

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

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Gavin D'Costa's latest book offers a richly informative and deeply inviting presentation of a Catholic approach to Christian-Jewish relations. It is dogmatically-oriented, historically-grounded, and dialogically-informed. Along with revisiting some of the perennial questions of Christian-Jewish relations, such as the salvific status of the Jewish covenant and Catholic missions to the Jewish people, this book also breaks new ground in Catholic theology. D'Costa takes up issues that have largely been sidelined by most Catholics, such as the theological status of the Land and the State of Israel as well as the theological significance and ecclesial status of Hebrew Catholics and Messianic Jews within the Church. This book contains an impressive amount of research in sources across religious traditions and historical periods. It effectively creates a virtual symposium of Catholic and Jewish voices, providing readers with an immersive and lively learning experience. Also featured in this book are the meticulous methodological exposition of the varying degrees of authority in Catholic magisterial pronouncements and an argument for their logical consistency in spite of their apparent contradictions, hallmarks of D'Costa's many writings.

One of the major accomplishments of this book is that it breaks new ground in Catholic thought regarding the theology of the Land and even the State of Israel. The way D'Costa articulates what he calls a "minimalist Catholic Zionism" exemplifies a promising and concrete paradigm for future Christian-Jewish dialogue (67-68). D'Costa emphasizes his faithfulness to Catholic belief, seeking continuity with biblical hermeneutics and magisterial teachings. He is also committed to learning from Jewish perspectives, taking into consideration not only elements of Jewish beliefs but also the history of Jewish existence among Christians and in the Land of Israel. This "minimalist Catholic Zionism" is not simply ancillary to Catholic anti-supersessionist theology but a major new development. For example, one of D'Costa's proposals is that the Temple of Jerusalem, were it to be rebuilt in the Land of Israel, would deserve Catholics' "reverence and respect," even as Catholics

do not regard such restoration as religiously “significant” (101). Drawing on established doctrinal precedents, D’Costa envisions the Church of the future to be open to unprecedented ways of embodying and living out its dual affirmations both of Christ as the universal savior and of the Jewish covenant as irrevocable. Furthermore, D’Costa argues that Catholics should acknowledge the possible relevance of the State of Israel to the religious link between the Land and the Jewish people, while cautiously avoiding any theological pronouncement on the political State itself. Impressively, in addition to examining the development of official Catholic teachings through a series of magisterial statements in order to discover a doctrinal “trajectory,” D’Costa also directly consults the writings of Jewish thinkers such as Michael Wyschogrod for theological insights, thereby paving the way for a comparative theological endeavor in developing a Catholic Zionism.

Another important achievement of this book is the comprehensive demonstration that, ever since Vatican II, official Church teachings have consistently upheld two key positions simultaneously: that Jesus Christ is necessary for the salvation of everyone, without exception, and that Jews who do not believe in Christ remain in a saving covenantal relationship with God. D’Costa is concerned that many participants in Christian-Jewish dialogues have failed to represent accurately what he views as the Church’s official positions by downplaying, if not outright denying, teachings regarding the necessity of belief in Jesus Christ and the Church’s obligation to universal mission. To address this, D’Costa shows that the Church’s missionary obligation is asserted not only in the supposedly conservative magisterial statements, such as *Dominus Iesus* (2000), but also in Church statements more well-received by Jews, most notably the recent Vatican statement “*Gifts and Calling*” (2015). Accordingly, he says, theologians who are widely regarded as opposing active mission to the Jewish people, such as Cardinal Walter Kasper, actually maintain the necessity of mission, as long as mission is properly understood as “witness” instead of coercive proselytization. Similarly, he says, contrary to popular beliefs, Benedict XVI’s decision to restore the earlier Good Friday prayers in the Extraordinary Form of the Mass was not a call to proselytization. Marshalling these and other examples, D’Costa argues that people’s misunderstanding of Catholic teaching regarding mission is a result of a lack of terminological clarity, which D’Costa’s analyses and evaluations help clean up considerably. In doing so, D’Costa also seeks to defuse the long-standing antagonism between Catholics and Jews surrounding “mission.” Further, through a careful reading of Church statements and theologians’ writings he tries to show that the idea of mission as witness is not as divisive within the Church as many have thought. If D’Costa is correct, there is an implicit challenge to Jewish dialogue participants to find a way to respect these Catholic doctrines instead of dismissing them as detrimental to Catholic-Jewish relations.

While D’Costa attempts to reconcile these and many other existing theological tensions in Christian-Jewish relations, an important issue left unresolved is the extent to which Christians’ unorganized, untargeted “witness” of their faith before Jews should, or should not, include the desire for the conversion of Jews to the

Christian faith. Due to theological, historical, psychological, and many other reasons, the majority of Jews will likely find a Christian desire to convert them inherently repugnant, even if this does not include coercive or targeted efforts. The issue regarding proselytization versus uncoerced “witness” is about the “how” of Christian evangelization, whereas the issue regarding whether Christians should desire Jews to become Christians is the more fundamental issue about the “what” and “why” of Christian evangelization. On this issue, D’Costa’s book does not offer substantial clarity regarding the relationship between mission, witness, and conversion. Rather, the ambiguity of this relationship is at times magnified in D’Costa’s discussion. For instance, by promoting the principle that any “possible conversion” of Jews “must not eradicate Jewish religious identity,” D’Costa may simply intend to remove an obstacle for Jews who desire to follow Jesus (187). However, this principle of compatibility can also lead to the possibility of Hebrew Catholics’ and Messianic Jews’ serving as alternative forms of targeted institutional effort to solicit Jewish conversions. Thus, D’Costa’s portrayal of Hebrew *ecclesia* as one form of Christian “witness” among many lacks consideration of its inherent Jewishness-oriented (“Hebrew”) and highly institutional (“*ecclesia*”) characteristics which can introduce considerable complications to Christian-Jewish relations. Moreover, D’Costa quotes the 2015 Vatican statement which admits that how Jews can be saved “without confessing Christ explicitly [...] remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (165). D’Costa recognizes that many Catholic theologians, out of humility before this “unfathomable” mystery of God, say Catholics should not attempt to convert Jews, even as they publicly give witness to their Christian faith and express their Christian identity. However, it is unclear why D’Costa dismisses this position and instead urges Catholics to take initiatives to evangelize to the Jews with a respectful yet adamant desire for their conversion in this world, arguing that “even if the Jewish ‘coming in’ happens at the end times, *whatever that means*, logically that *does not determine anything* about the historical mission to Jews before the end times” (172, emphasis added).

Likewise, some readers may object to D’Costa’s defense of the term “invincible ignorance,” though D’Costa helpfully clarifies that invincible ignorance refers to an objective human intellectual and existential condition and is not meant as a derogatory or exclusivist term (38-44). In fact, as D’Costa argues, the term “invincible ignorance” can temper another more ancient and more offensive term, *pōrōsis* (hardening) (58-60). Furthermore, “invincible ignorance” serves as a much-needed clarification of the meaning of economic or “soft” supersessionism. It allows for the possibility of the continuing “teleological” validity of the Jewish covenant. It is no longer “dead and deadening” but rather truly irrevocable in the positive sense, even as its rituals and ceremonies are no longer salvifically efficacious from the Christian perspective (43, 54). On the other hand, this clarification of theological language, while certainly necessary, may not be a sufficient solution to the problem the term is meant to address. While D’Costa successfully delineates one trajectory of magisterial teachings concerning the inaccessibility of Christian convictions to the Jewish people, equally worthy of consideration are other trajectories also present in Church statements over the centuries suggesting that Christians are also

responsible for acknowledging their own limitations in developing and expressing their soteriology and missiology. Thus, D'Costa's understanding of invincible ignorance appears to be unbalanced, as he focuses almost entirely on the invincible ignorance of Jews with regard to Christian faith, but rarely addresses Catholic ignorance of the profound Jewish covenantal relationship with God. In other words, Catholics also carry a kind of ignorance that is at least partially parallel to the Jewish "ignorance" of Jesus (*"Gifts and Calling"* 31).

Overall, this rewarding book demonstrates D'Costa's solid theological and historical research, faithful commitment to Catholic doctrinal integrity, and humility and openness as an experienced participant in Christian-Jewish dialogue. It will serve as a very beneficial resource not only for scholars and students in Christian-Jewish relations, but also for anyone who is interested in gaining insights into the dogmatic inner-working of the Catholic Church, even as one may dispute some of the specifics of D'Costa's arguments and findings.