

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

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Since Vatican II no more important work has appeared by a Catholic theologian on the Jews and Judaism than Gavin D’Costa’s *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II*, together with its predecessor volume on the Council itself, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (2016). Among the many merits of D’Costa’s work is precisely that he treats the Church’s relation to the Jewish people and Judaism as a doctrinal matter, rather than seeing it only as a pastoral, political, catechetical, or public relations issue. For Catholics it is all the latter, no doubt, but first of all it is a doctrinal matter, one that poses difficult questions about the coherence of Catholic teaching, as D’Costa sees clearly. There is much to discuss in this remarkably stimulating book, but here I will focus on the issue of doctrinal coherence, which D’Costa rightly sees as basic.

Our own time has seen a remarkable development of doctrine within Catholicism, which D’Costa’s two books carefully document. Taken together, *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate*, and subsequent papal teaching establish as normative Catholic doctrine the proposition that God’s covenant with the Jewish people “has never been revoked,” in John Paul II’s momentous phrase. Put positively, the God known to and worshipped by the Church maintains with the Jewish people today, and until the end of time, the covenant made with their forefathers according to the flesh, the covenant attested with great clarity and force by the Christian scriptures.

Any Catholic must assume this is an authentic development of doctrine, given the highly, and in some respects supremely, authoritative sources from which it comes. At the same time, *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate*, subsequent papal teaching, the Christian scriptures, and the Catholic tradition from early on teach that God desires every human being to enter the one Church of Christ—the Roman Catholic

Church—by faith and baptism, and, accordingly, that the Church's mission to proclaim the gospel is truly universal, extending to every human being. How can this be? The two teachings, both of which now have the status of normative Catholic doctrine, are apparently incompatible. God's abiding covenant with the Jews seems to deny the uniqueness and universality of the saving work of Christ, enacted by his Church, and the universal reach of God's call to faith in Christ and baptism into his Church seems to deny his abiding covenant with the Jews. Prominent figures in the Church, from popes on down, insist first on one, then on the other, to the alternate dismay of those especially concerned with each. Thus the problem of doctrinal coherence in this area posed for Catholics after the Council. D'Costa attends closely to it in the present book, especially in chapter 2 and from a different angle in chapter 5.

For a Catholic, recognizing in both doctrines authentic teaching given to the Church by God, the question cannot be whether the two cohere. It can only be how they cohere. As D'Costa shows, however, this is not easy to say. Inability to offer a convincing explanation—in the first place to ourselves—of how our doctrines fit together is a grave problem. Despite our readiness to congratulate ourselves on our tolerance for ambiguity or our embrace of paradox, the human mind loathes contradiction, and flees it. At best it takes great and continuing effort to hold onto beliefs of whose opposition we have become clearly aware, even when we also believe that the two can in fact be reconciled, though we do not presently know how. Our normal course is simply to ignore one of the conflicting beliefs, generally without admitting to ourselves that we are doing this. Most Catholic writing on the Jews and Judaism since Vatican II follows just this urge to flee contradiction, with the Church's consistent teaching on the absolute universality of her own divine mission usually the doctrine allowed to disappear into the shadows. D'Costa, to his great credit, confronts the matter head on.

The apparent conflict of doctrines here does not depend, it is important to note, on the traditional Christian claim that the “ceremonial” laws of the Old Testament—circumcision is the paradigm—have since the coming of Christ become not only “dead” (*mortua*) but “death-dealing” (*mortifera*), and thereby incompatible with covenant fidelity to the God known to the Church. The appearance of contradiction is therefore not alleviated by dispensing with this traditional teaching. *Nostra Aetate* 2 itself holds that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is true and holy” in the belief and practice of any non-Christian religion, while at the same time insisting that the Church's mission to join every human being to her own life through faith and baptism extends to the adherents of these religions. The Church can therefore affirm that the “ceremonial” practices of traditional Judaism are not “death-dealing,” but holy and life-giving, without at all denying that she has a divine mandate to call everyone committed to these practices, as to those of Hinduism or Buddhism (recalling the cases central for NA 2), to full Catholic life by faith and baptism. The great difference that sets the Jewish people apart from the Catholic point of view is the certainty that the practices, not only of biblical Israel but of traditional Judaism, are not only “true and holy,” but given by God as a necessary means by which the Jewish people will remain until the end of time a discreet and

visible sign to all the nations, the covenant people bound by the unrevoked calling made to the patriarchs and their descendants forever.

D'Costa makes a strong case that the *mortifera* teaching, while strongly attested in the Western tradition, does not rise to the level of Catholic doctrine, particularly in a way that would rule out any non-culpable practice of traditional Judaism. In fact Catholic doctrine, long before Vatican II, seems to allow for this. The way is thus open in Catholic teaching for the embrace, even within the Church, of at least some traditional Jewish practices. This is important, as we will see in a moment, but as D'Costa recognizes it does not by itself untie the apparent knot of doctrinal conflict with which he and I are alike concerned.

To that problem D'Costa offers, if I read him correctly, two distinct solutions. One of these turns on the notion of the permissive will of God. This approach, while suggestive and thought-provoking, is, I think, unconvincing. The other solution turns on the reality of Hebrew Catholics (as distinguished from Messianic Jews), that is, the reality of a small community of Jews fully converted to Catholicism by faith in Christ, baptism, and Eucharistic life who continue to engage in traditional Jewish practices that enable them to be recognized as Jews within the Catholic Church. Here, I think, D'Costa proposes a genuine solution to the doctrinal problem, an account of the coherence of Catholic teaching on the unrevoked covenant with the Jewish people and the universal mission of the Church. Serious difficulties remain, but they are of a practical, rather than a logical and conceptual, kind.

Catholic teaching seems to say that God wills two incompatible things; this is the core of the doctrinal conflict emerging in the wake of Vatican II. God wills that every human being enter the visible communion of the Catholic Church by faith and baptism (while granting that for reasons beyond their control, and thus through no fault of their own, many do not in fact do this). God also wills that the Jewish people remain in unrevoked covenant with him forever. To that end he wills that they keep the Torah and so, it appears, that they remain always outside the Catholic Church. Toward the end of his second chapter D'Costa argues that this conflict can be defused by seeing here not two wills (or more precisely, willings) of God that would as such enter into opposition with each other, but one willing, and one permission. The willing, or as D'Costa puts it, "positive will," is that every human being enter the Catholic Church (60-61). The permission, or "permissive will," is that the Jewish people keep the Torah, which almost always means remaining outside the Catholic Church, often in sharp opposition to it, though this can and does happen without fault on their part. Thus we have in this case a positive divine willing and a mere divine permission, and so no conflict at the heart of the divine will.

The idea of divine permission or a permissive will brings up difficult issues about how to understand willing in God, but it is nonetheless standard in Catholic theology. I do not think, though, that it can be applied to the unrevoked covenant with the Jewish people now taught by the Church. For this there are basically two reasons. (1) In the Bible the election of Israel, God's establishment of his covenant with the Jewish people, seems unmistakably to be a positive act rather than a mere permission: "The Lord set his heart in love upon your fathers and chose their descendants after them" (Deut 10:15). If this very covenant remains unrevoked, then

it is as much a positive divine act of love now as it was at the call of Abraham or at the ford of the Jabbok. (2) As typically understood, the notion of a permissive will is introduced specifically to help understand the presence of evil in God's good creation. Everything good in creation is actively or positively willed and given by God. Evil—specifically the *malum culpae*, the moral evil attributable to free creatures—is not willed by God, but in some mysterious way permitted.¹ Large questions loom here, of course, but since God's covenant with the Jewish people and their observance of it are obviously not evils, but great goods of salvation history, they cannot be understood as simply permitted by God. So far the apparent conflict of divine willings remains.

The conflict would go away, however, if traditional Jewish practice were possible within the Catholic Church in a way that clearly maintained both the unrevoked covenantal identity of Jews inside the Church and their full embrace of Catholic liturgical and sacramental life, the life of the one Church of Christ. This, D'Costa argues, is not merely a possibility, but an actuality, visible in the lives of Hebrew Catholics today. I think he is right about this, and it is of great importance that a Gentile Catholic makes this argument, and that others join him.

Even if there were no Hebrew Catholics, the requirements of Catholic doctrine would be satisfied just in case the following two conditions obtain. (1) The Jews are included in the Church's mission in the name of Christ, which thereby remains truly universal (given that this mission must be carried out in the “non-proselytizing” way D'Costa describes in detail in chapter 5). (2) Any Jew who becomes a Catholic is fully able to stand visible within the Church as belonging to the people God set apart from the nations, thereby bearing continual witness to God's unrevoked covenant with this people. On this second point D'Costa's argument that the *mortifera* tradition does not express a requirement of Catholic doctrine becomes particularly important. If correct it shows, at least in principle, that traditional Jewish practices needed to maintain the distinct identity of the covenant people can exist within the Church, together with full commitment to the Church's sacramental life. Were there no Hebrew Catholics this might seem like a purely imaginary, even fantastic, scenario. But present-day Hebrew Catholics, some of whose writings D'Costa discusses, have dared to live in a way that makes it real.

If this is right many daunting questions arise, even if these are of a practical rather than a doctrinal nature. Most Jews regard the very idea of a Christian mission that in some way includes them as at best indifferent to, if not deliberately aimed at, the extinction of the Jewish people. The Catholic Church insists, on the contrary, that she completely rejects all antisemitism and persecution of the Jews, and is irrevocably committed to the flourishing of the Jewish people out of obedience to the will of God, whose covenant with this people is a gift he will never take back.

¹ For this reason I think it's quite important to distinguish, with Scotus, between God “willing not” (*nolle*) and “not willing” (*non velle*), that is, between God willing that a state of affairs *s* not obtain (in which case it infallibly fails to obtain), and God neither willing that *s* obtain nor willing that it not obtain. The latter is divine permission. The phrase “permissive will,” while common, is unavoidably confusing; it's better to distinguish between will and permission in God.

This response to worries about mission usually leaves Jewish listeners unmoved, including some who have already commented on D'Costa's book. As D'Costa himself argues in the last chapter, Jewish wariness on this score is quite understandable. The Catholic Church, charged to proclaim the gospel of Christ to every creature, will always be made up overwhelmingly of Gentiles. The only hope that Jews might come to believe that this mass of Gentiles has their good at heart is not simply for them to say so, but manifestly to promote the flourishing of Jews at the heart of their own religion—that is, within the Church. Thus the great importance of living Hebrew Catholics for D'Costa's argument.

This leads one to wonder whether Hebrew Catholics can reasonably be expected to bear the tremendous weight this resolution of the Church's apparent doctrinal conflict places upon them. They constitute an immeasurably small fraction of world Catholicism, visible only to those who expressly look for them. Their place within the Church's overall understanding of her responsibility to the Jewish people today is at present unclear and in need of strenuous reflection. Gavin D'Costa has taken a long step in that direction, which is among the reasons to welcome, and be grateful for, his most recent book.