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Touching the Heart of Faith: Challenges of Christian-Jewish Dialogue

Cover Page Footnote

Mary C. Boys is the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on April 29, 1999, as the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding Annual Lecture.

MARY C. BOYS

*Touching the Heart of Faith:
Challenges of Christian-Jewish Dialogue*

I take my title for this afternoon's lecture from an assertion by the Catholic bishops of France that the continued existence and vitality of Judaism "pose questions to us Christians which touch on the heart of our faith."

Pursuing questions is vital to learning. I often think of a story about Nobel laureate Isidor I. Rabi (1898-1988). Not long after the physicist's death, a friend wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, testifying to the role Rabi's mother had played in his life. It seems that at the end of each school day she quizzed her son, "Now, Izzie, did you ask a good question today?" Today we also recall another great man, Frank Brennan, in whose memory this lecture is given, to whom we are indebted for the immense energy he devoted to pursuing questions at the heart of the dialogue between Christians and Jews.

What if, following the lead of the French bishops, we were to look at Judaism as questioning us Christians in ways that touch on the heart of our faith? Two aspects strike me immediately. First, the questioning involves *faith* — not merely information, not lofty abstractions. The inquiries will lodge in our bone marrow. Second, precisely because questions may catch us off balance and expose superficial understandings, they are critical for our religious maturity. We need questions to move us out of our complacency, particularly in North America, where Christianity enjoys the status of the majority religion. We need questions to launch us into a commitment to lifelong education in faith. We need questions to force us to deal with the shadow side of our faith, to lead us to wrestle with the "well-proven fact" that an "anti-Jewish tradition _____"

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stamped its mark in differing ways on Christian doctrine and teaching,

in theology, apologetics, preaching and in the liturgy," thereby providing the ground for the "flourishing of the venomous plant of hatred for the Jews."²

This is an enormous challenge, a formidable task. Anti-Judaism has been entwined in Church teaching for nearly 2000 years. The rethinking evident in the churches has as yet to make a broad impact. Breaking the tenacious hold of supersessionism – the teaching that Christianity supersedes or supplants Judaism – on Christian self-understanding requires commitment to study, dialogue, and creative pedagogy.³

Other factors heighten the difficulty. Leaders in virtually every denomination decry religious illiteracy, a problem compounded by culture's power to dominate the minds and values of Christians in ways that seem to outstrip the Church's resources. "Back to basics" is often proposed as a remedy, in the hopes that an emphasis on fundamentals will provide a knowledge so clear and compelling that lives will be changed. That goal is highly desirable, but the "basics," however, will not lead us there. They have no room for complexity, no room for a story line with a complicated narrative about partings. If we are to have room in the inn for a God who works among us in ways no less mysterious than for our ancestors in faith, then we must be faithful to the new insights from scholars and others who have (and are) engaged on a deep level with Jews and Judaism.

Moving Beyond Anti-Judaism

This requires learning to speak about ourselves as Christians in unfamiliar ways. It demands eradicating the supersessionism that has infected how we understand and practice Christianity, and replacing it with more adequate ways of praying, proclaiming, preaching, and teaching. This is a major commitment. It also means turning a critical ear to how we talk about the other and ourselves in prayer, hymnody, and sermon, and working to find more adequate ways of expressing our faith.

Let me illustrate this with a personal experience. Several years ago a Jewish scholar and I led a weekend of Jewish-Christian dialogue sponsored by a Catholic parish and a reform synagogue across the street from one another, an interreligious relationship apparently

initiated by the need to use one another's parking lots on major holidays. My responsibilities included preaching at the Sunday Eucharist. I gave the homily at five of the eleven services this mega-parish had each Saturday evening and Sunday. As is the custom in Roman Catholicism, we used the texts designated by the lectionary for the fourth Sunday in Lent (1 Samuel 16: 1b, 6-7, 10-13a; Ephesians 5: 8-14; John 9:1-41). The Gospel was especially poignant in light of the weekend's activities, though very few parishioners were even aware of the Jewish-Christian dialogue going on in their own household and across the street:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the

Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind, but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he

opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (New Revised Standard Version)

My homily followed the same contours at each service. After briefly situating the readings from 1 Samuel and Ephesians in light of Lent, I turned to the Gospel, contrasting two characters. The first, the blind beggar (nameless, like the woman from Samaria), though clearly no religious genius (vv. 11, 15), nevertheless matured in faith as the narrative developed. He was open to new knowledge (vv. 17, 31-33) and grew to believe (v. 38), ultimately recognizing Jesus as God's revelation. In contrast, a second set of characters, the neighbors, are busybodies with eyesight but no insight. They shuttle between various groups. They quiz the beggar and bring him to the Pharisees, then grill him a second time and interrogate his parents. In John's view, it is the neighbors (and the Pharisees) who are blind; they are representatives of those so convinced of their own righteousness that they miss the revelation. Lent, I suggested to the congregation, is a season for acknowledging that we have the neighbor in us, that we, too, may

operate from such limited horizons that we are unable to recognize God's revelation, which often comes from surprising sources.

Finally, I turned to the verses about the beggar's parents, who offer a level of support for their son that is tepid at best. According to the narrator, their feeble response was due to fear of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (see also John 12:42 and 16:2). Trying to explain this as concisely as possible — it was, after all, a Catholic setting in which a homilist's brevity is considered a virtue — I situated this text in the polemical context of the late first century. Many commentators believe this text reflects the situation of John's own community, which has been excluded from the synagogue because of its opposition to the temple, its inclusion of Samaritans and its high Christology.⁴

Many parishioners remarked on the homily as they left the church. Only, however, at the principal service, the "High Mass," did the responses sound a distinctly different note. In connection with the weekend's events, at this service the cantor and choir from the synagogue sang (as had the parish's choir at the synagogue Friday evening), the senior rabbi was seated in the sanctuary, and a number of members of the synagogue sat among the congregation. After this Mass, parishioners typically said something to the effect of, "I was so relieved and glad you explained that verse about the beggar's parents being afraid of the Jews. When I heard the Gospel today, I was so embarrassed that we were reading it with Jews here among us."

Only at the celebration where Jews were present did such a comment occur.

Let me draw a few implications from this experience. The presence of Jews when we read the Second (New) Testament often means we are struck by passages that had never before impressed themselves on us. Certain texts then assume a problematic character they had not had before. When we do take notice of the newly problematic passages, we often become self-conscious and even embarrassed. How is it, we may well wonder, these texts that we regard as sacred express such negative sentiments?⁵ Startled into awareness of difficult texts, we may discover a heightened desire to probe them more closely. Passages once taken for granted — we've heard so often about the hypocritical Pharisees that such texts make little impression

— now demand a new hearing.

If we are to replace the supersessionist mindset so deeply embedded in the conventional account of Christianity, we must begin with attentiveness to our own language of faith. We must resolve to hear what we say about others — the Jews — when we talk about ourselves. Mindfulness of Jews challenges us to hear resonances in our texts to which we otherwise tend to be oblivious. Such attentiveness is particularly important when we enact the Church's story in the liturgical assembly, for liturgy reaches us (or at least has the potential to) at such a deep level. The prayers we say, the hymns we sing, the sermons that interpret our sacred texts, the gestures we use — all bespeak longings that transcend words.

Liturgical Life and the Jews

Liturgy is a primary way in which we Catholics learn who we are. Liturgy is sensual and tangible. We break bread together and share the common cup. We incense the Book of Gospels, the altar, and assembly. We immerse neophytes in the waters of baptism and anoint them with oil. We mark foreheads with ashes as Lent begins and enkindle new fire at the Easter Vigil.

As theology embodied in poetry and proclamation, song and gesture, liturgy is the "acting out of a script for seeing the world. . . . [It is] our drama of the centuries providing us with the themes that persist through time, the assortment of conventions we have used to express those themes, and the experience of each new style as it emerges."⁶ In acting out this "script for seeing the world," we enter more deeply into Christian life. Thus, the liturgy's importance can scarcely be exaggerated.

Because liturgy exercises such a profound role in forming Christians, what it teaches about our relation to Jews and Judaism requires painstaking examination. This is particularly the case during the liturgical season of Lent, culminating in Holy Week, with the solemn remembrance of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. "Good" Friday, with its focus on the crucifixion, offers particular challenges. Yet an important change some forty years ago indicates that reconsideration of how Jews are regarded in this liturgy has been underway for some time. Previous to 1959, Roman Catholics prayed

``for the conversion of the Jews." The prayer is quite painful to reproduce, but it is part of our history and must be faced. Now a quite different, if not unambiguous, prayer has replaced it:

Pre-1959 Prayer for the Jews on Good Friday (Roman Catholic)

Let us pray also for the unfaithful Jews, that our God and Lord may remove the veil from their hearts; that they also may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Almighty and everlasting God, Who drivest not even the faithless Jews away from Thy mercy, hear our prayers, which we offer for the blindness of that people, that, acknowledging the light of Thy truth, which is Christ, they may be rescued from their darkness.⁷

Current Prayer for the Jews on Good Friday (Roman Catholic)

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the Word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of His name and in faithfulness to His covenant. Listen to your Church as we pray that the people You first made Your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption.

Recently I received a letter from a colleague, Padraic O'Hare, describing his participation in the Good Friday service on April 2, 1999 at Weston Priory in Weston, Vermont. The Benedictine monks at this priory draw hundreds of people from near and far to their Sunday liturgies, and during the Paschal Triduum, their liturgies are no doubt overflowing. Dr. O'Hare described the service:

The prior, Brother Richard, began reading an abridged version of the passion narrative from Matthew; at a point a third through the narrative, he paused and Brother Elias read from United Nations documents

on the genocide directed against the Mayan people in Guatemala – the story of a young boy describing the beating of his family and the burning of his home. Brother Richard resumed the passion narrative of Matthew. When he paused, Brother Elias read the words of a poor Zambian woman describing a life of brutality and privation. Brother Richard resumed and concluded the narrative of the passion and death of Jesus.

Immediately upon reading that Jesus had died on the cross, a third brother, Brother Placid, read from *Night* of the hanging of three persons, including the little boy who was the favorite of the Dutch Oberkapo, the boy who is so light that he hangs and dies slowly. . . . "Where is God? Where is He? . . . and I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows . . ."

Just prior to the veneration of the cross, Brother Placid said words to this effect: "As we approach to venerate the cross of Jesus Christ, we recall our great debt to Jews and Judaism, and how this cross has too often been lent to the service of anti-Jewish teaching, and the promotion of anti-Semitism. In order to remind ourselves of our Lord Jesus' Jewishness, and of this great debt to the Jews, and in order to fortify our commitment to resist anti-Judaism, those who wish to may observe a Jewish funeral rite as they approach to venerate the cross: placing a stone at the grave of a beloved dead person."⁸

While I personally have some reservations about Christians appropriating a custom associated with Jewish rituals of mourning, overall the Weston Priory liturgy for Good Friday seems to me a prime example of what it means to be attentive to what we are saying about Jews and Judaism when we worship.

Another teachable moment is the season of Advent. Consider, for example, the hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Many

Christian communities traditionally observe Advent by singing this ancient hymn while lighting the candles of the Advent wreath. In the midst of the northern hemisphere's winter darkness, its haunting melody is deeply affecting. Yet the traditional lyrics suggest that Judaism is obsolete. Judaism, in implicit contrast to Christianity, still lies in darkness: "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom *captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile* here until the Son of God appear" (emphasis added).

Once we truly hear what we have been singing, this Advent hymn provides the Church with a teachable moment. Supposing the congregation sang lyrics such as the following:

Come, O come Immanuel⁹
 And bless the place your people dwell,
 Protect and keep us day and night,
 And bring the blessing of your Light.

Come, Tree of Life from tender shoot,
 Come from the past, from Jesse's root,
 Break through the stone in ev'ry heart
 Bring hope and joy, new life impart.

Come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer
 Our spirits by your advent here;
 Bless ev'ry people, ev'ry race,
 Embrace us, young and old, within your grace.

The need for more theologically sound lyrics necessitates an explanation of why the traditional lyrics are outmoded. Thus, a note building upon one of the numerous statements recently issued by Christian denominations might accompany the lyrics. For examples:

Presbyterians might say: "Because we have pledged 'never again to participate in, to contribute to or . . . allow the persecution or denigration of Jews or the belittling of Judaism,' this Advent we inaugurate new lyrics in place of those that spoke of 'Israel mourning in lonely exile until the Son of God appear.'"

¹¹⁰

Lutherans might write: ``Because we have declared that we will pray for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community,' we sing this ancient hymn with lyrics more respectful of Judaism's vitality than those that spoke of `Israel mourning in lonely exile until the Son of God appear.'"¹¹

Catholics might note: ``Because we believe `the spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart,' we replace the lyrics about ransoming captive Israel with these new ones."¹²

An even fuller explanation from the pulpit would extend this teachable moment.

Conclusion

When we let the rich scholarship on Jews and Judaism enter into our ways of teaching, preaching, and celebrating liturgy, we have truly let Judaism be a question at the heart of our faith. The existence and vitality of Judaism not only reveal the shadow side of Christian history, but evoke what is deepest and most transformative in our tradition.

Notes

¹ ``Statement by the French Bishops' Committee for Relations with Jews," in Helga Croner, ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations: An Unabridged Collection of Christian Documents* (New York: Stimulus/Paulist, 1977), p. 61.

² ``French Bishops' Declaration on Repentance," *Origins* 27/18 (October 16, 1997), 304.

³R. Kendall Soulen identifies three distinct, yet mutually reinforcing kinds of supersessionism: *economic* (Christ's coming fulfills God's promises in the Old Testament), *punitive* (God has abrogated the covenant with the Jews as punishment for their failure to recognize Jesus as messiah), and *structural* (an

“Israel-forgetfulness,” in which the First Testament is largely irrelevant to the Church’s doctrines). See his “Removing Anti-Judaism,” in Irvin J. Borowsky and Howard Clark Kee, ed., *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament* (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance, 1998), pp. 149-56.

“See John T. Townsend, “The Gospel of John and the Jews: The Story of a Religious Divorce,” in Alan Davies, ed., *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1979), pp. 72-97; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); and J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). Martyn argues that behind John 9 is expulsion of Christians from synagogues. Their expulsion would have happened when “Christian” readers in the synagogue were no longer able to recite the twelfth benediction [of eighteen] – the *‘birkat ha-minim* – from the rabbinic statutory prayer, the *Amidah*. Their refusal to read the benediction would have effectively excommunicated them. *Contra* Martyn, Reuven Kimelman, “*‘Birkat Ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity,” in E.P. Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), pp. 226-44, maintains that this benediction does *not* reflect a watershed in the history of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the first century. Kimelman’s position, rather, is that the *‘birkat ha-minim* was directed primarily against Jewish sectarians. His conclusion seems to represent the current consensus: “Apparently, there was never a single edict which caused the so-called irreparable separation between Judaism and Christianity. The separation was rather the result of a long process dependent upon local situations and ultimately upon the political power of the church” (p. 244).

“Of course, there are many other highly problematic passages, of which one of the most infamous is John 8:43-45: “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” See Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting Difficult Texts: Anti-Judaism and Christian Preaching* (London: SCM and Trinity Press International, 1989).

“Lawrence Hoffman, “What Is a Liturgical Tradition?,” in Bradshaw and Hoffman, p. 19.

“In 1949 Pope Pius XII ordered that the phrase *[pro] perfidis Judaicis* be

translated into the vernacular as "unbelieving" or "faithless" Jews rather than "perfidious" Jews. In 1959 Pope John XXIII ordered the deletion of negative references to Jews in Good Friday's solemn prayers, and Pope Paul VI significantly revised the prayer so that it became "for the Jews" rather than "for the conversion of the Jews." These solemn prayers, nine in number, may have originated as early as the fifth century. Another at least implicitly anti-Jewish element in the liturgy of Good Friday, the "Reproaches" ("O, my people, what have I done to you?") has been made optional, and in many cases, significantly altered. See Eugene J. Fisher, "The Roman Liturgy and Relations Since Vatican II," in Eugene J. Fisher, A. James Rudin, and Marc H. Tanenbaum, ed., *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations* (New York: Paulist, 1986), pp. 137-138; also, W.S. Adams, "Christian Liturgy, Scripture and the Jews," p. 49 n. 40, in which he gives a United Methodist version of the Reproaches, with the refrain, "O my people, O my Church, what have I done to you?" and the addition of this reproach: "I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel, and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder. I made you joint heirs with them of my covenants, but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt."

⁸Letter of Padraic O'Hare to "Select Friends and Colleagues in Jewish-Christian Relations," April 12, 1999. I have edited it slightly.

⁹The NRSV uses "Immanuel" instead of "Emmanuel," which is reflected in these lyrics by Professor Barbara Lundblad of Union Theological Seminary. Used by permission of the author.

¹⁰Cited from the 1987 "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews." This Presbyterian statement may be found in Donald G. Dawe and Aurelia T. Fule, ed., *Christians and Jews Together: Voices from the Conversation* (Louisville: Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1991).

¹¹Cited from the 1994 "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community." The text of this Lutheran statement is available in *Interfaith Focus: Luther, Lutheranism and the Jews 2/1* (Allentown, PA: Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, Muhlenberg College and New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1995), p. iii.

¹²Cited from the 1997 statement, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. Text available in Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998).