



A Blessing to Each Other

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REBECCA MOORE

Rebecca Moore's compelling new book *A Blessing to Each Other: A New Account of Jewish and*

Christian Relations provides a history of the tangled web of Jewish-Christian relations from the 1st century to the present. She claims “the time is ripe for a fresh look at the history of Jewish and Christian relations” because the Holocaust encouraged Jews and Christians to investigate their shared history in new and fruitful ways. In doing so, they discovered elements of a counter-history that provides a positive model for the ecumenism so necessary in today’s religiously conflicted world (5).

Moore begins by tackling the three major disputes that have poisoned Jewish-Christian relations: their radically different views of the Bible, Jesus, and Paul. While post-Holocaust research created greater awareness of antisemitic Christian traditions, it also led to an appreciation of the difficulty of interpreting scripture. As Moore notes, debates over the meaning of scripture began in the Bible itself as later passages often reinterpret earlier ones. The existence of many distinct Judaic and Christian communities, all claiming fidelity to the same texts, further problematizes the idea that one interpretation fits all and casts new light on the notion of religious identity: “We tend to think religious commitment is firm and fixed, but new research suggests that the formation and maintenance of identity, including religious identity, is a dynamic process” (68).

Post-Holocaust studies have also rediscovered the surprising number of beliefs shared by early Jews and Christians, as well as the “Jewishness” of Jesus and Paul. This leads Moore to turn to Lori Beaman’s concept of “contaminated Identity” to demonstrate the difficulty of clearly separating Jews and Christians. Moore illustrates this by focusing on three distinct historical situations: 1) the slow and never complete parting of the ways between Jews and Christians in the early Christian centuries; 2) the existence of Christian Hebraism; and 3) Christian Zionism and evangelical support for Israel. In these cases, the interests of Jews and Christians merged, bringing them together in ways that encouraged cooperation and, in many cases, respect and toleration.

The Holocaust had the further impact of forcing Christians to evaluate the role of antisemitism in initiating the genocide. Three consistent charges levelled by Christians against Jews fueled this antisemitism: 1) God replaced Jews with Christians as his “chosen people” in retaliation for Christ’s crucifixion; 2) from Jesus’s day forward, Judaism became a legalistic religion without heart or soul; and 3) Jews past and present are guilty of deicide—they are all “Christ killers” and children of the Devil. Given these beliefs, Moore asks, “how should . . . [Christians] handle scripture that contributes to antisemitic feelings on the part of their coreligionists?” (31).

While many solutions have been offered, Moore admits they all militate against a literal interpretation of scripture. This is why post-Holocaust studies are so important: they confirm earlier doubts about the historical accuracy of the gospels by showing that what were once thought to be disputes between Jews and Christians were actually disputes among Jewish Christians, who disagreed about such basic issues as the nature of Jesus and the relevance of Hebrew scriptures for Christians. They also disagreed about how to achieve salvation and who was responsible for Jesus’s death (and did it matter since his death was preordained?). These questions transformed Christian-Jewish dialogue: “through personal and professional dialogue, collaboration on scholarly projects and partnerships in modifying worship and teaching materials, Jews and Christians are fashioning a new narrative based on mutual regard and appreciation” (12). Such cooperation has led some Christians to reject texts Jews find offensive. For example, the designation of Jews as “Christ killers” has been eliminated from the Revised Common Lectionary used by most Catholics and mainline Protestants to guide weekly scriptural reading. Actions like these enable Christians and Jews to view each other with “deep equality,” another concept Moore borrows from Beaman. Moore believes post-Holocaust scholarship offers a path to the “deep equality” she so passionately advocates: “If ordinary Jews and Christians do not become aware of ideas that contest their prejudices and stereotypes, then academicians are talking only to each other. That is why I have written this book specifically for a nonspecialist audience” (12-13).

But will most Christians or Jews ever take the necessary steps to achieve “deep equality” if that means denying the inerrancy of scripture and admitting the possibility of more than one truth? Moore recognizes the gravity of the problem, “If Jesus is the one and only way to salvation, there is no theological space for any other religion, not least Judaism” (171). A way out of this impasse was proposed by Father John Pawlikowski, who concluded that traditional Christology had to change for antisemitism to disappear. He turned to the gnostic idea that each individual shares in the divine nature: “Thus, in a very real sense one can say that God did not become man in Jesus. God always was man; humanity was an integral part of the godhead from the beginning” (181).

What is so interesting about this solution is that it emerged in the first Christian centuries among gnostic Christians. In the *Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels (Random House, 1979) describes this core belief and its suppression by the Catholic Church. But as scholars in the relatively new field of Esotericism have demonstrated, the idea persisted among mystics, Kabbalists, Christian Hebraists, Hermeticists, Natural Magicians, Quakers, Behemists, Theosophists, Freemasons, and even early Mormons—groups that included individuals like Raymond Lull, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and many Romantics, not to mention New Age practitioners. Another solution proposed by esotericists was the idea of a “Prisca Theologia,” or an original divine revelation at the core of every religion that, although obscured by the passage of time, can be rediscovered.

Moore's book is a tour de force of scholarship. She distills an immense amount of historical, theological, and philosophical research into a new, lucid, and challenging history of Jewish-Christian relations that not only provides a blueprint for ending antisemitism, but also for ending the religious animosities inflaming the world today. However, the question that remains to be answered is one of human psychology and the nature of religion itself: Are humans capable of tolerating religious difference, and can religions once institutionalized sanction diversity?

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