

SUPERSESSIONISM HARD AND SOFT

David Novak outlines the framework for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Supersessionism describes the theological conviction that the Christian Church has superseded the Jewish people, assuming their role as God's covenanted people, Israel. At first glance, supersessionism seems to be a core Christian belief, making any fruitful dialogue between Jews and Christians impossible since it seems to entail the Christian replacement of the Jewish people as God's covenant partner. But on closer examination, there are two kinds of supersessionism: one "hard," and the other "soft." The former does indeed prevent dialogue. The latter, however, does not.

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Hard or maximal supersessionism asserts that God has elected Christians to displace the Jews in the covenant between God and His people. Christianity is taken to be Judaism's necessarily total successor or "fulfillment." For hard supersessionists, the only option for Jews is conversion to Christianity. This means an abandonment of Judaism. Hard supersessionism of this sort kills Jewish-Christian dialogue before it even starts. Jews faithful to the Jewish tradition cannot accept this categorical dismissal of Judaism's theological validity.

Christian proponents of hard supersession regard the recent, more positive Jewish-Christian relationship as regrettable. For example, some traditionalist Catholics would like to downplay and even set aside the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Nostra Aetate*, which affirms that God's covenant with the Jewish people has not been superseded but is forever valid. The full theological implication of this bold new teaching still needs to be worked out by Catholic theologians, but, at the very least, it rules out hard supersessionism.

Hard supersessionism is not an exclusively Christian problem. Many Jews also reject the theological validity of the new Jewish-Christian relationship. Their hard supersessionism is the inverse of the Christian version. This Jewish position holds not that Christianity has superseded Judaism; instead, it is Judaism that has superseded Christianity. But how could that be? Didn't Judaism come *before* Christianity?

Jewish hard supersessionists answer by pointing to a theological sequence rather than a temporal one. They identify Christianity with the pagan or idolatrous practices that Judaism overcame. At the Passover seder, when Jews celebrate our call to covenantal status, we assert, "Our ancestors were originally idolaters, Terah the father of Abraham, etc." In other words, for Jewish hard supersessionists, Christianity is not *progressive* in relation to its Jewish origin. Instead, Christianity *regresses* to the pagan or idolatrous past that Judaism has superseded. One of the great debates among medieval Jewish theologians was whether Christianity is a true monotheism (albeit one inferior to Judaism), or whether Christianity is the old Gentile idolatry revived. Jewish hard supersessionists opt for the latter view, often deeming Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of the Trinity to be polytheistic. It follows, therefore, that Jews who hold this hard supersessionism are often vociferous opponents of contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue. (In his rejection of Jewish-Christian dialogue, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik was, in some regards, this kind of hard supersessionist.) As the French say, *les extrêmes se touchent*.

Whereas Christian hard supersessionists cannot deny that Christianity has Jewish roots, Jewish hard supersessionists can assert that Judaism has no connection to Christianity whatsoever. Christians cannot deny their origin in Judaism however much they might claim to have superseded Judaism. By contrast, Jews can ignore Christianity, treating it as a regrettable and theologically regressive offshoot of Judaism. Proof of this is how little Christianity was taken into consideration by Jews living under Islam in earlier centuries.

Things are different today. Jews need to take Christianity into consideration. In the West, Jews and Christians have been interacting for two thousand years. For most of those centuries, the interaction has been largely negative; of late, though, it has become more positive. For the past fifty years or so, both Jews and Christians have had to confront a common enemy, militant secularism, whose anti-Christian stance involves a public rejection of the most Jewish aspect of Christianity. Today's secularism is hostile to the moral commandments of the Torah, norms affirmed by both Christians and Jews. In a real sense, the militant secularist ideology claims to supersede both Judaism and Christianity, insisting it has the sole right to legislate public morality. Traditional Jews and Christians who affirm God's moral law as authoritative are not thereby engaging in a kind of syncretism that denies the considerable theological differences between Judaism and Christianity. The fact that there is a Judeo-Christian morality does not mean there is a Judeo-Christian religion. But we are lumped together by the secularist who imagines that humanity has "progressed" beyond divine authority and biblical morality. We are united in rejecting this secular supersessionism.

In any realistic dialogue, Jews cannot expect Christians to jettison supersessionism altogether. A complete denial of supersessionism leaves Christians unable to affirm Christianity as having brought something new and fuller to the ancient covenant between God and Israel. Without some kind of supersessionism, Christians have no cogent reason for not going back to their Jewish origins. Without some kind of supersessionism on our part, Jews like me would have no cogent reason for not going forward into what Christians regard as Judaism's fulfillment.

It is important to see that the supersessionism that remains necessary stands as an *inner* Christian and an *inner* Jewish matter. That is, Christians need to be able to answer to themselves why they ought to remain Christian and not become Jewish; and we Jews need from time to time to be able to explain to

ourselves why we remain Jewish and do not become Christian. Since Jews and Christians live in such close proximity, answering these questions can be a practical and not just a theoretical imperative.

This inner supersessionism seeks to answer the Christian's question of why a Christian should not become Jewish and a Jew's question about why a Jew should not become Christian. As such, it is quite different from hard supersessionism, which gives external answers to others, telling them what they should become, not explaining why they are what they are. Christian hard supersessionism tells Jews that they must become Christian in order to be in covenant with God, and Jewish hard supersessionism tells Christians that they must renounce Christianity to avoid being idolatrous pagans. Needless to say, this forecloses the possibility of true dialogue, for it presupposes that the other must renounce his deepest theological commitments at the outset.

How, then, can Christians speak about fulfillment—as they must—and still remain in dialogue with Jews? This can be done through what might be called “soft” or minimal supersessionism. In this view, Christianity brings something new (a *novum testamentum*) to the covenant between God and Israel. That does not mean, though, that Christians must see Jews set aside or replaced, any more than new tenants who have built upon the first story of a house must displace the original tenants on the main floor, even if the original tenants do not want to move upstairs with them.

Christian soft supersessionism can mean accepting the historical fact that Jews have remained with the “un-supplemented” ancient covenant while Christians have been called by God to a higher level by their affirmation of Jesus as the Christ. Jewish exceptionalism should be respected because, as Christians acknowledge, no one should be forced, cajoled, or seduced into the Christian version of the covenant. Indeed, Jews are a special case in this regard. Unlike others who do not believe in Jesus, we already know the *protoevangelium*, the technical term Christians use for the covenant and promises of the Hebrew Bible that allow one to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The combination of a commitment to free assent in faith with a recognition that Jews already know enough to make up their own minds is why soft supersessionists have largely abandoned evangelization that specifically and directly targets Jews.

Soft supersession is also supported by a theocentric view of the end time. Only God has the right to

bring a person into the covenant. In the case of the Jews, that probably will have to wait for the final redemption, which for Christians will be Christ's Second Coming. (One could say that Karl Barth was this kind of soft supersessionist.) On this view, ultimately though not immediately, Judaism will be overcome by Christianity, because all Jews will finally become Christians. I call this the “eschatological horizon” of soft supersessionism. It enables Christians who advocate it to speak with Jews in good faith in the present, yet-to-be-redeemed interim or waiting-time. Yet that dialogue is still not an encounter of equals. Judaism is still taken to be proto-Christianity.

Hard supersessionists have a much lower and often anthropocentric eschatological horizon. They are too impatient to wait for the end-time to solve their “Jewish problem.” They engage in aggressive proselytizing of Jews. Or they presume that most Jews have already abandoned Judaism, becoming secularist and atheistic. By this way of thinking, Jews are to be fought along with the other “enemies of religion.” (The voices of some Jewish atheists are more prominent in the public square than the voices of most faithful Jews. This can feed this misperception of all Jews and of the theologically grounded Jewish tradition.)

Just as Christian hard supersessionism has its Jewish counterpart (as we have seen), so does soft supersessionism have a Jewish expression. The second-century Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah said that “the righteous of the nations-of-the-world have a portion in the world-yet-to-come.” He was, in that sense, a Jewish soft supersessionist who thought that unconverted Gentiles (who at present are living according to what Judaism teaches is universally binding divine law) will be made “honorary” Jews in the world-yet-to-come. (This sounds something like Karl Rahner's notion of “anonymous Christians.”) On the other hand, his colleague, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, thought the world-yet-to-come will be an exclusively Jewish domain. He could be called a Jewish hard supersessionist.

A soft Jewish supersessionism, unlike hard Jewish supersessionism, does not equate Christianity with the idolatrous past superseded by the Torah. Instead, it somewhat grudgingly accepts Christianity (and Islam) as monotheistic and not polytheistic, though demoting Christianity (and Islam) to the status, in effect, of a watered down version of Judaism for the Gentiles. The great twelfth-century theologian-jurist Maimonides agreed with Rabbi Joshua's inclusivism, not with Rabbi Eliezer's exclusivism. He argued that, if Christians could be weaned of some of their

erroneous theological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, they could be persuaded to return to their true origin in Judaism. Most traditional Jews, though, tend toward hard supersessionism. They have not followed Maimonides's soft supersessionist advocacy of proselytism, even though in modern secular democracies there is no prohibition of Jewish proselytism, as was the case when Jews lived in pre-modern Christendom (and under Islam).

Soft is certainly better than hard, but even soft Christian supersessionism leaves Jews with the unsettling feeling that Christians are looking upon us as eventually becoming what Christians already are. It leads us to suspect that Christian dialogue partners seem to be engaging us not as the Jews we presently are, but as they pray we will become in the eschatological future. But can there be an authentic relationship—one that is truly “dialogical”—when the parties do not look upon each other as they see themselves, both now and in the eschatological future? At present, Christian soft supersessionism, while vastly better than the hard version, seems only to tolerate Jewish loyalty to the original level of the covenant.

There is a better way, and it relies on a different kind of soft supersessionism. To formulate this approach, we need to correct a historical mistake many Christians and Jews make about the origins of both Christianity and Judaism. The mistake rests in the assumption that Christianity (however “softly”) comes after Judaism. For Christians, that usually means Christianity arises from an already existing Judaism, bringing it *up* to a higher, fuller level of human existence before God. For Jews, conversely, that usually means that Christianity comes after, bringing Judaism *down* to a lower, more diluted level of human existence before God.

But Christianity did not *come out of* Judaism, whether for good (the Christian supersessionist view) or for ill (the Jewish supersessionist view). In truth, *both* Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism come out of, and thereby supersede, a religion based on the Hebrew Bible, plus some developments coming from the elaborative interpretations of Second Temple Jewish theology, the time after the final books of the Hebrew Bible were written but before the first century of Christianity. This religion could be called “Hebraic Monotheism.” It is neither Judaism nor Christianity, at least as we know them from the second century on. Judaism and Christianity have been continually superseding this ancient religion. Both have done so without forgetting their ever-present, ever-necessary foundation in Hebraic Monotheism.

Thus, it is incorrect to say that Jews only have the “Old Testament,” while Christians have both the Old Testament *and* the “New Testament.” Christians and Jews accept the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as interpreted by Second Temple Jewish theology to be their foundational revelation. This is what we have in common. In addition, both Christians and Jews have a “new testament.” For Christians, this “new testament” is the book by that very name, plus the ongoing tradition of the Church (its *magisterium*) extending that new testament into the present. For Jews, our “new testament” is the “Oral Torah” (*torah she-b`al peh*), written down in the Talmud (and related canonical rabbinic texts) but constantly being extended as *tradition* up until the latest Jewish teachings. So, just as the Talmud could be called the “Jewish New Testament,” so also the New Testament could be called the “Christian Talmud.” In fact, in both the New Testament and the Talmud, there is nothing of any significance being taught that does not seek a basis in the Old Testament, or what Jews call the Written Torah (*torah she-bi-khtiv*).

Both traditions base themselves on the same foundational revelation of the Hebrew Bible or “Scripture” (*kitvei ha-qodesh*). Because of this insuperable commonality, the two traditions cannot be totally different (as Christian and Jewish “isolationists,” both past and present, assert). On the contrary, there is commonality and difference. The two traditions are separate but interrelated, and this dialectic must be maintained until the end of this world. Commonality without difference can only lead to a Jewish-Christian syncretism. As Maimonides taught, we should be wary of the human fabrication of a “new religion” (*le-hadesh dat*), which is what syncretism is. To ensure this does not happen, we must respect the essentially different existential decisions we make as to *who* Jesus of Nazareth *is* and *what* he means for the covenant between God and His people, Israel. This fundamental difference keeps our commonality partial and incomplete. On the other hand, difference without any real commonality leads to the notion that Jews and Christians are affirming two different covenants. This, in turn, quite easily leads to the notion that Jews and Christians do not worship the same God—the ever-present Marcionite temptation.

The commonality is not only found in our shared foundational revelation. In exegetical practice, Jewish and Christian theologians regularly supersede or go beyond the literal meaning of Scripture (what the Talmud calls *peshat* and what Augustine called *sensus literalis*). But they must do so without ever leaving it

behind. An example of a doctrine directly inferred from Scripture by both Jews and Christians is the affirmation of the entire Mosaic Torah as normative. The difference between Jewish exegesis and Christian exegesis arises over analysis of *which* of the Torah's norms were taken to be perpetually binding, and *which* of the Torah's norms were only binding in the past and no longer apply in the present. By contrast, Jewish and Christian doctrines of the resurrection of the dead (*tehiyyat ha-metim*) are only alluded to by Scripture. The difference between Judaism and Christianity is over *when* the resurrection of the dead begins. In the Christian view, it has begun with Jesus. The Jewish view holds *it will begin* in the future.

It is important to recognize that these matters are not the kind of differences where it can be said, "You have your truth and we have ours." Based in a shared revelation, they concern the ultimate level of truth corresponding to ultimate reality. They concern our relationship to God. Here, the difference between Judaism and Christianity is the starkest. It is a matter of *either/or*. That is, either the Jewish people or the Christian Church is the fullest, most complete location for that ultimate relationship, the final purpose for humans created in the image and likeness (*tselem u-demut*) of God. When a human person seeks the ultimate covenantal relationship with the Lord God of Israel, one can only be *either* a Jew *or* a Christian, but not *both* a Jew *and* a Christian, and certainly never *neither* a Jew *nor* a Christian. It is important to realize, however, that this "either/or" need not imply hard supersessionism. It has the gradation of "more or less."

In truth, over the past two generations moral issues have been the main focus of Christian and Jewish dialogue. In these matters the issue of our *difference* can be bracketed. But it should not be suppressed. It needs to be in the background of our common discourse, ready to be invoked whenever our striving for commonality veers toward syncretism.

Our difference also needs to be invoked by Jews whenever a fellow Jew is tempted to become Christian. Then we should say to him—only if asked, though one must judge in the unique circumstances—"Do not go from what is more of the covenantal reality to what is less of it." And our difference needs to be invoked by Christians whenever a fellow Christian is tempted to become Jewish. Then you should say to him—only if asked—"Do not go from what is more of the covenantal reality to what is less of it." In both cases, the logic of our concern follows the Talmudic principle, "One rises but does not descend in sanctity." However, this principle should not be invoked

to compel or pressure a fellow Jew to remain Jewish, or to strong-arm a Christian to become Jewish—that is, when we have not been asked for counsel. The same should not be done by Christians to pressure a fellow Christian to remain Christian, or to pressure a Jew to become Christian—that is, when you have not been asked.

Let us always remember that all of our efforts reach toward an eschatological horizon. That horizon transcends the low horizon of hard supersessionists, and it transcends even the higher horizon of soft supersessionists. Both of their horizons can be anticipated in the present, one by rude, even coercive, actions, and the other by interior assumptions. But, in truth, neither Jews nor Christians can anticipate what God will do at the end of the world's time. The end time can only be hoped for, bringing another universe altogether, a universe that cannot even be imagined by us. Both Paul (1 Cor. 2:9) and the Talmud (Berakhot 34b) affirm about that end time: "No eye but Yours O God has seen what will be done for those who wait for You" (Isa. 64:4).

Usually, we think God will vindicate either Jewish supersessionism or Christian supersessionism in a zero-sum game. That is, either God will enable Christians to say to Jews, conclusively, "We have been right and you have been wrong all along," or God will enable Jews to say to Christians, conclusively, "We have been right and you have been wrong all along." But what if God Himself is a hard supersessionist? What if God's final judgment, ushering in the world-yet-to-come, supersedes our human triumphalism that looks at the final judgment as an either/or proposition? What if God's final verdict is *beyond* our expectations, and thus displaces all of them, replacing them with what our eyes and minds cannot imagine? Wouldn't that cure us of our Christian and Jewish triumphalist supersessionisms, hard and soft? Wouldn't that also (and just as importantly in our relativistic age) save us from the corrosive theological apathy that arises when we refrain from making truth claims about covenantal reality for fear of stoking an eternal enmity between Christians and Jews? Theological relativism cannot be the way forward, which is why supersessionism cannot be avoided in good faith. It can only be disciplined by nuanced theological reflection.

The question of supersessionism is not whether or not to affirm it, but *where* it is to be most cogently employed—and by *whom*. So, rather than hoping to supersede each other at the end time, as we cannot supersede each other at present, let us hope to be superseded by God's final judgment. May that time come speedily, even in our own day! **■**

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