

Author, lecturer addresses Christian/Jewish Dialogue

by Perilla A. Wilson

"Has God Only One Blessing," the title of a talk by Dr. Mary C. Boys, S.N.J.M. for the Christian-Jewish Dialogue, is also the title of her recent book on "Judaism as a source of Christian self-understanding." She is Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a prolific author. Her focus is on "the inside or reworking of Christianity." Boys claims that re-focusing on who we are is difficult because, like gardening, those "anti-Judaism roots keep coming back up!"

She attempts to explore in a new way how we encounter Jews and Judaism and how it affects the way we think. Her principal audience is "those who help Christians achieve a sense of Identity." She is distressed by the "immense

disparity" between what theology students learn and what happens in the churches. Although much of the history has been discredited by scholars, Boys feels one wouldn't know it in the pews.

Since the "old story" that Christians have long been taught of God's covenant with the Jews; their subsequent unfaithfulness; God's promise of a Messiah; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as suffering Messiah; followed by a Church that flourished and a Judaism that died, distorts Judaism, Boys wrote a companion story. This revision, she said, was longer by 200 pages and more complex! She begins about 500 BCE and carries it up to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, outlining distortions such as the view of a God of Wrath by Jews vs. a God of Love by Christians. Christians find it hard, also, to let

go of legalistic terms, e.g. pharisees. There is "slippage" when the legalistic pharisee comes to represent Judaism. The "old story is radically flawed" and it is crucial that one seeks "to understand what gave rise to supersessionism—the teaching that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's people because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus Christ."

Another problem that Boys sees is that in many places dialogue is peripheral to church and synagogue. It is not just an extra but "a justice issue that goes to the heart of who we are." In seeking a conceptual frame for her book, she started with several modern day parables. The first deals with the Sisters of Sion founded in the 1840s in France by two Jewish brothers who had converted to Catholicism. The original purpose was for the conversion of Jews but due to their involvement with schools, conversion was consigned mainly to the

sisters' prayer life. In the 1950s in the wake of the Shoah, they began to realize that their original goal was "wrongheaded" and in 1964 their new rule called for justice for Jews in the world.

In the second parable Boys discusses an occasion when she spoke at five Masses at a very large Catholic Church during a Dialogue weekend. At the fifth Mass there were rabbis and other members of the neighboring Temple present. The gospel was John 7:1-41 in which the parents of the cured blind man decline to answer "for fear of the Jews." Only at this fifth Mass did many parishioners comment on how relieved they were that Boys explained the passage because they were embarrassed at the reference in the presence of Jews. So often, the distortions are not really heard, which is why she recommends that the gospel be heard as though it were read in the presence of Jews.

According to Boys, parables have a "disorienting quality" that disturbs familiarity and causes one to look at things with a different view. She decided that sharing at the level of stories helps one to see what happens when it breaks through a stereotype. She brought with her two lovely sculptures of the ancient models of Ecclesia and Synagoga but with a modern touch. Sr. Paula Mary Turnbull, S.N.J.M. was commissioned by the author to create new "postures" for these symbols of Church and Synagogue, seen widely in European settings depicting supersessionism.

Boys message was that people of Christian and Jewish faiths should respect each other while recognizing that they are on different roads to the same God. It is her "deep conviction that Synagoga and Ecclesia are, in the words of one church document, 'partners in waiting for the full redemption of the world.'"