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Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Theology: Race, Whiteness, and Covenant

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Abstract: Supersessionism in the Western Christian theological tradition remains an issue to be remediated. The problem of supersessionism is the problem of Gentile Christians' wrongly viewing themselves as the exclusively favored object of God's desire. This misplaced prioritization of Gentile belonging within the life of Israel's God mirrors dynamics found in Euro-American racism or whiteness. Just as theories of anti-racism are useful for confronting the challenges of whiteness, in this paper I argue for an explicitly anti-supersessionist theology. This theology offers possibilities for deepening an understanding of the covenantal relationships among God, Israel, Jesus Christ, and the Gentile Church. As such, it transcends the binary of supersessionism and post-supersessionism.

Keywords: supersessionism; anti-supersessionism; anti-racism; Jewish-Christian relations; covenant; Christology; whiteness; race

1. Introduction

The problem of supersessionism in the Western Christian theological tradition is one that, despite two generations of attention, remains an issue to be remediated. Supersessionism continues to be endemic to Christian thought and practice, especially at the local level, in part because it is so embedded in millennia of Christian theology, biblical interpretation, and proclamation. Supersessionism at its most basic iteration is the claim that the Christian Church has replaced the Jewish people, Israel, as God's chosen people and that God's covenant with the Jewish people has been replaced by a Christian one.[1]

Supersessionism mistakenly foregrounds one group that has covenanted with God (the Church) as more deserving and having a dignity greater than another group in covenantal relationship with God (Israel). Eugene Rogers writes that "Almost all Christians—Gentile ones—need to learn that life with God is not their due reward, not their natural possession, not theirs to demand or extort, and they can learn that perhaps best by learning that others have a prior claim, others are God's first love, others have become (also by grace) God's quasi natural family"(Rogers 1998, p. 66). He sees the problem of supersessionism in Gentile Christians' wrongly viewing themselves as the exclusively favored object of God's desire. Other Christian theologians have developed post-supersessionist theologies in an attempt to resolve the moral and exegetical problems in the decades following the Shoah. The crucial intervention of post-supersessionist theology has been the affirmation of God's eternal covenant with Israel. Instead of seeing Jewish disbelief in Jesus as the Messiah as warrant for declaring God's transfer of the covenant from the people of Israel to the Church, as classical supersessionism does, post-supersessionist theology insists that the disjunction between Jewish and Christian belief is a mystery to dwell upon. God's covenant with Israel persists despite the differences in Jewish and Christian theological affirmations. Even while acknowledging that Jewish non-affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah was not the grounds for covenantal abrogation, post-supersessionist theologians, especially in the past quarter century, have still maintained a Christological focus in their efforts to explain how God's redemptive work can encompass both Israel and the Church. Thus, Christian post-supersessionist theology as a project of repairing the relationship with the Jewish

people can present itself as a stumbling block for Jews who might not recognize themselves in post-supersessionist affirmations of covenantal relations. Rogers's reminder that Gentile Christians need to always remember that God has a first love (the Jewish people) must not be reflected on in retrospect only but also in the present moment and for the future. Post-supersessionist theology continues to struggle to articulate how Gentile Christians are in covenant with God without introducing frameworks that render Jewish covenantal belonging as somehow dependent upon Christological formulations.

The problem of supersessionism as a misplaced prioritization of Gentile Christians' exclusive possession of the covenant with Israel's God mirrors dynamics found in Euro-American racism, a condition that we can identify as whiteness. This latter condition is a racist stance that seeks to possess and commodify all things, including non-white people, their lands, and their resources.[2] Although the consequences of racism and supersessionism are similar, they also have differing manifestations in Euro-American Christianity. Racism typically seeks the total domination and exclusion of other racialized groups for the benefit of Euro-Americans. While it can display a racial dimension, supersessionism fundamentally seeks the expropriation of the covenant and scriptures of Israel from the Jewish people, in order to subsume them within the Gentile Christian Church. While racism seeks a comprehensive exclusion and segregation, supersessionism appropriates before it excludes. Nonetheless, the practices of both whiteness and supersessionism exhibit sin through unjustly claiming the possessions of another, whether it be people, land, or covenant.

Whiteness and Gentile Christian identity equally require decentering in order to restore the vision of reconciliation of all people with God that is at the heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ. For those identified as white in the Gentile church, part of this work can be accomplished by incorporating patterns of anti-racism into the construction of an anti-supersessionist theology. Although all Gentile Christians regardless of racial and ethnic identity ought to address the problem of supersessionism and anti-Judaism, this problem has yet to be addressed in the context of Euro-American (white) theology that has traditionally been centered as normative in the work of Jewish-Christian relations.

The necessity of decentering (white) Gentile identity resonates with recent scholarship on anti-racism. Ibram X. Kendi argues that whiteness and ideologies of white supremacy are best resisted by engaging in intentional practices of anti-racist thinking and re-framing. Racism functions in part as a set of practices and epistemologies that seeks the conformity of racialized bodies to dominant white norms. An anti-racist framework is necessary because it centers the mutual flourishing of all people (Kendi 2019, pp. 18–21, 31–34). Following this logic, in order for Christian theology to counter racist impulses within its discourses, it is not enough to be passively non-racist. Rather, it must be explicitly anti-racist in its discourse and practice.

This essay argues for an explicitly anti-supersessionist theology modeled on anti-racism. Such a theology represents a supplement to the binary of supersessionism and post-supersessionism, that is, the perpetuation of anti-Judaism in the church and the attempt to mitigate it. Anti-supersessionism moves towards the re-articulation of Christian theology and practice that reconceives the relationship between the Gentile Church and Israel, much as anti-racism pushes for a new arrangement of social relations. In order to establish the benefit of an anti-supersessionist framework, I will examine the achievements and limits of post-supersessionist theology. Following that I will show how anti-racism offers a helpful framework for addressing the limitations of post-supersessionism before advancing an anti-supersessionist alternative, exemplified in a rethinking of covenantal relationships between God, Israel, Jesus Christ, and the Gentile Church. In order to achieve this, I will first discuss the trajectories of racism and supersessionism in the modern West.

2. Racism and Supersessionism

In Western culture, the production of racism as a phenomenon is entangled with the discourses and practices of Christian supersessionism. A Christian racialization of Jews as an inferior group precedes other forms of racialization carried out against non-white bodies

in the modern era. Denise Buell argues that the seeds of racialized thinking developed in early Christianity in the writings of theologians such as Clement of Alexandria and Aristides, with the idea that members of the Body of Christ are a third race, called out of both Jews and Gentiles (Buell 2005). In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* we see the co-emergence of supersessionist thinking with racialized thinking about Jews. In order to claim the Scriptures of Israel and its blessings for followers of Jesus, Justin not only needs to dispossess Jews of their holy texts but also of their identity as a people or race belonging to God. "As, therefore, Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race ... [E]ven so it is necessary for us here to observe that there are two seeds of Judah, and two races, as there are two houses of Jacob: the one begotten by blood and flesh, the other by faith and the Spirit" (Justin 1989, p. 267). This passage shows how the binaries of flesh and spirit in Pauline thought concerning the relation between Jews and Gentiles moves in the middle of the second century towards a disavowal of physical Jews. While some scholars argue that such language here is a metaphor and not about race *per se* but theological discourses designed to create boundaries between potentially overlapping forms of belonging, the trajectory of this rhetoric in later Christian thought is clear.[3] We see in this passage Justin Martyr condensing authentic Jewish belonging (being of Israel) into the Jewish body of Jesus and creating a true, spiritual Israel to which only believers in Jesus (who could be Jewish or Gentile) belong. Any Jew not confessing Jesus is thus expunged from the authentic and true spiritual Israel and relegated to a carnal and fleshly Israel. But in Justin's logic this is not an Israel at all if it is not the spiritual Israel. As Willie Jennings argues, this dispossession of Jewish bodies from any true claim to either their own identity or their own land, also called Israel, is a theological and political move that will be mimicked by European Christians in their dispossession of non-Europeans in the age of colonization and modernity (Jennings 2010, pp. 33–34).

Race existed as a feature of medieval Christian Europe and the racialization of Jews was at the center of this activity. The operation of race not as a stable category but as a concept designed to establish hierarchies of difference was brought to bear on Jewish communities in medieval Europe, communities that manifested a tangible theological and cultural otherness in their local contexts (Heng 2019, p. 19). The coordinated acts of civil, administrative, and state violence against Jews is not only theological or cultural in origins. The Rhineland massacres, ritual murder and blood libel accusations ending in collective violence, compulsory proselytizing sermons, and forced expulsions from Christian territories all fall within the scope of racist practices designed by Christians to discipline Jewish bodies. This violence was perpetuated against an internal minority group who in official and popular discourse were considered alien from the rest of the population not only in religious or ethnic terms but also biologically. Medieval Christians claims of a specific Jewish smell, male menstrual bleeding, and facial caricatures all signify this. The combination of violence, legal impediment, and biologization of Jews among Western medieval Christians shows the further movement of Jews into a racial category prior to modernity (Heng 2019, pp. 29–31). In late medieval Spain, anxiety that the forcible conversion of Jews to Christianity might lead to intermarriage and a corruption of the Christian body politic gave rise to the concept of blood purity (*limpieza de sangre*) designed to protect Gentile Spanish Christian bloodlines from the contamination of Jewish "New Christian" intermarriage. These notions of blood purity and degrees of intermingling of identities stand as a source for the further demarcation of racialized communities among the enslaved and creole populations of the Americas.[4]

By the time of the Enlightenment we can observe a twinned racialization of Jewish and Black bodies.[5] J. Kameron Carter delineates how the question of race in modernity is linked to and preceded by the question of Jewish presence in Western civilization itself, specifically the modern nation-state. A decoupling of Christianity from its Jewish origins in order to make Christianity the origin of Western civilization (and hence the ground of a universal order) enables Enlightenment thinkers to apply the logic of race to Christianity. The result was modernity's "anxiety over Jewish existence and ... what Jewish existence

theopolitically signifies for a modern world come of age" (Carter 2008, p. 80). Terence Keel establishes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Christian pseudo-scientific theories utilized Christian supersessionist theories of history to argue that just as Jews were rendered inferior by a new Christian people so new racial groups that European Christianity encountered were also rendered inferior (Keel 2018, pp. 23–54). Colin Kidd reveals how Anglophone Protestant Christianity of the nineteenth century contributed to racialized discourses by employing biblical narratives to differentiate European peoples as superior to Jews and other races (Kidd 2006, pp. 168–202).

Arising out of these modern patterns of thought, Euro-American discourses sought to use racialized thinking to create a Western-dominated social order even as modernity threatened previously assumed religious and cultural certainties. Both Jewish and Black bodies (along with other non-European descended groups) were taken as enfleshed signs of spiritual inferiority. Pseudo-scientific endeavors such as phrenology, physiognomy, and the creation of modern racial classification systems emerged from these assumptions, resulting in essentializing supposed biological attributes of Jews, Blacks, and other racialized groups. These essentialized biomarkers then came to be constitutive of moral qualities and hierarchies. Here is the creation of whiteness as not just theoretically but empirically superior to other identities. In the nineteenth century, white supremacist thinking in the United States and Europe worked to portray both Blacks and Jews as inherently hostile and dangerous threats to the purity and integrity of the (white) nation-state. Campaigns of racial terror against African Americans, notably in the practice of lynching, were used to neuter the perceived spiritual and moral threat of African Americans entering the body politic. These campaigns were given moral support by some Christian leaders, especially white evangelicals, as part of a wider effort to maintain a vision of a moral society that required the separation of races (Butler 2021). The Nazi regime in Germany utilized racialized thinking to advocate for the elimination of Jews from society. The architects of these policies drew upon American practices of segregation and legal disability to develop their policies. Moreover, prominent Nazi Christian theologians developed a racialized portrait of an Aryan Jesus, severed from his Jewish identity, to create support for the genocide of the Jewish people, arguing that the very physical presence of Jews threatened the spiritual order to which the German people ought to aspire (Heschel 2008, pp. 21–22). While the histories and trajectories of the African American and Jewish experiences have important differences, the violence perpetrated against both communities has its own entangled history. Although racialized segregation, violence, and genocide emerged in secularized modes in modernity, Christian theologizing also lay behind its development and deployment (Mitchell 2009, pp. 74, 80–81). Supersessionist thinking not only was perpetrated against Jews but, in a broader sense, also was foundational for European and white American Christian racist thinking against Black people and other minoritized groups.

3. The Post-Supersessionist Response

After the Shoah, Christian churches and theologians began the work of repair and repentance for those sins against the Jewish people that grew from the soil of supersessionism. Acknowledging the co-inherence of racism and anti-Judaism was an important element of this work and constituted part of a larger move in Western Christianity to confront the evils of racism and oppression. For example, the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, with its pathbreaking positive statements about Jews and Judaism at the Second Vatican Council, ought to be placed alongside the council's affirmation of human dignity in *Dignitatis Humanae* (both from 1965). Similarly, Protestant churches argued for the imperative necessity of civil rights while denouncing anti-Semitism (von Kellenbach 2015, pp. 1–22; Eckhardt 1989). Clark Williamson has shown that developing a Christian theology that consciously rejects supersessionism was a form of liberation theology. For Williamson, "all forms of domination are interconnected and inseparable, including anti-Judaism" (Williamson 1993, p. 8).

Post-supersessionism developed out of this context. At the core of post-supersessionist theology is the affirmation that God and Israel remain in an unrevoked covenantal rela-

tionship and that this relationship is theologically significant for the Gentile Church. R. Kendall Soulen has shown that post-supersessionist theology has had three different stages over the past seventy-five years. There was an initial step of recognizing the fundamentally supersessionist nature of Christian life and teaching and of moving toward an affirmation of God's ongoing covenant with Israel. We can look to the scholarship of Marcel Simon and James Parkes and the declaration *Nostra Aetate* as typifying these developments. After that was a period of critical re-examination of Christian teachings in light of the history of supersessionism. Operating primarily in the context of liberal theology, in this period the focus was fundamentally on reframing Christian theology. Here we can look to the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Franklin Littell, and Alice and Roy Eckardt. Finally, a post-liberal school sought to reverse supersessionism while affirming that core Christian doctrines can be reinterpreted rather than minimized. Here we can locate the works of George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, and Kendall Soulen himself.[6]

Moving beyond Soulen's schematic, recent years have also seen the development in post-supersessionist theology of the question, led by Mark Kinzer, of how messianic Jews are to be considered in the life of the Church (Kinzer 2011). This has influenced the field of post-supersessionist theology such that a society dedicated to its promotion includes in its description that it "affirms the ecclesia's identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah" (Jennings et al. 2021). This development has coincided with larger questions of how identity, ethnicity, and race figure into post-supersessionist theology as a project, as represented by the work of Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter.

4. Anti-Racism and Post-Supersessionism

Given this trajectory, post-supersessionist theology is a field naturally receptive to further contributions from anti-racism. Yet, engaging with racism as a parallel problem to supersessionism has largely been absent from the work of post-supersessionist theologians. Some theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Clark Williamson, and Katherine von Kellenbach have noted where there are resonances and overlaps between post-supersessionist theology and other liberative theologies, but up to this point post-supersessionist theology has not sought to engage in any sort of intersectional work in this regard.[7]

Ibram Kendi's work on anti-racism is instructive for this work. For Kendi, racism and its counterpoints manifest first as ideas that then are expressed through practice. In his view, ideas lead to policies which lead to outcomes for good or ill. Race is a system of power that divides people in the self-interest of those maintaining power (Kendi 2019, p. 42). To reverse inequity and sustain meaningful equity in society, policies must be reversed and cemented by change in thinking or epistemology concerning race.[8]

Kendi offers a tripartite typology of approaches to race that he classifies as segregationist, assimilationist, and anti-racist. He argues that the problem of racism is not simply one of exclusion (segregation) or inclusion (assimilation) since both of these approaches seek to conform racialized bodies to dominant white norms. Concerning segregation, Kendi states that racist ideas and behaviors are expressed by segregationists who posit the fundamental assumption that racial groups perceived as inferior can never achieve equality with racial groups perceived as superior. This leads to segregation between these two groups (Kendi 2019, p. 24). Kendi offers that assimilationist views, which he identifies as a characteristic of significant aspects of contemporary United States society, are also a racist position in so far as assimilationists view "any racial group as the superior standard that another racial group should be measuring themselves against . . . Assimilationists typically position White people as the standard" (Ibid., p. 29). Finally, Kendi defines an anti-racist approach as one that seeks to guarantee equality between racial groups on their own terms and the use of policy to remove any inequality between these groups (Ibid., p. 24).

Considering Kendi's tripartite typology is useful for reflecting on Christian supersessionism. Kendi's definition of a segregationist perspective resonates with the reality that Christian theology about Judaism has often concluded that the Jewish people are blind

to Christian truth. Even when there might be a hope, following Augustine of Hippo, that Jews can be preserved as a witness to this truth, any current change to their status is often deemed impossible, typically because of a perceived moral or spiritual failing within Jews collectively.[9] Historically, this had led to policies of Jewish segregation in Christian society, as seen in medieval and early modern Europe, and ultimately contributed to genocide in the twentieth century.

Regarding the assimilationist perspective, it is worth remembering that in many Euro-American Christian contexts, even when there is not an actively hostile form of Christian anti-Judaism, Christians establish their own standards as religiously normative and then define Judaism in such a way that it falls outside of those norms. This trope extends to contemporary stereotyping of Judaism derived from New Testament passages in popular works of preaching and biblical exegesis despite otherwise open-minded attitudes to Jews and Judaism by Christian leaders. In this category we can also place efforts at Christian conversion of Jews or the place of messianic Judaism in the Gentile Christian Church. Are Jews in this instance expected to take on the norms of the Gentile Church or are they permitted their own distinctiveness and not required to assume the values and behaviors of other ecclesial cultures?

Concerning the position of anti-racism, it would seem natural to draw parallel connections to post-supersessionist theologies insofar as they seek to affirm a covenantal relationship between Jews and Christians or between Israel and the Church. Yet there is reason to not so readily apply this equivalence. Post-supersessionism affirms Judaism's place in God's salvific will for the world. But because of other theological commitments to creedal and doctrinal positions, frequently post-supersessionist theologians do not firmly address the degree to which the eschatologically redeemed status of the people of Israel depends on the work of Jesus Christ and not on the eternal covenants made with Israel in Abraham and at Sinai.

Rather than consistently operating in a space that affirms the equality of Judaism and Christianity in God's redemptive work, post-supersessionism at times relegates Judaism to a secondary space that these theologians claim to avoid. One can discern such a dynamic in the work of Robert Jenson. He views the emergence of the church as an event within Christ's coming to Israel. Israel is the primary site of God's redemptive activity and for Jenson Jesus Christ is the culmination of that work for Israel. The emergence of a Gentile church is a by-product of Jewish disbelief about Jesus Christ. He conceptualizes the church as "an eschatological detour of Christ's coming" (Jenson 1999). Jenson also envision Judaism as it has developed from rabbinic traditions, that is, contemporary Jewish religious life, as a detour from God's plan of fulfilling Israel's hope for redemption. While acknowledging the legitimacy of rabbinic observance of Torah, Jenson also identifies Judaism as only now a part of Israel alongside the church. He states, "The church . . . should regard the continuing synagogue as a detour like herself, within the Fulfillment of Israel's hope" (Jenson 1999, p. 194). It is clear that this hope is a primarily Christological one and that any Jewish hope ultimately is referred to Christ, as seen in his affirmation that a mission to convert and baptize Jews remains in effect for the church, even if it also ought to recognize contemporary Judaism as a manifestation of God's will (Ibid., p. 293). For Jenson, "The church and the synagogue are together and only together they present availability to the world of the risen Christ" (Jenson 2003, p. 13). Israel now exists in part as a Gentile reality.

Jenson's efforts to affirm a coherent post-supersessionist theology in which the synagogue and the church are not rivals but partners end up subsuming the Jewish people within Christianity. While trying to affirm the church's belonging to Israel in a way that does not denigrate continuing Jewish fidelity to Torah, Jenson evacuates the significance of Israel as a primarily Jewish mode of belonging to God. This obscures the integrity of Jewish life as a covenanted life with God prior to Christian claims.

Jenson's post-supersessionist theology mirrors Kendi's description of the integrationist position more than an anti-racist position. Jenson affirms Judaism but also envisions Judaism, intentionally or not, within the terms of a dominant Christian discourse. Jenson's

argument that the synagogue is a manifestation of Christ's presence in the world that requires a yoking with the church to see it is an aspect of the dominant post-supersessionist insistence on a single covenant that both Jews and Gentile Christians participate in. Post-supersessionist theologians make such a claim to avoid any distancing between the types of redemptive work God does. By making Jesus Christ the focal point for the ultimate meaning of God's covenanting work with Israel, post-supersessionism offers (to use Kendi's language) an assimilationist stance. An anti-supersessionist theology would seek to incorporate more fully Jewish self-understanding into Christian reflection.

Anti-supersessionism emerges out of the insight from anti-racism that practices of solidarity are necessary in order to reshape cultures and societies formed by racism. In order for that to happen, those identified as white need to act in solidarity with Black people and other peoples of color and to collaborate with them in creatively extending foundational anti-racist work.[10] As a corollary, Christians seeking to undo supersessionism must act in solidarity with Jewish people, which means both paying attention to Jewish discourse and recasting traditional Christian theology. This activity should not only mitigate the effects of supersessionism and anti-Judaism but also should shape future expressions of Christianity that are actively anti-supersessionist. Anti-supersessionism is not a repudiation of post-supersessionism but an attempt to intensify its commitments. Anti-supersessionism is the creation and maintenance of a deep solidarity between Gentile Christians and Jews to ensure their mutual flourishing and indeed to cultivate a communion within the common life of God, a communion that permeates Christian theology and practice.

Deep solidarity requires conceptual reframing. Let us recall how Rogers challenges Gentile Christians to decenter claims to a privileged relationship. They need to resist the supersessionist tendency to apply the scriptural narrative of the people of Israel to themselves, where it has been used to define Gentile Christian identity exclusively. To redress this issue, Rogers develops a pneumatological argument to show that the Jewish community was and is in a permanent, graced relationship with God. This requires Gentile Christians to re-center the Jewish people in the scriptural narrative. Likewise, for white Christians, the decentering of their Gentile Christian identity must accompany a decentering of their white identity. Just as in white American culture the work of decentering requires arriving at a new understanding of racial difference, in Gentile Christianity the work of decentering requires reconceptualizing questions of redemption and salvation. A primary focus for Gentile Christian reflection concerns the nature and status of God's covenant with the Jewish people. It is to this topic that I now turn in order to show the potential for an anti-supersessionist theology.

5. Anti-Supersessionism and Covenantal Relationships

For an anti-supersessionist Christian theology, it is essential to re-frame the concept of covenant, and specifically to rethink the category of membership in the people of God. From the earliest examples of supersessionist theology, Gentile theologians presented Jesus Christ as the universal savior of the nations by denying any ongoing salvific legitimacy to God's covenant with the people of Israel.[11] By emphasizing Israel at the center of God's redemptive relationships, the Gentile Church can exercise deeper solidarity with Israel and create the foundation for anti-supersessionist correctives to other aspects of Christian practice and theology.

A focus on covenant as the foundation to an anti-supersessionist theology also resonates with the way in which anti-racist thinking names how power and control operates in racist systems. Much as a supersessionist framing of covenant seeks to control the narrative of God's own gracious activity in relation to people, racist thinking creates hierarchies and binaries of those groups of people who are in and out of favor with systems of power. Anti-racist and anti-supersessionist frameworks both are used to reverse these distorting systems, even when they have the appearance of intractability. A primary way to overcome the apparent intractability of oppressive systems is to name how they are constructed for purposes of control and subordination. Once named, that which seems natural and

inherent to a system can be revealed as the result of deliberate design (Zamalin 2019, pp. 29–31). Thus, once it is recognized that Christian life and thought have long been in thrall to supersessionist constructions, one can begin to deploy new frameworks to counter this seemingly natural state of Christianity. Anti-supersessionism enables Christians to see the systemic nature and operations of supersessionism and anti-Judaism within Christianity. But the goal is not simply diagnostic; this framework also offers alternate constructions of Christianity. Just as anti-racist strategies prompt one to consider alternate models of what freedom and flourishing look like in society, anti-supersessionist strategies prompt one to consider alternate models for the flourishing of the entirety of God's people, Jew and Gentile, Israel and the Church.

Moving from a supersessionist framework of adjudicating the validity or invalidity of covenants to a vision of a co-covenanting dynamic among God, Israel, and the Church is the catalyst for the decentering work of anti-supersessionism within Christianity. Recent scholarship on Pauline literature provides tools for this move. Paul's portrayal of the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ hinges on what he accomplishes for Gentile inclusion within the covenantal life that already exists between God and Israel. Gentile adoption in Christ leads to kinship with Israel but also necessitates that Gentiles not boast, or center themselves, within this work (Rom 11:17–20) (Nanos 2017, pp. 3–59). Paul tells them that his message, while affirming Gentile belonging, roots them in the extant covenant with the people of Israel. Boasting is therefore inappropriate, for their rootedness is more tenuous than the rootedness of Israel (Hodge 2007, pp. 137–48). Having been justified by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, they can enter the family of God by grace only to discover that Israel is already in the covenant (Eisenbaum 2009, pp. 240–49). Jews and Gentiles are on equal terms, and any effort by Gentiles to obscure this equality by boasting is to be firmly rejected (Wan 2021, pp. 32, 47).

From a Pauline perspective, Gentiles in Christ ought to be humble about their status in the Church. It is always constituted by a body of people brought in by grace to a covenanted life with God that Israel first shared. Jennings frames the necessity of this self-understanding in light of the perpetual problem of Gentile Christians' viewing themselves as the primary focus of God's redemptive covenantal work instead of Israel. He observes that "In truth, the election of Israel never significantly entered into the social imagination of the church. Israel's election has not done any real theological work for Christian existence" (Jennings 2010, p. 254). This inability to perceive the nature of God's work as first with Israel mistakenly places the Gentile Church at the center of the biblical narrative. An anti-supersessionist position emphasizes the priority of the Jewish covenantal relationship with God that would seem to create tensions with traditionally Christological and Trinitarian affirmations. I would argue that affirming the covenantal relationship between God and Israel is prior to the assertions of these other categories because in terms of classic Trinitarian theology, the path to knowing God immanently occurs via God's economic activity, notably in the life of Israel.[12]

Decentering the Gentile Church's misperceived covenantal priority reminds us of the provisional nature of the Gentile experience in the New Testament witness. The Gentile position is not as the dominant partner of God's redemptive work but rather as adopted children, engrafted branches, and reconciled strangers. While post-supersessionist theology envisions what a theology of repair between Israel and the Church might look like, an anti-supersessionist theology emphasizes the reorientation of the quadratic relationship between the God of Israel, the person of Jesus Christ, Israel, and the Church.

The challenge that anti-supersessionist theology offers to the Gentile Church is similar to the challenge that anti-racist thought offers to white culture. Just as anti-racism asks if in Western contexts non-white bodies and cultural productions can represent the universality of human experience that white bodies and cultural productions commonly are privileged to possess, so anti-supersessionist theology asks whether Israel's election as the first instance of God's redemptive covenanting can be seen as having universal significance for the Church and not merely represent a past reality.

Applying an anti-racist lens to anti-supersessionist theology helps to re-orient a scriptural vision of how two communities can live together amidst difference. Jennings takes up the story of Jesus' speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and notes how typically Christian readers place themselves alongside Jesus and not the woman. As such, Gentiles imagine themselves to be in the place of the disciples, or among Israel (since Jesus is a Jew), rather than among the Gentiles as the Samaritan woman was (Jennings 2010, p. 262). What might it mean for Christian life and thought if Gentile Christians no longer perceive themselves as the insider walking alongside Jesus but rather the outsider who by grace is made into one who shares in the life of the redeemed community of Israel? The transformative work of this revisioning occurs when the movement from outsider to insider for Gentiles is not conceived as a one-time event when God's redemptive election shifted from Israel to the Church but rather as a constant process by which the Gentile Christians understand themselves as strangers continually being invited, welcomed, and adopted through the work of Jesus Christ into a covenantal life that Israel always enjoyed first.

If the Gentile Church can shift from seeing itself standing alongside Jesus in a position of privilege to being identified with the Samaritan woman, it can begin the process of decentering its claim to have a truer realization of God's redemption than Israel's. Such an act of decentering disrupts the Church's certainty of the location of God's saving activity solely within its sphere.[13] As such, the Gentile Church is required to encounter the otherness of Jesus as a Jew belonging to Israel who provides the means for Gentiles to share in Israel's covenanted life with God.[14]

6. The Jewish Jesus and the Gentile Church

The Gospels are clear that Jesus' primary concern was to minister to the people of Israel. There are only a few scenes that include non-Jews and certainly no focus on Gentiles in general. When after the resurrection the disciples are finally sent to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19), they do not abandon their ministry to Israel. Rather the sending to the nations is part of the eschatological mission of the resurrected Christ to lead all the nations of the earth to turn to and to worship the God of Israel. This is in keeping with the visions of prophets such as Isaiah and Micah that God's redemption of Israel will include the gathering of the nations to Zion (Isaiah 2:2–4; Micah 4:1–4).

How Jesus was redemptive for Israel given that few Jews were persuaded by claims made about his messianic status is the mystery that stands at the heart of the Christian proclamation (Romans 11:25). Much of the New Testament, and especially the Pauline epistles, serve as an extended meditation on this mystery. Despite the contrast drawn in many of these texts between law and grace, Jew and Gentile, and faith and works, two theological claims emerge in the explorations of this mystery, one about Jews, the other about Gentiles. First, God has not abandoned Israel and, in God's own mysterious way, Israel will be redeemed (Romans 11:28–29). Second, Gentiles, while brought into a redeeming relationship with the God of Israel through the work of Jesus Christ, have no cause for boasting of their status over Jews. Rather than boasting, Gentiles ought to stand in awe of God's gracious work for them (Romans 11:17–20). How God tends to Israel is not theirs to judge or decide.

For Gentile Christians to accept the Gospel and to follow Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge that they turn to one who first offers his gift to Israel. This in itself is a modeling of Jesus' own decentering, or emptying of himself of glory (*kenosis*), as Paul narrates in his Christological hymn in Philippians 2. Any glory that one might receive only ever comes analogically by imitating Christ's own self-emptying and decentering that God the Father rewards with glory. Gentile Christians receive glorification, redemption, or divine gifts only provisionally. These cannot be earned either by their works or because of their ethnic or racial identity. Any good thing received by a Gentile believer is a pure gift of grace. The cultivation of gratitude ought to be at the center of the Gentile life. This practice will ensure

that the awareness of the graciously provisional, yet eternal, nature of their redemption does not shade into resentment or hostility.

This theology rests on a sense of humility with relevance beyond relations with Jews, for it applies equally to racial divisions (and especially habits of whiteness) in the Church. While acknowledging the many diverse forms of Christianity globally, from the context of this Euro-American author, the dominant forms of Christianity manifest expressions of both supersessionism and whiteness. Both must be addressed and overturned by practices of anti-supersessionism and anti-racism.

7. Trajectories

Much as the Church has been developing anti-racist solutions for the effort to decenter whiteness in the life of the Church, so too anti-supersessionist theology can decenter supersessionism. For Gentile Christians, God's relentless drawing of all things into divine relationship means that the claims of the superiority of whiteness or the superiority of the Gentile Christian experience (i.e., the Church) must be abandoned. Gentile Christians ought to experience their specific ethnic and cultural identities as gifts that manifest the diversity of the created order. And they ought to celebrate the sacred mystery that is the Church, expressed in the vast bounty of human diversity found in the Body of Christ. But that mystery must be experienced precisely as that—a gift of covenantal life that Gentile Christian themselves can never rightly claim as theirs to own for the purpose of claiming superiority or to arbitrate God's gracious dealings with others.

These observations leave us with some considerations of issues in Christology. In light of the inter-relationship of whiteness and supersessionism in contemporary contexts, a word about the diversity of the Gentile Church as it perceives the person of Jesus Christ is in order. Christianity exists across the whole spectrum of racial and ethnic expressions. One of the legacies of Western Christian colonialism was the presentation of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and Christianity as expressions of whiteness and its values. Hence, an important move in the development of forms of Christianity authentic to a multitude of peoples, places, and context is a conscious decoupling of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and Christianity from whiteness. Recall that James Cone turns to a Black Jesus as a means to critique the violence of whiteness in the Church and to retrieve the power of God's acting in Jesus Christ for all people, and especially for the oppressed and marginalized. Moreover, Cone's affirmation of the significance of Jesus Christ precisely in his Jewishness is what constitutes his analogical manifestation as Black. His Blackness emerges from his Jewishness because Cone perceives how these two ways of being in the world intersect with experiences of oppression and marginalization (Cone 1997, pp. 123–24). Barbara Meyer reflects on Cone's argument to note how the category of a Black Jesus does work for the Black Church that a Jewish Jesus typically does not.[15] A Black Jesus provides the crucial means to critique the culture of whiteness in which it is embedded. This works because a Black Jesus becomes the familiar figure in finding life and liberation. And yet, when the Jewishness of Jesus is foregrounded, he becomes less familiar or recognizable. Indeed, a Jewish Jesus might even stand as a challenging figure for some, like Palestinian Christians. The Jewish Jesus is thus a figure of otherness that stands as a challenge and invitation for an expanded vision of God's redemptive activity for all Gentile Christians (Meyer 2020, pp. 73–75, 91–96). Different Christians will have different encounters with the effects of whiteness and supersessionism. Equally, manifestations of racism will exist in varying cultures beyond anti-Black racism that this article focuses on. But globally, one can discern how Christianity in diverse cultural contexts is suffused with implicit forms of supersessionism that an anti-supersessionist theology can help reverse.

The proposals in this essay for an anti-supersessionist theology also require a word about creedal statements about the person of Jesus Christ. The more Christians reflect deeply on the Jewishness of Jesus, the more they are called to wrestle with the mystery of how he was both a Jew who came for Jews and is also the Incarnate Word, fully co-equal with the Father, and redeemer of the world. Paul van Buren reminds us that the Church

"has to live with the Jewish people for the sake of its own Christology" (Van Buren 1988, p. 200). This is not a mere toleration of a Jewish presence but rather an openness to the work of God to reveal how Jesus Christ stands between the Church and Israel and the covenantal actions that establish redemption for both the Church and Israel. While van Buren himself moved away from classical creedal formulations in his work, I would argue that to deny what the Spirit revealed to the Church in its own discernments and councils is as deleterious as to deny the on-going gracious divine activity within the Jewish people. Between Jews and Christians, the person of Jesus Christ remains a figure of irreducible difference. And yet, the Church is called to constantly re-orient itself in light of God's gracious action of inviting it into the covenanted life first established with Israel.

For the church, the radical invitation of Gentiles into God's covenantal life is Christologically centered. Yet this invitation also calls for the decentering of Gentile identity in order to avoid the supersessionist patterns frequently found within Christian life and thought. This anti-supersessionist work of decentering emerges out of anti-racist discourses in the context of the Black experience in the United States, but it also relates to broader intersectional theological approaches to promoting human flourishing.

Prior scholars of Jewish-Christian relations have argued that resisting supersessionism is part of a larger liberative theology. The same is true of anti-supersessionist theology. Anti-supersessionist theology is a practice of solidarity that is primarily concerned with Jews but also contributes to solidarity with other communities that dominant forms of Christian life and thought have marginalized. Practitioners of anti-supersessionist theology would find that it is constitutive of a broader form of theological discourse and practice that seeks flourishing for all people and the end of oppressive ideologies and practices. As such, anti-supersessionist theology is not limited to critiques raised by analysis of anti-Black racism but would recognize that all forms of racism have their own contexts and trajectories that, when found in Christian contexts, include the problem of supersessionist dynamics. In another vein, the deployment of gendered discrimination and the creation of hierarchies of embodied experiences in Christianity is another reality to which anti-supersessionism must attend. The call for a decentering of Gentile experience, for instance, ought not to be used to then call for a decentering the concerns of marginalized people and bodies from which patriarchal expressions of Christianity have historically benefitted. On the contrary, anti-supersessionist theology creates a heightened awareness of the intersectional realities in contemporary contexts and provides a new theological perspective to provide life-giving alternatives to prior theological models that have operated in Christian theologies of Judaism.

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Notes

[1] For a fuller definition of supersessionism, see (Soulen 1996, pp. 12–17).

[2] Willie James Jennings links the re-evaluation of the relationship between Jews and Christians with a reckoning with the ideologies of whiteness that course through Western Christianity. See (Jennings 2010, pp. 250–88).

[3] (Gruen 2017). On Justin's agenda, see (Boyarin 2004, pp. 37–40).

[4] On how to understand how race was used as a category in medieval Spain, see (Nirenberg 2009, pp. 232–64).

[5] Regarding the capitalization of "Black" but not "white" in this article, see (Laws 2020).

[6] (Soulen 2018, pp. 405–18). Soulen locates the Episcopalian theologian Paul Van Buren as a figure who falls within both the second and third periods.

[7] It is possible that this might represent the fact that post-supersessionist theology has been produced primarily in European and American institutions that have not done significant critically reflective work on the intersection of scholarly productions and race.

[8] Jennifer Harvey's work is an example of this position. See (Harvey 2014). Here we can pause to consider that historians of Jewish-Christian relations also observe how Christian theological conceptualization of Jews as an inferior category provided the

foundation for anti-Jewish practice and violence in Christian communities. The dynamics between racism and supersessionism coincide even when the referents differ. For a survey of this history see (Nirenberg 2013).

9   On Augustine's theology of Judaism, its collapse in the later middle ages, and the emergence of Christian persecution see (Cohen 1999).

10   (Zamalin 2019, pp. 7–9). Although in this essay I focus on the problem of anti-Black racism, I acknowledge that this is not constitutive of all forms of racism. Nonetheless, anti-Black racism and anti-Judaism are inexorably linked within the conditions of modernity. Further work is needed to investigate dynamics between anti-Judaism and other expressions of racism.

11   Two early examples from the second century are the *Letter of Barnabas* and Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

12   For the foundational modern position, see (Rahner 1970).

13   There is a risk that the language of decentering can obscure other ways in which gendered and racial hierarchies have operated in other forms of New Testament interpretations of passages like this one. An anti-supersessionist approach would require an avoidance of these and ideally help provide alternative interpretive models. See (Parker 2020, pp. 259–71).

14   On the otherness of Jesus the Jew, see (Meyer 2020, p. 11).

15   It is of course important to note that Jewish communities themselves cross the boundaries of culturally conditioned categories of race. Here Meyers is referring specifically to what she understands as Cone's reflection on the American Black church experience.

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