Blessing of a New Dawn: Reorienting Christianity's Relation to Judaism

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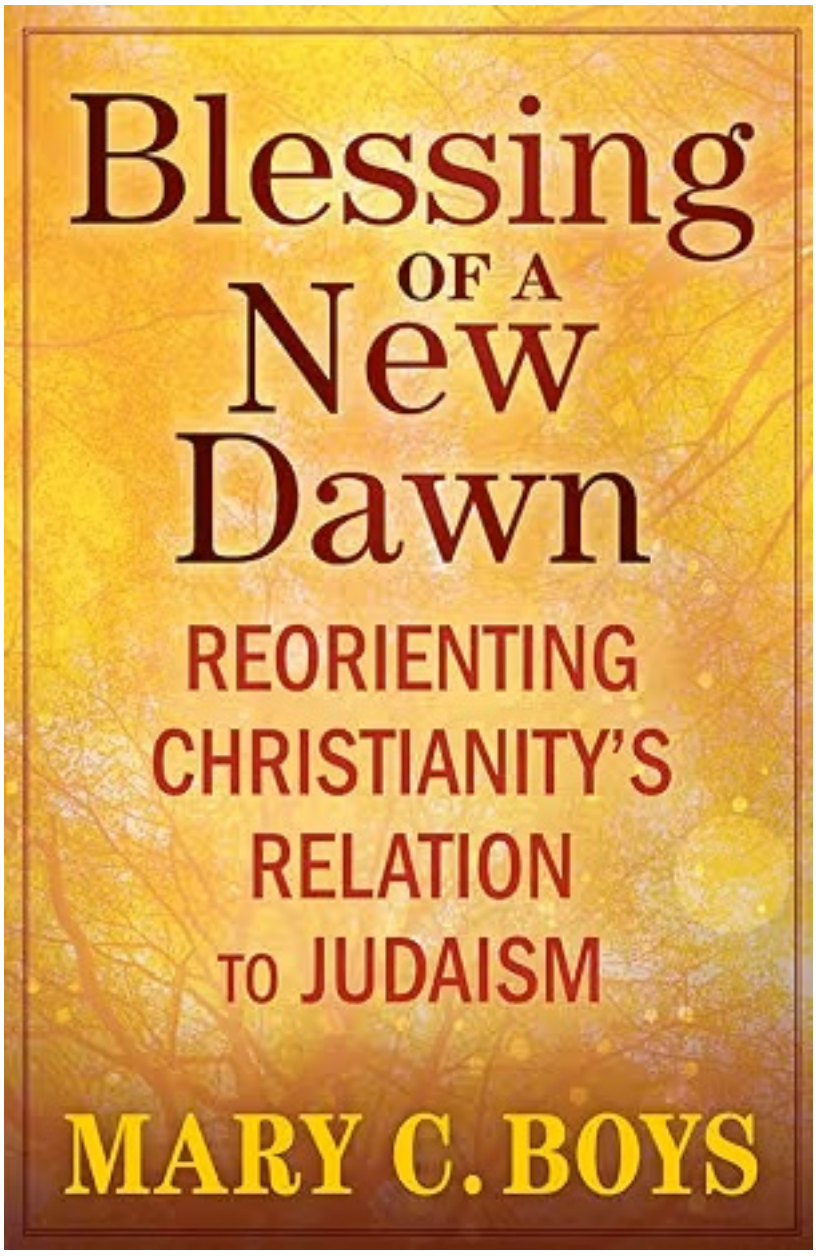
Mary C. Boys:Blessing of a New Dawn:Reorienting Christianity's Relation to JudaismOrbis Books, 2025), paperback, 280pp.



Years ago I studied with a rabbi who in the 1960s felt compelled to study philosophy. So he hesitatingly ventured out of his Orthodox milieu to study at Fordham in New York City. Before the first class he struck up a conversation with a young nun. When he arrived for the second lecture two days later, the nun told him that she enjoyed their conversation so much that she went home that night and excitedly told her mother, "I met a Pharisee today."

If today the nun's statement seems thoroughly benighted, Sr. Mary Boys reminds us in her recent book, *Blessing of a New Dawn*, that the nun's conception was representative of the Church's teachings for 1,800 years. Early on the Church fathers "constructed what it believed Judaism [and Jews] to be and formulated its own developing identity in contrast, thus occluding Judaism on its own terms" (125). The Church's normative hard supersessionist theology taught Judaism as a flat literary stereotype divorced from what Judaism actually was and what Jews really were. And this stereotype was often toxic, with "the church fathers constructing their critiques in tropes of Jewish infidelity, legalism and obsolescence." The construction was guided by a patristic "oppositional imagination," and it produced "a flawed portrait of Judaism as a homogeneous relic of the past" (126). As the young nun's innocently intended statement indicates, this conception still resonates loudly among many Catholics today.

Now that *Nostra Aetate* has transformed Church teachings about Judaism and the Jewish people, Boys understands the need for "reorienting Christianity's relation to Judaism"—the book's subtitle. Rejecting any dogmatic approach to the New Testament and the Church fathers Justin Martyr, Ignatius, Jerome, and John Chrysostom, Boys uses contemporary biblical scholarship and historical research to understand these hallowed texts in the context of nascent Christianity's need to distinguish itself from Jewish practice and belief. Her essential thesis is that the anti-Judaism and antisemitism often expressed in these early teachings resulted from the contingent political and communal circumstances of the second through fourth centuries and are not intrinsic to Christianity's core theology (7). Moreover, since John Paul II noted that "the Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is intrinsic to our own religion,'" for Boys how Christianity regards Judaism "touches on the heart of my faith." This makes reorienting Christianity's relation to Judaism deeply personal for Boys, a vital subject for contemporary Christian-Jewish relations, and perhaps most importantly, an urgent internal Christian requirement. This reorientation needs to encounter the multifaceted nature of Judaism in the early centuries, the development of rabbinic Judaism after that, and today's Judaism and Jews as living realities. And it must correct Justin Martyr's mistake in his dialogue with the Jewish Trypho: "Justin tells without asking and testifies without inquiring" (157).

The book is organized conceptually into two parts: (1) Chapters 1-3: "Memory and Imagination," "In Pursuit of the Pharisees," and "The Early Church and its Construction of Judaism," which describe the traditional flawed conception, its background, and Boys' scholarly "deconstruction," and (2) Chapters 4-6: "Early Judaism: Resilience, and Reinvention," "Recovering the Jewish Jesus and Rediscovering Judaism," "The Past is a Foreign Country: A Guide for Traversing its Terrain" and the Epilogue, all of which limn the rudiments of the needed Christian reorientation.

The keys to this reorientation as explicated in Chapter 5 are recovering the Jewish identity of Jesus, both historically and theologically, and situating the Gospels, the apostles, Paul, Mary, and Magdalene "within Judaism," all of whom were Jews immersed in Jewish culture and practice. They were both faithful Jews and followers of Jesus, not converts out of Judaism to a new faith. Paul likely reflected their collective self-understanding as each "a Christ-following Jew passionate in following Jesus' call to preach to the Gentiles" (167-168). Their writings, frames of reference, disagreements, messianic expectations, and worldviews reflected one form of first century Judaism. (As a traditionalist Jew well-schooled in the rabbinic texts and theologies of the early centuries of the Common Era, I know this to be true. When I first read the New Testament, I sensed its personae's logic of argumentation, use of parables, disagreements over ritual, and, above all, Jesus' veneration of "Love your peer as yourself" as old friends.) Jesus lived and thought within a Pharisaic Weltanschauung and his disputes with his peers reflected classic internal pharisaic legal discourse—the stuff of which the Talmud and later rabbinic literature is made.

This is a radical reorientation away from much of pre-Vatican II Christian teachings, and it is disconcerting to many Christian laypersons and clergy, who still view Pharisees, Judaism, and

Jews as paradigmatic "Others." They forget Paul's statement in Philippians 3:4b-6 that he is "one circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee..." (167).

Some of the salutary features of this reorientation are approaching Scripture with a critical eye and in context, forthrightly confronting the anti-Judaic and antisemitic passages in the New Testament (particularly in the Gospel of John), emphasizing the gradual emergence of Christianity from its Jewish roots and its continued commonalities with living Judaism, and increasing the number of Old Testament readings in the lectionary. All these results would make practicing Christianity "contribute to constructing a world more reflective of its just and merciful Creator" (198).

Blessing of a New Dawn is a testament to Mary Boys' deep faith in the Church and its ability to correct its past errors and to uncover Christianity's grey history and to reveal its truer spiritual ideals of truth, peace, and reconciliation with its elder brothers and sisters and their faith.

Sr. Boys has already made considerable significant contributions to Christian and interfaith scholarship. Her book *Has God Only One Blessing?* is a classic in the field. There is also significant value for scholars in this new book. In the text Boys cites a vast number of academic studies, while the bibliography consisting primarily of scholarly works is a full twenty pages.

Yet *Blessing of a New Dawn* seems to reflect the author's recognition that the greatest unfinished business of *Nostra Aetate* is the need for its teachings to filter down more widely to the pew level. The work is written primarily for lay Christians, in a flowing, relatively easy, and often personal style. Many chapters end with a section of personal reflections. It is a ready-made teaching text particularly well-suited for preachers, for seminarians to learn about New Testament scholarship and the theological changes wrought by Vatican II, and for university students studying religion, theology and the history of Christian-Jewish relations. Lastly, the book's focus on the intimate, often tortured relationship between Christianity and Judaism may help stem the tide of the recent rise in antisemitism—some of which is fueled by online *faux* Catholic celebrities.

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