Learning from Each Other – A Christian Perspective

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A statement by a Christian long active in Christian-Jewish dialogue about what she has learned from the experience. Paired with the statement by Rabbi David Rosen, Learning from Each Other – A Jewish Perspective.

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Mary C. Boys

This evening's topic, "Learning from Each Other," evokes many memories and musings of rich, if sometimes difficult, learnings from my involvement over the course of some twenty years in Jewish-Christian relations. Because the occasion suggested I stay close to the ground of my own learning, I intend this lecture as a tribute to those in various settings - classrooms, workshops, dialogue groups and conferences - who have contributed so richly to my continuing education (including Rabbi Rosen). Nor can I forget those who have taught me in less formal ways around Shabbat tables, sukkahs and synagogue services, and through treasured friendships. I have learned many things from books, but what I have learned from my dialogical encounters has immeasurably complemented, sometimes challenged and always enlivened the words of texts. Judaism is my study partner - my *chevruta* - in the arduous process of discerning God's voice in the cacaphony of our times.

A word about the context that shapes my approach to tonight's topic. For many years - more than I want to admit - I have worked as a religious and theological educator in the Christian tradition. The energy unleashed by the Second Vatican Council was in large measure the impetus for entering this field. Newly exposed to the riches of Sacred Scripture, I envisioned becoming a biblical scholar. This desire never left me, but it assumed a new life force when I began teaching high school. Once immersed in the life of the classroom, I knew that my path had someone to include a serious attention to the educative process in addition to Bible and theology. Whatever the twists and turns of my work over the years, that love of learning through teaching has sustained and animated me.

I will always be grateful for my biblical grounding. It was my study of New Testament that first raised awareness that what I had absorbed about Judaism's relationship to Christianity was seriously lacking. The fuller understandings of biblical texts in their religious, literary and cultural contexts opened a broad new horizon in which I could situate our two traditions. The breadth of vision biblical studies offered contrasted sharply with the parochial perspectives of the catechism:

Q. Why did the Jewish religion, which up to the death of Christ had been the true religion, cease at that time to be the true religion?

A. The Jewish religion, which, up to the death of Christ had been the true religion, ceased at that time to be the true religion because it was only a promise of the redemption and figure of the Christian religion, and when the redemption was accomplished and the Christian religion established by the death of Christ, the promise and figure were no longer necessary.[1]

Over the years a radically different question in particular has become central: How do we make

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accessible to Christians an understanding of *our own tradition* that does justice to Judaism, the tradition in whom we originated and with whom we have been in relationship for nearly two millennia? Put more simply: How might we Christians get our story straight? I am utterly convinced that, as Clark Williamson has said, "conversation with Jews is indispensable to understanding the Christian faith." History demonstrates that "apart from listening to and talking with Jews, we will misunderstand the Christian faith and act on our misunderstandings."[2]

I. Pursuing the Question

Pursuing this question invites thinking about two inextricably related areas: the requisite knowledge we Christians need, and the processes through which we might attain and live by that knowledge. Though distinguishable, knowedge and the processes by which we come to know must be considered in relation to each other.

In terms of requisite knowledge, five areas seem especially important

1. **Situating Christian origins in the context of the heterogeneity of Second Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire.** (Second Temple Judaism refers to Judaism from the period of the return from exile in Babylon ca. 540 B.C.E. [when the Temple was rebuilt] to the destruction of that same Temple in 70 C.E.) It is appropriate to speak of "Judaisms" in this approximately 600 year period, so significant was the diversity of living as Jews. Second Temple Judaism existed within Roman Empire - and when we probe our Christian origins, we must also attempt to understand the impact of empire upon the fledgling movement initiated by Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the remarkable aspects of coming to understand this period is the way in which we learn from one another. Christian and Jewish scholars are collaborators in producing an astonishing array of scholarship. There are, of course, a few precedents: St. Jerome learning Hebrew from Jews and the eleventh-century School of St. Victor in Paris, where Christian scholars studied the commentaries of Rashi and other Jewish luminaries. But our respective ancestors in faith could hardly envisage the degree of scholarly exchange in the present - not to mention Jewish New Testament scholars and Christian scholars of rabbinic literature.

2. **Interpreting the New Testament in its full context in the life of the church over the ages**. This means seeing texts as multi-layered, richly textured interpretations of Jesus and his "Reign of God Movement." Too few Christians have had the Scriptures opened up to them in this way. Too few Catholics in particular seem to have any understanding of what it means to say that the Scriptures are the church's book, that is, a communal task extending over time and place to discern what the texts mean for the church today. We search for the meaning of texts within our communal context; we require the wisdom of the community - those who have given us commentaries over the generations and those who continue in this work.

3. **Facing our history and ourselves.** In part, this involves tracing the way we Christians have drawn upon our heritage, how we have used texts to relate to others, especially Jews. This entails not only probing what the texts might mean in their originating context, but also how they were used in new contexts. A text's meaning lies not simply in how we think about it, but in how it functions for us - what it inspires, undergirds, rationalizes, and permits. This entails not only probing what church leaders, such as early church writers, did with texts but also how "ordinary" Christians used texts for forming identity and relating to others beyond the borders of Christianity. History reveals troubling knowledge about Christianity's shadow side, how we used sacred texts for sacreligious purposes - and how we continue to do so when we assemble proof texts to assert our superiority over other religious traditions.

4. **Entering into the rethinking of the churches in the past forty years.** Many Christian

denominations have issued thoughtful statements about their relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people, but they exist on the periphery of church life.

Interpreting texts on the death of Jesus provides a dramatic case in point. Two factors are crucial for responsibly reading these texts in our times: (1) the scholarship that unfolds the many layers of gospel composition, helping us to understand the complex way in which the accounts were composed; and (2) the acknowledgment of the tragic way in which, as Gerard Sloyan says, "The chief actual sufferers from Jesus' death by crucifixion have been, paradoxically, not Christians but Jesus' fellow Jews." Once the passion narratives were taken up in the mid-second century by a now largely Gentile church, they were wrenched from context. The historical core - the complicity between the priestly leadership of the Temple and with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate - was misread. Christians, for a variety of reasons to complex to develop here, extended the responsibility for the death of Jesus to the whole of Jerusalem, the whole land and ultimately to the whole people. For nearly two millennia, Jews were held collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

An entire body of church documents, beginning with Nostra Aetate #4, offers an alternative interpretation. What is so important in the contemporary church is that Christians allow the narratives of the passion to be placed in their literary and historical contexts so that we no longer use the Bible to bludgeon Jews for alleged faithlessness.

Speaking as a Catholic, I wonder why it is that our own substantial and numerous documents lie largely inert in Catholic circles. We might hypothesize about many causes, but surely one is that merely producing and disseminating documents does not suffice. Norman Brown's aphorism, "To teach is not to tell, not to tell," highlights the educational task. We must take people inside the process, engage them at the level of their own connection to Christianity.

The pedagogical challenge seems all the greater during this time when fundamentalist perspectives appeal to many. So our educational appraoches need a pastoral ear to be sensitive to fundamentalism's appeal. Fundamentalism produces "strong" religion (perhaps why our religious authorities are slow to counter it), but its strength is selective and sure beyond that about which we can or should be sure.

Thus, we find virtually no tolerance for complexity and ambiguity. Instead, there is a confusion of *certitude* with *faith*. I suspect this is a perennial temptation, but it seems to be a hallmark of our world today. Perhaps this is because we live in difficult time when not only many nations but our planet itself seems in danger. This is a time of wars and rumors of wars, a time of increasing disparity and despair.

It is vital that our teaching and preaching be sensitive to the deep insecurity many in our world feel today. Our challenge is to address this insecurity in ways that might, in Buber's wonderful phrase, transfigure it to "holy insecurity."

I do not underestimate the difficulty of this task - but neither can I ignore its importance. We must speak to whole persons, with their multiplicity of concerns, and engage them at the level of faith. Thus the importance of paying attention to popular religiosity. If we hope to have people interpret the passion narrative in ways more respectful of the literary and historical complexity of the texts, then we need to respect the piety attached to the passion.

5. **Discovering living Judaism, and, when possible, learning together with Jews.** This constitutes the second major section of my lecture.

II. Discovering Living Judaism: Interreligious Learning

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This evening I'd like to share experiences in which Jews and Christians have entered into serious and sustained conversation.

1. **The surprising question, the unanticipated comment.** My first examples point to the ways in which interreligious learning provides a new lens on one's own tradition, often through an unanticipated question or surprising observation.

We had many memorable moments during the Catholic-Jewish Colloquium, which Sara Lee and I coordinated for three years in the early 1990s, but one in particular stands out. During our second gathering of this group of twenty-two Jewish and Catholic religious educators, one of the Jews asked, "I don't understand why you Christians need Jesus. Isn't God enough?"

Our normally loquacious Catholic participants fell uncharacteristically silent. Finally, one said, "It isn't that we need Jesus. It's just that he is." Needless to say this was hardly an adequate answer - but the reflection that exchange stimulated continues to this day. I am tempted to ask the Jews in the audience to turn to Christians in their midst and ask the same question. What, my Christian friends, would be your answer?

A similar, if less dramatic, moment happened in a course I taught last spring, "Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations." About half our participants were students from our neighboring school, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. A few weeks into the course, one of the Christians mentioned, almost in passing, that Jews and Christians believed in the same God. One of the rabbinical students said he didn't think that the case.

When he made his rejoinder, I had to make one of those decisions teachers do many times in the course of a given session: Should I stop and situate his comment in the recent dialogue, or should I simply acknowledge it and let the conversation flow, recording it in my own mind for the agenda of later class sessions?

I chose to let the discussion follow its course. Perhaps because his comment seemed to take the Christian students aback (temporarily silencing a verbal group!) and the Jews found nothing too unusual, no one picked up on it in class. Apparently, however, the conversation continued after class, because our rabbinical student contributed to the "Open Forum" we have on-line:

Headed "Theological Can of Worms," he wrote:

I just wanted to make a theological clarification about something I said two weeks ago. I responded to someone who said we believe in the "same God" with resistance by saying that I did not think this was the case. Subsequently, upon talking to people about this comment, I realize that I may have misspoken. It is not that I believe in more than one God - certainly not (i.e., that Christians believe in one god and we believe in another). It is rather that I have a lot of trouble with the whole trinity, Jesus as divine issue. Assuming that we both claim to believe in one God, then I guess we believe in the same God, but do so very differently. It is the trinity and the oneness of God that was tripping me up and continues to do so.

Here we get a glimpse of the value of conversation between Jews and Christians: When someone from the other tradition asks us something so fundamental about our own - such as the Trinity - then we have to reach more deeply into our own understandings of our faith. And it is especially when we grope for words and feel inadequate that our own "teachable moment" has arrived. I am not claiming this is the first time in their seminary education that Union Seminary's Christian students had given thought to the Trinitarian character of our tradition - but it came alive in a new way in the presence of Jewish inquirers.

2. On other occasions, **the other's perspective re-situates a familiar doctrine**. One example

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comes from a Torah commentary that we studied together (on *Yitro* 5763, Exodus 18:1-20:23) by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the chancellor of Jewish Theological Seminary. Chancellor Schorsch:

Christianity turns on the doctrine of incarnation as formulated famously by the Gospel of John: "So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). It is a doctrine that Jews tend to identify as uniquely Christian. Whereas both Judaism and Christianity equally acknowledged that at creation "the Word dwelt with God" (1:1) as both wisdom and instrument, Judaism refrained from ever endowing it with human form. Though valid, the distinction does not preclude the appearance in Judaism of the doctrine. For Judaism, the Word became incarnate as book. . . .

But Abraham Joshua Heschel in his final book *Kotzk. A Struggle for Truth* (Yiddish, 1973) goes beyond the doctrine that the Torah was literally revealed. In quoting this passage from the Talmud [BT Shabbat 105a], he translates the words of R. Yochanan to mean "I give Myself in writing" (p. 58). That formulation is a Jewish version of incarnation. *The words of the Torah are more than the medium of God's will; they are the very form which God's presence takes in our world of time and space.* Concentration on the text leads to union with the Almighty. . . .

Yet like the Christian doctrine of incarnation which since the fifth century posited a Christ of two natures, divine and human, the Jewish version also allows for a twofold nature. *In this conception, the Torah is a roiling composite of divine presence and human reaction, a gripping record of the lived experience of the eternal in the midst of the ephemeral.*

I do not understand Chancellor Schorsch to be saying that Judaism has a doctrine that is identical to or even virtually the same as Christian belief in the Incarnation. Rather, I take his commentary to be saying that our traditions share a belief in the presence of God in our midst as mediated - whether by Torah or by Jesus. The opportunity to learn together reveals both the profundity of our differences and the profundity of what we hold in common.

Last May in a conference in London in which Rabbi Rosen and I both participated, we had paired papers by Jews and Catholics on topics such as "God" and "salvation." By no means did the pairings eliminate differences - to the contrary - but they highlighted deep commonalities and challenged us to open the horizon of our thinking.

3. **Reflecting on another's liturgical calendar.** October 6, 2003 was the first time that Union Theological Seminary, which has a daily ecumenical service, explicitly organized a service for Yom Kippur. The organizers were clear that it was a service in which we Christians acknowledged Judaism's holiest day; we did not seek to imitate the Yom Kippur liturgy of the synagogue, but rather to reflect in our own way on what the day's themes might mean to us.

As the homilist for the occasion, I did some reading about Yom Kippur and asked my JTSA colleague Carol Ingall about what the day meant for her. She sent me one of the prayers, the *Unetaneh Tokef*.[3] Reflecting on this prayer forced me to engage an image of God that I find quite challenging: God as judge.

4. **Respecting mystery.** Acknowledging that that deep down, all religions contain something mysterious. None of us can penetrate their innermost nature; no reading of texts exhausts its revelatory capacity.

There is in every religion, beyond what can be explained, a mystery, a last secret, which remains unreachable for outsiders. We, Jews and Christians, can go a long way together and talk to each other, but sooner or later we will arrive at a closed door, to which the Christians have a key, but we do not. When we come to this closed door, we Jews can do nothing but bow our heads in

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reverence before it and stay silent. We ask and expect - and this is the purpose of our dialogue - that the Christian world shall learn to revere the mystery that is the innermost core of the Jewish religion, that which is difficult for outsiders to grasp and difficult for us to explain.[4]

Ultimately, the core in all faith is mysterious, a secret of God, before which all religious peoples should feel humble.

But the mystery at the heart of religion must be distinguished from a lazy faith that refuses to look at hard questions. I often think of a line from one of Chaim Potok's novels, *In the Beginning:* "A shallow mind is a sin against God." It is, I believe, a God-given imperative that we search the Scriptures with our whole hearts, our whole minds, and our whole souls.

5. **Acting in solidarity.** We also learn from each other in less academic settings. The following, from a student in my "Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations" course last spring, is a report of an "excursion" of her study group.

After class, the three of us went to see the film, "The Pianist." The film tells the story of a musician, Szpilman, who survives the Holocaust. As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I tend to be moved by films about the Shoah. Throughout "The Pianist," I felt particularly moved and agitated, perhaps because it so reminded me of my family's own experiences. Like Szpilman, my grandparents were "in hiding" in Poland during the war. Like Szpilman, they were not sent to a concentration camp. Admittedly, as a child, I always felt apologetic about my grandparents' story because they were not in concentration camps; somehow, I always imagined that being "in hiding" was a lesser form of horror than the camps. But, I have grown to realize that there shouldn't be any "competitions" when it comes to this tragedy. Genocide is genocide. Dehumanization is dehumanization. These themes came across loudly and clearly in Szpilman's story, for he was also "just" in hiding. In a sense, Szpilman was "lucky," for he lived, while the rest of his family perished in Treblinka. Yet, I wonder how lucky he really was. He personally witnessed the Nazis ship trainloads of Jews to Treblinka. He personally witnessed the Nazis beat a child to death, shoot countless people in the head, throw a crippled man out a window, and endless other horrors that are too gruesome to describe. And he had to live with those images and with "survivor guilt" for the rest of his life.

Viewing this film made me re-evaluate my own desire to hear more details about my grandparents' story. My grandmother took her secrets to her grave. My grandfather, thank God, is still alive. But he never talks about events that took place after 1939. There are family secrets. Of that I am certain. After seeing "The Pianist," I wondered if perhaps my grandparents' need to forget supersedes my need to know. Memory can be both a curse and blessing.

After the film, Julie and Jill were virtually speechless. But their silence was not the silence of apathy. They so wanted to listen and to offer their emotional support. Even during the movie, they kept looking at me to see if I was okay. A few times, they reached over to touch me. They hugged and kissed me at the end of the night. Those gestures were the most powerful form of communication, even more moving than words. That night, I had an "A-ha" moment. This is what Jewish-Christian dialogue is all about. It's about forging relationships, so that words are sometimes not even necessary. I wonder if this is the way to prevent another Holocaust from happening. If people of different religions and ethnicities form real relationships with each other, then maybe it won't be so easy to hate. Perhaps the Nazi perpetrators and non-Nazi Gentile collaborators and by-standers would not have been so quick to participate in Hitler's Final Solution if they had had real relationships with Jews.

III. Learning from Difference

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The theme of this evening's lecture, "Learning from Each Other," implies a desire to learn from differences without adopting or absorbing the other. To learn from difference means not only seeing the limitations of one's tradition, but also appreciating its power in a new way. Dialogue with Jews has heightened my interest in Christianity's distinctive doctrines and practices (e.g., the Trinity, the Eucharist), and deepened my appreciation for its modes of contemplative prayer and discernment. It has renewed my commitment to Catholic social teaching and fostered a far deeper grasp of the importance of practices in sustaining a religious way of life.

In my experience, learning from the Jewish other deepens appreciation for mystery, for the ungraspable nature of truth, for the "more than" of religious experience. It has stimulated me to ponder more profoundly the One Beyond All Names and to probe more seriously who this God is who "saves" and "redeems." It has challenged me to wrestle with painful questions of God's absence or powerlessness that arise out of reflection on the Shoah. Thus, I find that Judaism, particularly as Jewish friends and colleagues mediate it, reveals new layers of meaning in my Christian vocation insofar as it opens up new - if often unsettling - vistas on God.

For all this learning I am deeply grateful.

Notes

1. *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine Prepared and Enjoined by Order of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore,* No. 3 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1921), p. 79 (Q & A 391). This is the "Baltimore Catechism," first published in 1885, and revised in 1941 (Q & A 391 remain unchanged in the 1941 revision).
2. Clark Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel* (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster, 1993), p. 9.
3. "We acclaim this day's pure sanctity, its awesome power. This day, Lord, Your dominion is deeply felt. Compassion and truth, its foundations, are perceived. In truth do You judge and prosecute, discern motives and bear witness, record and seal, count and measure, remembering all we have forgotten. You open the Book of Remembrance and it speaks for itself, for all have signed it with their deeds. . . . The great shofar is sounded. A still, small voice is heard. . . . You bring everything that lives before You for review. You determine the life and decree the destiny of every creature."
4. Marcus Ehrenpreis, Chief Rabbi in Stockholm between 1914 and 1951, in *Judisk tidskrift*, 6 (1933), p. 299; cited in "The Ways of God: Judaism and Christianity. A Document for Discussion within the Church of Sweden," 2003.

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