produced, it is not surprising that the process has taken time. Nor has it been without backsliding. As Mary Boys suggests in her account of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s 1998 book *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, even a single text can embody both trends. Thus, although “the Sinai covenant is indeed superseded,” Ratzinger argues, its greater truth inheres and will be revealed for those who turn to Christ (70). Boys points out that the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church “gives its readers virtually no sense of Judaism as a living, vital tradition. It may speak of the covenant as not having been revoked—but that covenant seems only to play a preparatory role for the new covenant of Christianity” (70, 91). On the

other hand, Michael Signer reports that some contemporary Jewish texts on the covenant issue “do not utilize the discourse of new and old covenant. They move in the direction of covenant as relationship rather than covenant as boundary marker . . . they seem to be removed from the ‘diachronic’ or ‘progressive’ notion that ‘new’ is better than ‘old’” (121). Boys calls progression “the positive side of discontinuity,” which, as she recognizes, thus leaves discontinuity in place (95).

In recent years, some evangelicals have qualified their convictions about the end of days and about the role contemporary history and geopolitics play in preparing for those events; in so doing they abandon the certainty of premillennial dispensationalism for what has been called the New Christian Zionism.

Dispensationalists embrace a nineteenth-century belief in a broad theological periodization of history; premillennial dispensationalists like John Hagee (1940-) and Jerry Falwell (1933-2007) anticipate Christ returning to rule the earth for a thousand years. New Christian Zionism, a movement that includes both evangelical and non-evangelical Christians, espouses humility about human knowledge of history’s trajectory. As Gerald McDermott writes, the movement rejects the notion that we can “plot the sequence or chronology of end-time events” (“Introduction” 14). On the contrary, for New Christian Zionists, the end of days “is a mystery we must not think we can penetrate with any precision” (“Implications and Propositions” 331). Abandoning the certainty that the end of days is readably inscribed in contemporary events may allow for both a more nuanced relationship with Israel—one in which Israeli policies can be criticized but in which Israel’s right to exist is unquestioned—and better relations between Christians and Jews worldwide. A two-state solution becomes plausible because it is no longer considered heretical for Israel to cede part of its covenanted land to achieve peace. Embracing the Jewish state puts to rest the long-held Christian conviction that the Jews were cast aside by God for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah

and are thus doomed to live in exile from the Promised Land until either they repent of their error or the Kingdom of God arrives.

Rather than give Judaism a theological and historical role that is functional but decidedly transitory, New Christian Zionism insists instead that both Christianity and Judaism will be transformed when the Messiah appears. This position partly parallels some versions of Jewish utopian messianism in which the Messiah's arrival will be heralded by transformative extra-natural events—though there are other Jewish messianic traditions, like that of Moses Maimonides, which are not comparably apocalyptic or utopian. Gershom Scholem helped draw the distinction in “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism.”

Instead of thinking of Israel as a placeholder for an eventual conversion site, the existing Jewish state is seen by some New Christian Zionists to “represent a provisional and proleptic fulfillment of the promises of that world to come” (McDermott “Introduction” 27), a change in focus that makes present-day Israel “a place of spiritual testing” (McDermott “A History of Christian Zionism” 50). Israelis are to be engaged with in terms of how they live now, not on the basis of future guarantees that eliminate the need for contemporary understanding and assessment. Of course New Christian Zionism remains Christian, which means that the discomfort Jews have with its claims to a universal truth still obtains. As Darrell Bock writes, Jesus is “the one in whom covenant promises are realized . . . . the Messiah of all, both Jew and Gentile,” and therefore “there is no reason for a two-covenant view of Israel that says Gentiles are saved through Jesus but Israel is saved through the Torah” (309). But this difference is with Christianity itself, not primarily with Christian Zionism old or new.

Nonetheless, a functional rapprochement between Christians and Jews is possible. Robert Jenson writes that “We are separated by just one question: Did the God of Israel in fact raise his servant Jesus from the dead or did he not?”

Theologically, yes; that question about Jesus' nature captures what fundamentally separates Christians and Jews. Practically, no; it doesn't suffice to account for the problem. Part of what separates us is ignorance. Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee's Director of International Jewish Affairs, observed that he meets bishops who do not even know the content of *Nostra Aetate*. Lisa Palmieri-Billig, AJC's representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See, remarks that she meets many Christians who are shocked when told that Jesus was a Jew: "How can that be?" If *Nostra Aetate* was a miraculous transformation of the Olympian Heights, it has yet to fully penetrate to the grass roots after more than half a century. So education is one route to further mitigation of supersessionism. But the most resistant barrier is the existence of the Jewish State. One action in particular could facilitate the sixty year project of mitigating supersessionism: for Christian churches, including the Vatican, to formally adopt the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. Despite continuing efforts at persuasion, the Vatican has been unwilling to do so. That is one key priority for the work of reconciliation and an effective way to counter the revival of supersessionism that is based on hostility to the Jewish state.

The theological work might begin with Christian reconsideration of the status of Jews as the chosen people. As Willie James Jennings argues, "the election of Israel has never significantly entered into the social imagination of the church. Israel's election has not done any real theological work for Christian existence" (253). One may nonetheless suggest the basis on which that work could proceed. As Joseph D. Small writes, "Everything goes back to God's promise to Abraham . . . the church, by and of itself, cannot claim that it is the people of God . . . Christians and Jews, synagogue and church, are bound together irreversibly, precisely as the peoples of God" (157, 158). Markus Barth is especially direct: "It is not enough to say that salvation *came* from the Jews; for

salvation *comes* from the Jews” (47-48). As Karl Barth has written, “God’s faithfulness in the reality of Israel is in fact the guarantee of His faithfulness to us too, and so to all men” (80). The irrevocable, unbreakable covenant with the Jews is the truth from which flows Christianity’s faith in its own covenantal status.

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