

Introducing the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology

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Greetings and welcome to the first annual meeting of the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology. My name is Kendall Soulen and I thank you for taking time to be with us here today. This meeting is the fruit of several years of planning on the part of small steering committee, whose other members I'd like to introduce now. They are Mark Kinzer (), David Rudolph (The King's University), Holly Taylor Coolman (Providence College), and Gerald McDermott (Beeson Divinity School).

I think the best way to introduce the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology is to refer you to the Society's mission statement, which you will find printed on sheet on your seat. It reads:

The Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology exists in order to promote research and discussion that advances post-supersessionist thought. The Society understands post-supersessionism as a family of theological perspectives that affirms God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people as a central and coherent part of ecclesial teaching. It seeks to overcome understandings of the New Covenant that entail the abrogation or obsolescence of God's covenant with the Jewish people, of the Torah as a demarcator of Jewish communal identity, or of the Jewish people themselves. The Society welcomes participation from all who seek to advance post-supersessionist theology. It especially seeks to promote perspectives that remain faithful to core Christological convictions; that affirm the ecclesia's identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah; and that engage with Jewish thought and tradition as an expression of ecclesial partnership with the Jewish people as a whole.

Permit me to comment on this mission statement by putting it in historical context.

In the twenty centuries since the close of the apostolic era, Christian teaching has seldom if ever undergone a change as profound as that which has occurred since the Holocaust with respect to the church's understanding of its relationship to Judaism and Jewish people. Other important moments in Christian theology, such as the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century or the Reformation in the sixteenth, represent developments that stand in substantial continuity with prior currents of thought. In contrast, the almost total destruction of European Jewry in the heart of Christian Europe has occasioned a different kind of change in Christian thought. Slowly at first, but with ever more conviction, breadth, and precision, Christian communions representing hundreds of millions of Christians around the globe have concluded that traditional Christian teaching about the Jewish people was, in certain fundamental respects, not just ambiguous or incomplete, but false and contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ as attested by the Scriptures.

Like many conversions, the Christian effort to learn to speak “what is right” about the church’s relation to Judaism and the Jewish people has occurred gradually, unfolding not all at once but proceeding rather step by step. Although no doubt a simplification of a vastly more complex reality, it is possible to distinguish three broad stages in the development of Christian theology since the Holocaust: a period of “Repentance and Awakening” (1948-1968), “Lamentation and Experimentation” (1968-2000), “Reaffirmation and Integration” (1990 -).

Repentance and Awakening (1945-1968)

Just five months after the end of the Second World War, the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*) adopted a statement that has come to be known as the “Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.” Acknowledging that “through us endless suffering has been brought to many peoples and countries,” the document offers a forthright confession of sin: “We accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.”¹ In April 1948, the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony adopted a “Declaration of Guilt toward the Jewish People” in which it confessed complicity in “the persecution of Jews, including even Christian Jews,” and petitioned God “for the forgiveness of sins against the Jewish people, committed or tolerated.”² These statements exude a spirit of sincere repentance, rooted in a forthright acknowledgement of the suffering caused by the church’s failings. At the same time, it is noteworthy that they implicitly trace the horrors of the Holocaust to *failings of conduct* rather than to *errors of teaching* on the part of Christians. In fact, the first statement does not expressly mention the Jews at all, but speaks instead of the suffering inflicted on peoples generally.

Arguably, repentance, no matter how sincere, cannot be fully genuine or effective apart from an effort to understand the true proportions of the wrong that has been done. In the case of the Holocaust, this has required Christians to come to grips with the role that church *teaching* has historically played in justifying anti-Jewish sentiment. Credit for prompting this awakening among Christians goes in considerable measure to a handful of historians whose work on the ancient roots of Christian anti-Judaism became well known in the 1950’s and 1960’s, such as James Parkes (1896-1981) and Jules Isaac (1877-1963). These courageous scholars opened the eyes of the churches to the ways in which that Christian teaching had provided a theological rationale for the persecution of Jews down through the ages. Isaac, a French professor of history, lost several members of his family to the Nazis, and wrote much of his groundbreaking 600-page study *Jesus and Israel* while on the run, hiding in farms and at the homes of sympathetic priests or ministers.³ Parkes and Isaac demonstrated how countless Christian theologians, including many of the first rank, had cultivated a “teaching of contempt” (Isaac) toward Jews, charging them with collective guilt for the crime of deicide (Melito of Sardis, Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther) and with implacable enmity against both God and humankind (Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Jerome). They demonstrated, too, the fateful role played by the teaching that God’s ancient promises to the Jewish people were no longer in effect, having been abrogated by God on account of Israel’s sins, or rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ.

This last teaching is commonly be known today as “supersessionism.” It maintains that God’s covenant with Israel has been abrogated or rendered obsolete in the Christian era, and that the church alone is the people of God in the present day. Supersessionism was assumed almost universally by Christian theologians prior to WWII, and was still widely maintained in its immediate aftermath. Against this backdrop, it is possible to glimpse something of the epochal significance of Vatican II’s statements on Judaism, which were informed in part by the historical scholarship of Jules Isaac and others. In *Lumen Gentium* (1964), the Council implicitly rejected the teaching of supersessionism. Citing Paul’s words in Romans 11:28-29 (and without the otherwise plentiful citations of the church fathers), it affirmed that “in view of the divine choice, they [the Jews] are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance.” Similarly, in *Nostra Aetate* (1965), the Council explicitly rejected the root of the “teaching of contempt,” stating that the crucifixion “cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, nor upon the Jews of today.” With these brief statements, the Council achieved nothing less than a radical renewal of the starting point of a Christian theology of Judaism and the Jewish people.

At the same time, it must be admitted that while Vatican II laid the foundation for a renewed Christian theology of Judaism, it did not develop its implications, but rather embedded its brief statements on the Jewish people in what was otherwise a largely traditional account of the economy of salvation. In this respect, there is marked similarity between the theology of Judaism found in the documents of Vatican II and that of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Among Protestant theologians during the fateful years of 1933-1945, Barth was almost alone in his tireless affirmation that the Jewish people remain, today and always, the elect people of God. Yet even in Barth’s case, the affirmation of God’s fidelity to his covenant with Israel remains cloaked in what was in many respects a very traditional, and very troublesome, Christian theology of Judaism.

Lamentation and Experimentation (1968-1990)

By the late 1960’s, Christian theology’s first tentative steps toward a renewed theology of Judaism were overtaken by a fresh sense of urgency and radicality, fueled in part by the emergence of ferocious critique from Jewish writers frustrated with the church’s glacial pace of change. Writing in disappointed reaction to the slender scope of Vatican II’s statement on Jews, Eliezer Berkovits drew a “straight line” between fourth century Christian polemic against Jews and the Holocaust. “What was started at the Council of Nicaea was duly completed in the concentration camps and the crematoria.” He went on to demand, “All we want of Christians is that they keep their hands off us and our children.”⁴

Around this time, too, the Holocaust itself became the explicit subject of theological reflection after having been cloaked in relative silence for nearly a quarter of a century. Many noteworthy Jewish works on the Holocaust appeared in a span of some fifteen years, including Richard Rubenstein’s *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (1966), Eliezer Berkovits *Faith after the Holocaust* (1973), Emil Fackenheim *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a*

New Jerusalem (1978) Arthur Cohen *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (1981). Notable Christian reflections on the Holocaust followed soon thereafter, including Harry James Cargas, ed. *When God and Man Failed: Non-Jewish Views of the Holocaust* (1981) and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds. *The Holocaust as Interruption* (1984). A recurrent theme of these works is that the enormity of the evil perpetrated in the Holocaust renders traditional ways in which Jews and Christians have made theological sense of evil and suffering inadequate (e.g., suffering as chastisement sent by God). Accordingly, faith, if it is to have a future, must be prepared to venture down radically new paths.

The same spirit of radical critique and experimentation is also characteristic of important Christian theologies of Judaism that appeared in the same era. Two important examples are Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (1974) and Paul van Buren's trilogy *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (1987-88).

Prior to the appearance of Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*, both Jewish and Christian scholars tended to agree that Christian supersessionism and anti-Judaism were later corruptions of the original Christian point of view (see even Berkovits comment above). Striking at the root of this consensus, Ruether argued that far from being a later corruption of Christian faith, anti-Judaism springs directly from the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of Israel and Son of God. Christian anti-Judaism is nothing other than "the left hand of Christology." In Ruether's view, the early Christian movement erred by "historicizing the eschatological," that is, by conceiving of God's action in Jesus Christ as eschatologically decisive for all people in all times and places. Today Christians should be content to understand Christ as the principle of salvation that informs their own community, while recognizing the equal legitimacy of other communities organized around different principles of salvation. Ultimately, then, Ruether urges Christians, and by implications adherents of other religions, to embrace a theology of religious pluralism as the surest way of freeing religious faith from the dangers of violent rivalry.

Paul M. van Buren's *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* is another bold theological experiment that, like Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*, effectively rules out a central claim of historic Christianity, namely, the universal saving significance of Jesus Christ.¹ But whereas Ruether does this in a way that *loosens* Christianity's bond to Judaism, making them equal peers within the community of world religions, van Buren does so in a way that *tightens* that bond. Van Buren's work represents a Christian appropriation of a viewpoint first developed by the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig in his work *The Star of Redemption* (1921).⁵ Conceived in the trenches of WWI, *The Star of Redemption* proposes that the Jewish people and the church are related to each other like a star and its rays. The task of the Jewish people is simply to be what it has been made by God, and in this way to form the kernel of the star at the center of God's plan for creation. It belongs to the essence of the church, in contrast, to be comprised, not of Jews, but of gentiles drawn from many nations, who, though originally submerged in pagan myth, are drawn to God the Father through Jesus Christ. Following Rosenzweig, van Buren argues that God's act in Jesus Christ represents a new step in the history of the

LORD's covenant with Israel and creation, whereby God establishes a way for *gentiles* to worship the God of Israel. Jesus Christ's salvific significance does not consist in his relationship to Jews, who already stand in immediate relation to God the Father, but rather in his relationship to gentiles, who are drawn by him to worship the God of the Jews. Although early Christians expected the church to be a community of both Jews and gentiles, history has shown that Jewish followers of Christ are unessential to the existence of the church. Today the church must be prepared to accept this unexpected (but now irrevocable) development as guided by the providential hand of God. Christians should confess that God "has provided two ways for walking in His Way, one for the Jews and one for the gentiles."⁶ Like Ruether, then, van Buren in effect comes to the conclusion that Christian faith can free itself from its bitter legacy of anti-Judaism only by rejecting the church's historic affirmation of the universal saving significance of Jesus Christ.

Rededication and Integration (1990 -)

In recent decades, the contours have begun to emerge of what might be called a "third-generation" post-supersessionist Christian theology have begun to emerge. The animating spirit of this "third-generation" approach is aptly captured by Peter Ochs (1950-) in his work *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (2011), where he writes "[T]here is a way for Christians to rededicate themselves to the gospel message and to classical patristic doctrines of the church without at the same time revisiting classical Christian supersessionism."⁷ Ochs substantiates the thesis by offering detailed examinations of the work of a number of theologians whose work is characteristic of the "third generation" of post-Holocaust theology, including George Lindbeck (1923-2018), Robert W. Jenson (1930-2017), Stanley Hauerwas (1940-), and David F. Ford (1948-). A common thread that Ochs discerns in these theologians is the conviction that it is possible for Christian theology to transcend Rosemary Ruether's "either-or choice" of affirming classical Christology *or* freeing [itself] of the evils of supersessionism. As a mainstream Jewish theologian and philosopher, Ochs finds reason to welcome the Christian effort to overcome this "either-or" because it implies that Jews need not wait for Christianity to abandon its own deepest theological commitments before dismantling its historic anti-Jewish bias, a wait whose hope might well never be realized.

In my estimation, The Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology is best understood as an expression of the spirit that animates the "third-generation" of post-supersessionist theology. As the range of theologians discussed by Ochs indicates, and as the Society's "Mission Statement" affirms, this approach to post-supersessionist theology is not a single homogenous viewpoint, but rather a varied and partly conflicting family of theological perspectives. And indeed, the Society welcomes the participation of all who seek to contribute to the project of nurturing post-supersessionist theology. At the same time, the Society is especially desirous of doing so in a way that synthesizes elements of the two earlier stages of post-supersessionist theology. Like Karl Barth and the documents of Vatican II, the Society is especially committed to advancing theological perspectives that affirm *both* the irrevocability of God's covenant with the Jewish people *and* the universal saving significance of God's action in Jesus Christ, encompassing both Jews and gentiles. In this respect, the Society may be said to *rededicate* itself to two cardinal truths which St. Paul affirms in Romans 9-11, both of which are rooted in one

and the same reality, namely, the merciful fidelity of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Society wishes to make room for theological approaches that shares the judgment of thinkers like van Buren and Ruether, who demonstrated that anti-Jewish patterns of thought are deeply entrenched in much traditional Christian exegesis and theology. With them, the Society recognizes that it is not enough for Christians to affirm Israel's ongoing covenant while continuing to affirm foundational doctrines in an unexamined way. Rather, Christians must seek to *integrate* the affirmation of God's fidelity to the Jewish people into their understanding of the full range of Christian doctrines, including the doctrine of God, christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Moreover, it seeks to do so in a way that encourages the participation of all who are concerned with the future of post-supersessionist theology, including those who identify themselves as members of the Jewish people and as followers of Jesus Christ. It is important to mention this last point explicitly, both because the problem of supersessionism can scarcely be examined and overcome without attending to the reality and significance of messianic Jewish identity, and also because earlier iterations of post-supersessionist thought were at times reluctant to recognize and engage this important family of voices.

So much by way of introduction. Again, welcome to the first annual meeting of the Society of Post-Supersessionist Theology. I look forward to our work together in the years ahead.

¹ "Declaration to the Representatives of the World Council of Churches," by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (October 19, 1945), in Franklin Sherman, ed., *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Stimulus Books, 2011), 41-42.

² "Declaration of Guilt toward the Jewish People," adopted by the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony (April, 1948), in Sherman, *Bridges*, 45.

³ Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel: A Call for the Necessary Correction of Christian teaching on the Jews*, trans. Sally Gran (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971). The work was originally published in French in 1948.

⁴ Eliezer Berkovitz, "Judaism in the Post-Christian Era," *Judaism* 15 (1966), 77, 82.

⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Van Buren signals his debt to Rosenzweig in programmatic fashion by beginning the first volume of his work with the word "Death" and ending it with the word "life," just as Rosenzweig had done in the *Star of Redemption*.

⁶ Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality: Part One: Discerning the Way* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 61. Vols. 1-2 of the trilogy were originally published by Seabury Press in 1980 and 1987; Vol. 3 was originally published by Harper & Row in 1987.

⁷ Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 1.