

By Reverend Ray Gaston

Theologian Kendall Soulen points out that because Christianity is concerned with the God of the Hebrew Bible and because Jesus was a faithful Jew, 'the question has never been whether Christians should speak and act with reference to the Jewish people. Rather the question has been how they should do so, and how what they would say and do would affect the existence of the Jewish people.'¹

A Rabbi friend when first confronted with the passage in John's Gospel, 'the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews,'² reflected 'How ironic, as for most of the last 2,000 years it has been Jews who have been hiding behind locked doors for fear of Christians'. The truth of Christian – Jewish relations for much of the church's life has been a story of oppression and violence inflicted by Christians upon Jews. This violence was located within the very self-understanding of Christians in relation to their Jewish neighbours. It was built upon a theology of supersessionism that saw Christianity as having displaced the Jewish people in their covenant with God. This interpretation of Christianity is still widely preached in our churches.

Soulen outlines three types of supersessionism that have dominated the church's theology – punitive, economic and structural.³ The first argues that the Jewish people rejected Jesus and are therefore being punished for this rejection, God has abrogated the covenant made with the Jewish people and has replaced Israel with the 'New Israel' of the Church, the Jews became a wandering people who in their homelessness witnessed to the consequences of disobedience to God. In the second version sometimes aligned to the first but not always, Israel is merely the preparation for the coming of Christ. Israel's relationship with God based on 'worldly' limitations such as a specific people, land and way of life is replaced by a 'superior' more 'universal and spiritual' salvation brought in Christ. Finally, structural supersessionism is perhaps the most deeply ingrained in the Christian consciousness – it is the way we often read the biblical story in prayers, liturgy, lectionaries and preaching. Soulen calls it the Standard Canonical Narrative – a story in four movements -The creation, the fall, Christ's redemption and the future consummation. All other characters and events of the diverse and complex biblical narrative are co-opted (or ignored) to fit this overarching narrative.

All these ways of reading our relationship with the Jewish people represent attempts to assert the superiority of Christianity. We tend to see the church as growing out of a moribund and degenerate second temple Judaism. The truth was quite different⁴. The Jesus movement was one of a number of movements associated with the diversity of Judaism in the 1st century of the Common Era (CE) – a pluralistic tradition that sought to survive and continue to stay true to the God of the covenant under the heel of a vicious Roman occupation of their land. Following the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and the later failed Jewish revolts it was the quietist siblings of the Jesus Movement and the embryonic Rabbis that survived the further brutal oppression of empire. In the events that followed these two

movements developed different trajectories: the Rabbinical movement resourced the Jewish people – renewing the tradition after temple destruction and led to the Judaism we have today. On the other hand the Jesus Movement increasingly orientated itself as a missionary movement taking the God of Israel into the gentile world and became the Church. Where the two movements met there was theological conflict and the echoes of this often acrimonious intra Jewish debate can be heard in the gospels and the epistles. But when these largely Jewish texts became the Scripture of an exclusively gentile movement the nature of the conflict changed. An eventually powerful gentile church, allied to empire, sought to shame or destroy its weaker sibling and supersessionism became the theological rationale for the dismissal of the Jewish people and the preaching of contempt the norm. It was this continual message of contempt in varying degrees, with very few exceptions that filled the preaching of the early church fathers, the medieval church, the reformers, the 19th century liberal Protestants and their later neo-orthodox detractors alike. This contributed to the rise of Nazi ideology in a culturally Christian Germany and the murder of 6 million Jews. So deeply rooted was the theology of supersessionism that the church stood by at best and joined in the Nazi obscenity at worst. The small organised Christian resistance to the Nazis was not because of their treatment of the Jews but because they sought to interfere with the Church. 5

The reality of the Shoah⁶ has led to a re-examination of the theology of supersessionism in the churches of Europe and North America particularly. But despite many Church statements supersessionism remains embedded in the consciousness of Christians and is often at the heart of much of our preaching and worship. To challenge this we must continually ask ourselves the questions posed by Soulen above: How are we speaking of the people who gave us Jesus and whose scriptures we share and what are the implications of our speaking for the Jewish people today? As one group of Christians has argued it is A Sacred Obligation.⁷

1 R. Kendall Soulen The God of Israel and Christian Theology (Fortress Press 1996) p1

2 John 20:19 (NRSV)

3 Op Cit pp29-33

4 See for instance Mary C Boys Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self Understanding (Paulist Press 2000) pp83- 85

5 Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel Betrayal – The German Churches and the Holocaust (Fortress Press 1999)

6 Shoah which is Hebrew for ‘catastrophe’ is often preferred by Jewish commentators to ‘Holocaust’ as a term for the Nazis murder of over 6 million Jews

7. See A SACRED OBLIGATION: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People, A Statement by the Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations

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<http://www.jcrelations.net/ASacredObligationRethinkingChristianFaithinRelationtoJudaismandtheJewishPeople.2372.0.html?L=3>