Magda Teter, *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 390.

by *Matteo Caponi*

In her latest, thought-provoking book Magda Teter revisits antisemitism and anti-Black racism by looking at them as two interconnected phenomena which have shaped Western cultures, societies and politics across the Atlantic. This choice implies a clear historiographical positioning. Quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, the author claims the need of "reconnecting the study of racism and antisemitism" and "overcoming methodological separatism"—we must consider that in US public discourse racism is mostly conceived in connection with the color line. Reversing a common trope, Teter argues that both antisemitism and anti-Black racism have old Christian, not novel secular, roots. The goalis not to point out, as Robert P. Jones recently did,[1] "the legacy of white supremacy in American Christianity," but on the contrary to investigate, "by a deeper chronological look," "the Christian legacy in white supremacy": that is, how Christianity "left its mark" on Jewish/Black exclusion or annihilation (p. 14). Christendom was built on the "enduring marks of inferiority" attributed to certain "contrasting figures" (p. 15): Jews (chapter 2), in particular, and enslaved Africans, when a white European Christian identity emerged under the doctrine of colonial discovery (chapter 3). Missing, admittedly, is the figure of the Arab/Turkish/Moor/Muslim, also central to Christian imagination.

A Polish-born historian, professor of Judaic studies at Fordham University and a New Yorker living in Harlem, Teter has to her credit important works such as *Blood Libel*.[2] Her interests have expanded to analyze how Christian teaching had assembled, since the first centuries CE, "a mental habit" that provided for a socio-religious hierarchy. *Christian Supremacy* moves from the tragic events of Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, when a crowd of Christian white nationalists

[1] Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

[2] Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail on an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

protested against the removal of a monument of general Robert E. Lee to the cry "Jews will not replace us." Teter rewinds the tape of this narrative and takes the reader through an itinerary that avoids trivializations. From the earliest Christian era onward, the theology of Jewish servitude established a paradigm that was later transferred to dark-skinned humankind in need of conversion. Indeed, the religious discourse about 'heathens' has been a powerful vector of racialization before and beyond the scientific-biological language of race, as also shown by Kathryn Gin Lum.[3] Drawing from the *longue durée* debated interpretations by M. Lindsay Kaplan and Willie Jennings, [4] Teter contends that Christian supersessionism, which was applied to Judaism, and implemented in legal instruments of oppression since the late ancient and medieval ages, acted as a genealogical paradigm for white domination over people of color since the early modern age. "The European Christian sense of superiority over non-Christians, which had emerged at first in regard to Jews," represented a "fertile ground for the development of racialized Christianity" associating Blackness with non-Christian inferiority and "hereditary heathenism" (p. 57). The enslavement of black Africans reframed Christian supremacy, consolidating a religio-racial normativity well expressed by Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, which as of the Seventeenth century editions transposed whiteness as part of "European Christian identity" (p. 69).

The imagery of Christian supremacy "developed, gradually, first in the Mediterranean and Europe in respect to Jews and then in respect to people of color in the European colonies and the US, before returning transformed back in Europe" (pp. 1-3). The thesis that supersessionism was the urtext of racism has been strongly contested. However, such a perspective allows us to decenter our gaze from an all-European history built on a Weber-style idea of modernity that coincides with secularization and the enfranchisement of the political bodies from Christian reference values. Significantly, intertwined representations of Christianity and whiteness were reaffirmed at the time of the emergence of post-1776 and post-1789 modern citizenship. The emancipation of Jews, accompanied

[3] Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2022).

[4] M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

by a debate on their "regeneration", did not brand them as totally incompatible with the new model of national community, but still fashioned them as basically non-Europeans, "Semites", and "Orientals", as non-Christian. The legal parity awarded to Jews seemed, even to its advocates, a necessity to remedy their being strangers to the modern state. Despite secularization, the belief that "allowing Jews to be citizens would 'endanger' Christians," (p. 92) and that the new post-revolutionary Europe and the United States of America had a Christian-based culture, was at work in a variety of geographic and chronological contexts.

While rejecting false equivalences between Jewish and Black condition ("Jews may have been despised, but they were not slaves," p. 94), Teter focuses on the American case, adhering to a revisionist approach toward the "redemptive" narrative centered on the American dream, the Emancipation Declaration and so on.[5] From the earliest laws of the now-independent former colonies (e.g., the Naturalization Act of 1790), and even in the minds of the abolitionists themselves, there was a shared view that the United States should be a Christian (Protestant) country and that the political freedom cherished by Christians (*We, the People*) was not a business for Jews, Native Americans, or Afro-descendants. The fact that for many this did not mean that Jews, infidels or 'pagan' savages should be oppressed and persecuted, did not prevent the view that the bearers of the torch of freedom were Christians, thought of as white, and that non-Christians were the outsiders to be marginalized. Bellah's American civil religion was able to incorporate and remodulate the leading motifs of Christian supremacy, including antisemitism and Blackophobia. It would have to wait until the 1940s for the theme of the Judeo-Christian tradition to be disseminated, and then cultivated in the anticommunist climate of the Cold War. On the other hand, not even the Civil Rights Movement would erase the reality of systemic racism: as stated by James Baldwin in 1963, "the Christian world has revealed itself as morally bankrupt and politically unstable" (p. 268).

The contestation of Black citizenship by anti-Reconstruction jurisprudence after the Civil War was animated by the "reconciliationist" vision that it was a Christian duty, proper to a Christian nation, to oppose "Negrophile" tendencies that risked

[5] Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

"Africanizing" the United States, and threatened civilization, progress and national harmony. Again: the myth of the Christian nation and of a "white Protestant republic," openly thematized by Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court David H. Brewer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was also widely operative in unspoken anti-Jewishness. In the United States, Jewish citizens could certainly exercise the right to vote and were never in danger of being denaturalized. Yet, the 20th century saw a growing aversion to Jews as "unassimilable aliens" (pp. 196-197). Anti-Jewish discrimination was "often veiled in euphemisms [...], such as 'restricted clientele' in hotel advertising" (p. 216): nothing comparable to Jim Crowism at home or antisemitic persecution in Europe, but nonetheless something emblematic of a simultaneous backlash against Jewish and Black equality (chapters 7-8). The cliché of Jews as "tricksters and Blacks as dupes" planted seeds of what would become "an antisemitic and anti-Black trope of Jewish support of Black civil rights in order to disrupt white Christian American society" (p. 226).

The book closes by challenging the idea of a post-1945 retreat of racism and antisemitism, with the statement that "a true reckoning was not possible, neither in Europe nor in the United States" (p. 239). Really insightful pages are spent on anticommunist antisemitism in Eastern Europe, in particular in Poland, promoted by a part of Catholic bishops. Not even the evolution of Jewish-Christian relations since the 1980s, several years after *Nostra aetate*, has erased the "Christian sense of superiority" (p. 284) that has empowered cultural racisms in their various ramifications. If I may suggest a critique of this brilliant and wide-ranging monograph, sometimes the exposition seems to gloss over the alternatives, more or less traveled, with respect to "Christian supremacy" understood in a religio-racial sense, or at least its internal articulations. Teter convincingly emphasizes the original contribution of Christian cultures to antisemitic and anti-Black racism. However, not all anti-Black racisms and antisemitisms (plural) have been Christian-derived. Christian interaction with secular (or non-Christian) racisms/antisemitisms has been made up of encounters but also clashes and otherness. On this issue, several lines of research are still open. No doubt, Teter's work represents an essential scholarly contribution.

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