Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today

New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships

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About the cover art

In his final letter, the Apostle Paul described the relationship of Gentiles in the church to the Jewish tradition as akin to a wild olive branch being grafted into a domesticated olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24). It was impossible for him to know that a few years after his death the Roman Empire would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, that in the following centuries the church would effectively become a thoroughly Gentile community, and that rabbinc Judaism would become normative for the Jewish people. The cover’s olive tree thus illustrates the two traditions growing out of the trunk of biblical Israel: Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, whose branches have historically and theologically intertwined as history unfolded.
Testament bears witness, will remain unhindered for all time because of God's unalterable faithfulness. This implies a joint Jewish-Christian mission in the sense of an ongoing theological identification of a difference that we must name and verbalize together. The aim of this dialogue is to articulate this difference as the binding confession of a separation in a shared faith in the God of Israel.

A Jewish Response to Elizabeth Groppe, Philip A. Cunningham and Didier Pollefeyt, and Gregor Maria Hoff

Adam Gregerman

Over the last half a century, Catholics have made a stunning break with centuries of anti-Judaism. For a religion that values continuity and faithfulness to past traditions, this has required profound reassessment of fundamental theological beliefs. In seeking to challenge hostile attitudes toward Jews and members of other religions, scholars painstakingly and sometimes painfully have had to reconsider traditional topics such as God, christology, and covenant, to name only a few.

The authors of these three chapters tackle one of the most complex of these topics, trinitarianism. They do so with a full acceptance of the remarkable new spirit in the relationship between Jews and Catholics, as they consider how to affirm an ongoing Jewish covenant with God alongside the claim that Christ is savior of all humanity. Like other authors in this book, they reject the view, held for nearly all of Christian history, that the Jewish covenant with God had been abrogated. As summarized by Cunningham and Pollefeyt, in the past “Christians presumed that Jews were cursed by God, their covenant with God either terminated or withered” (p. 187). These authors ground their break with this tradition in paradigm-shifting church statements. Beginning with Nostra Aetate and continuing with later documents, the Catholic Church radically revised its teachings about Jews. These provide a powerful impetus to the important and welcome theological work found here, as these authors venture beyond these church statements to explore daring new ground.

I review their essays with a sense of gratitude and appreciation, highlighting what I find most significant or important. Where I offer critical observations, I do so in a spirit of humility, recognizing my status as an outsider not only to the complexities of academic trinitarian thought, but
to the Catholic tradition in general. I also raise some questions about the persuasiveness of their essays. I do this a bit uncomfortably, for as a Jew I of course strongly support their work, but hope that my comments might perhaps indicate ways that their arguments can be strengthened.

The authors' most creative and bold arguments are intended to affirm a trinitarianism that does not deny the Jewish covenant with God. Though there are some similarities in all their approaches, I want to begin with the essay by Cunningham and Pollefeyt. They offer a significant reevaluation of Jewish religious life grounded in two aspects of trinitarian thought. First, they consider God as creator and sustainer of all things, who invites Israel into a covenantal relationship and empowers Israel to perceive and accept this invitation. Therefore, God is the originator of the covenant that was made with the Jews. Cunningham and Pollefeyt use phrases that highlight the futurity and potentiality of this original act. God's call was "an invitation to enter into a permanent relationship" and "an empowerment to become a unique people" (p. 196; italics added). This is faithful to the biblical message, which presents God's reaching out to the patriarchs and then the people of Israel at Sinai as momentous events of relationship-formation. These past events point forward in time to covenantal life with God. However, this is the less pathbreaking aspect of their model; even supersessionist Christians (unlike, say, Marcionites) historically affirmed God's past call to the Jews. Rather, what these earlier Christians denied was that the original relationship endured in the present and extended into the future. They argued that it had been abrogated, perhaps moments after Sinai following the sin of the Golden Calf or at the coming of Christ.

Therefore, it is the second trinitarian aspect that I see as more important and pathbreaking: the ongoing activity of "the Logos and the Spirit" in Israel's religious life. This has been taking place "since its [i.e., the covenant between God and Israel] inception" (p. 196) and, especially, "even after the time of Christ" (p. 197). This reflects a belief in the perpetual activity of the Trinity, namely, "God's constant outreach for relationship." It keeps alive the original, past experience of relationship-formation with the Holy One.

It is this present quality that represents a break with supersessionist theology and the belief that Jews were cast off once Jesus arrived. Not only in the past, but after the coming of Jesus, in the present, and into the future, Jews continue and will continue to experience "life-in-covenant." The authors here make a key temporal claim in their trinitarian theology: the call of God to the Jewish people was not limited to the past and did not end with the incarnation. Rather, Jews "continue to experience the indwelling of

God within their community and people." This rejection of a time-limited or past-only covenant distinguishes their approach from near-ubiquitous earlier (pre-Vatican II/pre-Shoah) approaches. This is a vital distinction and an important contribution to a revised trinitarianism.

Related to this are the authors' efforts to minimize any threat to this ongoing Jewish covenant because of the Jewish "no" to Christ. Contrary to many centuries of teaching, they claim that the Jews' refusal to accept Christian claims made about Jesus does not imperil the promises of the triune God to them. In my understanding, the authors, unlike earlier Catholics, minimize what Jews and Catholics disagree about (the incarnation of the Logos) and emphasize what Jews and Catholic agree about (the ongoing Jewish covenant). The latter is noteworthy because it reflects a welcome openness to that which was and is absolutely fundamental to Jewish religious identity.

Furthermore, the status of the covenant is also the topic that historically divided Jews and Catholics more than any other. These theological proposals come after a long history during which Christians refused any such affirmation of a "robust" Jewish religious life, typically because of the Jewish refusal to believe in Jesus. That is, the Jewish "no" ended the ongoing covenant. I therefore believe that the authors address a most painful divide: the need to see "the ongoing Jewish tradition on its own terms" (p. 186), a tradition that places the covenantal relationship with God at its center. I might suggest that this affirmation offers a helpful nuance to the church's demand that Catholics "learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves." Without minimizing the importance of Catholics learning about traits (in the plural) of Judaism — and Jews learning about Catholic traits as well — I think it is fair to say that the covenant between God and Israel is the preeminent trait I would hope Catholics would recognize. The authors' trinitarianism is therefore a reversal of great significance, not even to be derailed by Jewish lack of belief in Christ.

On the other hand, none of the authors, despite some differences, deny that the incarnate Christ, whether recognized or not, is active even in this ongoing relationship between God and the Jews. Cunningham and Pollefeyt write that, in their experience of life in the covenant, "the People of Israel have been interacting covenantally with the Triune One" (p. 197). Jews just do not know it or experience it in a Christian trinitarian fashion.

Likewise, Groppe, while insisting that Israel's bond with God is unique, holds that Christ is "infinitely related to every last creature" (p. 212; quoting LaCugna). Hoff's view is expressed in the more tentative language of paradox: the distinctly Christian utterable (i.e., Jesus) is also expressed in the non-Christian unutterable (i.e., "differing ecclesiological realizations" and even different religions). He too does not, however, actually sever the connection between the distinctly Christian and the non-Christian: "For by His Incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every person." Rather, he defers the full revelation of the mystery of the unutterable to the end of days.

To summarize their varied discussions, for these Catholics it is impossible to conceive of divine activity — even God's covenanting with Jews — separate from the triune God, and specifically separate from the Logos incarnated in Jesus. This is a traditional affirmation, and one made repeatedly by the authors and in recent Catholic statements. It is, they write, in the nature of God to exist in three subsistents, and at all stages of this relationship with the Jews, as at all stages of human life generally. According to this model, Jews remain actors in a Catholic theological drama (Hoff borrows Rahner's term "anonymous Christians"). That is, their religious life, while presented positively and partly in terms a Jew would recognize, is ultimately seen in trinitarian terms.

To a Jew, it is at once scandalous and also — I recognize — unavoidable for Catholic authors such as Cunningham and Pollefeyt to say that "rabbinic Judaism and Jewish religious life up to today must therefore be seen as expressions of the divine Logos and Spirit" even if "Christ incarnates the divine Logos" (p. 197). The overall theological shifts the authors propose are enormous, but, in this regard, limited. They do not offer, and maybe cannot offer, an alternative way of conceiving of divine activity apart from trinitarian theology, even at the end of days, even among those who reject a Catholic understanding of it. While the historical areas of clash are minimized, and both Jews and Catholics have central aspects of their religious identities affirmed, the authors do not deny that Christ is somehow active in Jewish covenantal life. They naturally perceive religious reality in their "own terms." But those terms are not the terms that Jews use, though it should be observed that Jews also inevitably must seek to understand Christians through Jewish categories.

By ending the dispute over the legitimacy of the Jewish covenant, the authors therefore go far, but only so far. They eliminate the most historically divisive issue for Jews, but still present the Jewish covenantal relationship in terms that remain at the core unrecognizable to Jews, for whom there is no role for the Logos (as they understand it) in the covenant made with the patriarchs or at Sinai.

Still, from my perspective, this is a signal improvement. There is a huge difference between a refusal to grant legitimacy to Judaism (i.e., the historical supersessionist position) and a refusal to understand Jewish covenantal life as Jews do (i.e., apart from the Logos or Christ). The belief that Jewish covenantal life is in "unity with the glorified humanity of the Jew Jesus" (as Cunningham and Pollefeyt write; p. 198), while undoubtedly not at all the way that Jews understand their covenant, is much less problematic than denying validity to Jewish covenantal life at all. In comparison to earlier supersessionist denunciations of Judaism, the terms of the dispute have shifted massively. The shift, however, is still only partial.

From a historical perspective, then, there is much that is auspicious about this endeavor. While Jews are not entirely "right" in their theological understanding, the novel claim that the Jewish "no" does not imperil the Jewish covenant God undermines any motive to coerce Jews to change their minds. Though the authors do not make this point, this theological model can also blunt traditional Catholic anger over Jewish stubbornness. The immensely distressing outbursts of rage that have disfigured Catholic-Jewish relations and led to hostile acts are potentially stripped of their motive-force. More broadly, there is no sense that the emergence of two separate religious traditions in the first few centuries C.E. requires that one yield to the other or disappear entirely. All these authors agree, in their own ways, that present circumstances are religiously acceptable and do not require human intervention to remedy a wrong, or even nonviolent polemics against the ignorant or stubborn other.

On this issue, all the authors agree. Cunningham and Pollefeyt see divine intentionality in this outcome: "The existence of two distinct communities in covenant with God is not the result of some sort of mistake. Rather, it was God's will" (p. 200). In similar language, Groppe writes, "God's personal providence allowed for the emergence of two distinct religious communities: Jewish and Christian" (p. 181). In the most formal language, Hoff notes that Jesus' incarnation was necessarily delimited "by space and time" (p. 210) without denying any saving activity elsewhere in the world. He therefore rejects an "exclusivist, singular theology of religion" that would render the Jewish covenant invalid or unrelated to God.
or to Christ. The implications of this belief in divine intentionality are therefore profound, for diversity is not just tolerated but affirmed. Again, however, this acceptance of religious diversity does not mean that such diversity is understood apart from trinitarian theology. Quoting Jacques Dupuis, Hoff insists that these different, non-Catholic traditions — including Judaism — remain “interdependent and complementary” (p. 209) because they all reflect the intentions of the triune God.

I do want to raise a concern about an argument that builds on the presence of these two distinct religions in the world today. The authors, especially because of their personal experiences (see below), see the existence of Judaism positively. Though the authors do not make the argument so simplistically, all are deeply impressed by, among other things, the continued presence of Jews. This idea is already found in the Vatican statements quoted by Groppe that “[t]he permanence of Israel… is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design.” Though it does lead to a favorable view of Judaism in the case of the Vatican statement, such permanence need not necessarily do so.

That is, it is not necessary that this “is” (i.e., Jews’ continuing to live as Jews) proves this “ought” (i.e., Jewish covenantal life is good and ought to continue). In fact, historically most Christians saw the continued existence of Jews very differently. Some were troubled or puzzled by it; Augustine famously believed Jews were preserved by God in order to endure divine punishment for disobedience. While these are not the only options, Jewish existence as such might just as easily contribute to a weakened supersessionist theology. We know this historically, and it is possible logically as well.

I therefore am wary of attempts to derive too much theologically from Jewish existence itself. The lessons it can offer are diverse and not all positive, especially when judged by worldly standards: there are comparatively few Jews at all; they have often faced exile and subjugation, etc. I much prefer the authors’ emphases on what it is they learn in dialogue and friendship with Jews, rather than emphases on the presence of Jews itself. Ideally, the former might avoid the potential pitfalls of drawing theological conclusions from present reality.

As already noted, the authors’ insistence on the validity of the Jewish covenant is repeatedly grounded in the personal and the relational. Their essays evince a profound respect for Jews and Jewish religious life that emerges not only out of theological reflection. By noting this, I do not want to minimize the significance of their analyses of trinitarianism and Judaism. However, they all highlight the significant influence contact with Jews and knowledge of contemporary Jewish life has on their theological views. They show that context influences us, and should influence us, deeply, especially when thinking religiously. Even on a topic as seemingly abstruse as trinitarianism, they demonstrate the relevance of lived experience, and it is important to recognize that this is at work here as well.

Cunningham and Pollefeyt, for example, admit that their “insight is possible because of the depth of dialogue and relationship that has provided opportunities for us to resonate with [Jews]’ distinctive experiences of covenant with God” (p. 193). That is why “interreligious dialogue is an important touchstone for every theological enterprise” (p. 194). Likewise, Groppe’s resistance to “dominant theologies” that deny validity to Jewish religious life is grounded in her own “direct personal encounter with Jews who have a deep spiritual life and practice.” She mentions the example of her late teacher, Rabbi Michael Signer, and observes that “[t]he world would be spiritually poorer, not richer, were all Jews to stop hallowing the Sabbath, to cease grappling with the meaning of Torah” (p. 180). This affirmation of the positive spiritual significance of another religious tradition is a relative novum in world history, far beyond toleration. Such a view seems possible only in a diverse society that encourages contact with different others. It is also an essential feature of these reassessments of trinitarian theology.

Hoff expresses a similar idea. Again, in more formal language, he welcomes “joint theological discussions” and “open dialogue” between Jews and Catholics, to the same end: recognition of their differences along with affirmation of a “shared faith in the God of Israel” (p. 219). Helpfully, he identifies a tension that is present in all these essays, between doing theology from an “inner-logic of the church’s revelation” and from “the exterior perspective of the world as it really is” (p. 204). In his case, he praises the second over the first. That is, he praises perspectives that reflect an awareness of the positive value of religious diversity (i.e., “the world as it is”) rather than earlier Catholic theologies that a priori began by denying value to anything outside the church (i.e., outside its “inner-logic”). Like the two earlier writers, he believes that awareness of and personal exposure to the other require new ways of theological thinking.
“The Old Unrevoked Covenant” and “Salvation for All Nations in Christ” — Catholic Doctrines in Contradiction?

Christian Rutishauser, S.J.

1. Guidelines and Tasks Given by the Second Vatican Council

1.1. Reshaped Theology of Israel and of Salvation

The Second Vatican Council has dramatically changed the relationship of the church to the Jewish people. It laid the foundations for a new positive approach when it stated: “As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock. . . . In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle [Paul], the church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and ‘serve him shoulder to shoulder’” (Zeph. 3:9; Nostra Aetate, §4). Pope John Paul II internalized these guidelines, and took important steps for further developing the new relationship between the church and the Jewish people, particularly with his articulation of the “unrevoked Covenant.”1 The so-called Old Covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai retains its validity and effectiveness and the Jews’ nonacceptance of Jesus as the messiah can — in the light of Romans 11:11-15 — even be regarded as positive since it enabled the forming of a New Covenant through Christ with people from other
