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Reflections on the Experience of Teaching about Christianity to Jewish Teenagers

Judith E. Wolff

Temple Adath Yeshurn, Manchester, NH

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Introduction by Mary C. Boys, SNJM

The editors of *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* requested an introduction to “Reflections on the Teaching of Christianity to Jewish Teenagers” by Judith E. Wolff, since her insightful essay is a departure from the genre of scholarly essay characteristic of this journal. Rather, hers is the mode of reflection-on-action, the insights of one who has taught a course over a period of time and given careful consideration to its content and significance. Wolff offers rich fare for consideration by Jews and Christians alike in her description and analysis of this one-semester, required course.

Wolff’s students come from homes with two Jewish parents, as well as from intermarried homes; Wolff detects more negative views of Christianity from the latter, perhaps because they have internalized attitudes from the non-Jewish parent. Her students live in a largely Christian region of southern New Hampshire, so Wolff’s primary goal is to encourage respect for the Christians with whom they interact on a regular basis. Accordingly, her course (1) approaches Christianity through Jewish lenses, revealing both the similarities and differences in regard to, for example, redemption and covenant; (2) situates Christian origins in Second Temple Judaism, and Jesus in the context of his preaching for the Kingdom of God; (3) examines recent Christian teaching about Judaism, with emphasis on the post-Nostra Aetate tradition of Catholicism; and (4) makes connections with current events. Wolff, of course, does not aim to convince her students of Christianity’s truth claims, but rather to make those claims more comprehensible.

By demystifying Christianity, Wolff’s students have gained a vocabulary and a conceptual foundation to engage Christians, in contrast to the inability of many Jewish adults to discuss Christianity intelligently. Moreover, the study of Christianity increased discussion about God, thereby inviting students

to address Jewish beliefs more explicitly. The course thus enabled them to live more knowledgeably and confidently as Jews, and increased opportunity to reflect on their own Jewish identities. Wolff has discovered that the course also provides a forum for her teenagers to discuss their own experiences of antisemitism, and thus to feel less isolated.

Wolff concludes:

Although one sometimes hears that Hebrew School classes do not have sufficient time to be able to teach Judaism *and* such superfluous topics as Christianity, my experiences with these several groups of Jewish teenagers point in the opposite direction. Their encounter with an introduction to Christianity was time well spent in the enrichment of their Jewish knowledge and in the formation of their own Jewish self-awareness and identification.

It is my hope that not only will Wolff’s article be widely distributed and discussed, but that this journal will continue to publish such essays. In reflecting on her pedagogical experience, she has placed an important topic on the agenda for Jewish educators, and implicitly challenged Christian educators to consider their own teaching about Judaism.

The Context of the Course

After teaching an introductory course on Christianity to Jewish teens for five years, it is very apparent that such educational opportunities are important and valuable for them. While the students differ, their experiences living as a Jewish minority in a predominantly Christian society are remarkably similar. They bring these experiences into the course and are enabled to reflect upon and understand both the Christian “other” and their own religious tradition better.

Usually, this course is offered on a semester basis for ninth or tenth grade students, but at times it has been taught to eighth graders. My particular setting in an after-school Hebrew High School in Southern New Hampshire was, until recently, a joint school program of a Reform and a Conservative synagogue, though for unrelated reasons, the school is now affiliated only with the Reform synagogue. The classes consist of children from several different towns in the region, and each of them is a minority in their school. Many times they are the only Jewish child in the class, or at best, there are five Jewish children in a grade. On occasion, some children are the only Jewish student in the entire middle or high school student body.

Each of the times this class has been offered, the majority or an equal number of the students have come from an intermarried Jewish and Christian household. Two Jewish parent households never outnumber the intermarried ones. I have noticed that the children who come from a two Jewish parent home and those who come from an intermarried home share negative attitudes towards Christians. On the whole, there does not appear to be more "openness" toward Christianity among the students from intermarried households. In fact, the reverse is true. Curiously, at times the intermarried group seems less tolerant of Christianity. My sense is that in some of the intermarried households where the parents made the decision to raise the children as Jews, the Christian parent might have expressed a disappointment with his or her own childhood Christian upbringing.

Yet, in the Hebrew School there has never been a negative comment about offering a course in Christianity, either from the students or from their parents. This is especially noteworthy since the course is not an elective course offering, but one that all students at their grade level in the Hebrew School must take. The students always appear eager to learn and curious to know what their Christian friends believe. Each

class has discussed the question, "Why should we study Christianity?" and each has responded similarly: "We live in a predominantly Christian society and we need to know about it." Once in response to this question, a perceptive student commented, "but Christians do not participate in our [Jewish] world, so they do not have the same need."

The students have no idea what to expect as the class develops, but once the information begins to unfold, defensive and judgmental contrasts between Jewish belief and Christian belief begin to appear, which can inhibit learning. As the teacher, I feel that I must ensure that such comparisons be fair and based on accurate understandings and not on stereotypes. Among the impressions of Christianity that have been expressed by the students are:

- It is a religion based on fear, fear that you cannot go to heaven.
- Christians answer questions about religion with: "that's just the way it is."
- They copied us and now they think they are better than us. They think we're going to hell.

These sentiments are not instantly or even easily expressed, but unlike many Jewish adults, once adolescents do reveal their thoughts, they have few inhibitions about stating their thoughts strongly and uncensored. Although challenging, their views are a bit refreshing because they are honest.

Purpose and Objectives

The course could be said to have as an overarching goal the encouragement of respect for those who believe differently. However, when those others who believe differently are Christians, then some particular forces come into play for Jewish students. These include the demographic reality that Jews are a minority in a majority Christian society, the historical

and theological interrelatedness of the two communities, and a legacy of mutual stereotyping and hostility between the two traditions. When Jews study Christianity for the first time, they are not encountering something totally foreign but something recognizable enough to seem strangely twisted to them. This can generate negative reactions that teachers trying to promote interreligious respect must face. An accurate grasp of Christianity would seem to be the remedy. This purpose is pursued through the following objectives:

- A. Introduce Christianity when possible in terms of Jewish self-understanding

Teaching Christianity through Jewish lenses and our own experiences as Jews seems the only effective way to teach something that appears to be so different and peculiar. Certain key theological concepts, such as redemption/salvation, covenant, eschatology, or Messiah are discussed in terms of the respective approaches and emphases of Judaism and Christianity, recognizing that there is a spectrum of ideas within both traditions.

- B. Highlight the origins of Christianity in late Second Temple period Judaism

We begin by emphasizing that Jesus and all his followers were Jews and that the earliest churches slowly emerged from a Jewish context into a Greco-Roman one. In the process as new ideas arose and new perspectives were introduced, Christianity became a religiously distinct community that included more and more Gentiles, and Judaism and Christianity had a parting of the ways.

- C. Present an overview of the practices of Christianity today and its teachings about Judaism, especially as seen in the Catholic Church

Catholicism is emphasized for two reasons. First, demographically Catholics are the largest Christian community in Southern New Hampshire and Catholics are the Christians the Jewish students meet most frequently. Second, the changes in official teachings about Jews that have been initiated in various churches since the *Shoah* are most apparent in the numerous Catholic documents, beginning with the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate*.

- D. Discuss current local and world events that relate to the discussion of Christianity and Judaism

Current events help to bring the students' own experiences and attitudes to bear on the material being studied. In particular, the course has proven to be a place where students can share their experiences of antisemitism.

Interacting with the Course Content

- A. Late Second Temple Period Judaism.

At the start of the course we talk about Jesus—who he was and what he taught and preached. We discuss the ministry of Jesus in the context of the first-century world. Students learn that Jesus traveled about, proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. This was his mission. I point out that other Jews of his time also believed in the coming of God's kingdom. We examine the concept of the "Kingdom of God" as a Jewish idea, taking note of its use in our Jewish liturgy. In the fall months we refer to the High Holiday services, which helpfully reinforce the lesson. In class we read the liturgical references to the concept of the Kingdom of God as it is also expressed in the prayer books so that the students can be alert to the phrase when it arises during the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services.

The students easily understand this information. It dispels the mystery surrounding an unfamiliar religious tradition and helps prepare for future unsettling conversations. They relate to the idea that Jesus' message was a Jewish one and feel immediate gratification that they learned something very important, not only about Jesus and the Jesus movement, but also a key expression of Jewish thought. That Jesus and his disciples really were Jews becomes the central thought of the program. In response to the information that those associated with the Jesus movement were one of many different groups of Jews in Jesus' time, a student once observed that maybe we cannot fit Jesus into any one category of Jews of his time. Some students compared this to their own situations. They could not place themselves exclusively in one category today; for instance, a Jew may keep kosher and yet belong to a Reform synagogue.

Students typically ask, "If Jesus was Jewish, then why aren't Christians Jewish?" Sometimes this thought is expressed by noting a confusing mixture of similarities and differences between Jews and Christians. For example, one student asked, "How do we know who has the truth?" This sort of reaction shows that a mere historical presentation of the origins of Christianity is not enough. The spiritual or religious distinctiveness of Christianity must also be treated.

B. Key theological concepts of salvation, redemption, eschatology in terms of Jewish understanding

The central Christian "story" of the death and resurrection of Jesus is a very difficult topic for the Jewish students. Surprisingly, most of the students have never heard Christian claims that Jesus "rose on the third day" and they react with incredulity. While most students have experienced the question, "Why don't you believe in Jesus?," we attempt to explore the question, "How can Christians believe in Jesus?" The

subject allows for discussions on specifically Jewish topics that are new to the students. These include the theological implications of the Exodus and traditional Jewish teachings regarding resurrection.

Judaism's central story of the Exodus can be related to the central Christian story. The Jewish experience of slavery in Egypt and God's redemption from slavery—relived each Passover—make known to Jews that in the past God has acted to redeem us and will do so in an ultimate way in the Age to Come. Those who followed Jesus were Jews and the Exodus story was their understanding of God and God's ways. The death of Jesus causes them to despair but they claim to have experienced God's redeeming power through Jesus after his death. Jesus prepared his followers for an imminent eschatological event, and for them his death comes to mark the beginning of redemption, the approach of the Kingdom. Although not shared by most Jews in their time or by Jews today, Jesus' followers plainly reinterpreted Jewish thoughts that were well established in the early part of the first century. The discussion leads to a consideration of traditional Judaism's belief in the resurrection of the dead when the Age to Come dawns.

The purpose of these lessons is not to convince Jewish students of Christian faith-claims but rather to make the claims somewhat comprehensible. While definitively rejecting Christian assertions about the singular resurrection of Jesus, some students eventually show some empathy with how such ideas could occur and be spiritually normative for Christians. Once, after weeks of discussing the Jewish historical experiences of despair/exile and redemption/renewal (the Exodus, the Babylonian exile, the destruction of the Second Temple, and the liberations or restorations that followed), one student connected these events back to our discussion of the first statements of Jesus' "being raised," saying, "Now I see how those [Jewish]

followers of Jesus were feeling their loss and then experienced redemption—the resurrection.”

As we begin to study the key concepts every group of students repeatedly comments, “They [the Christians] copied us.” I have heard this said in each class and I am concerned that the children were taught to understand Christianity simplistically. As the course continues and they explore Jewish thought in Christianity, they articulate this sentiment in a more mature way. They understand that “they” were “us” and understand the roots of Jewish thought in the development of Christianity.

C. Catholicism today and its teachings about Judaism

Not surprisingly, the Jewish students have never heard of *Nostra Aetate* or the Second Vatican Council. To explain this document’s importance it is necessary to introduce the Christian teaching of contempt for Judaism, the theology of supersessionism, the deicide charge and collective guilt, and Christian distinctions between the “old covenant” and the “new covenant.” Of these items, the central topic of the deicide charge receives the most attention.

After we read together *Nostra Aetate* §4, as with many Jewish adults who encounter for the first time the reversals articulated by this document, the students’ primary concern is whether the changes are permanent. They are not prepared to assume that long-standing but temporarily abandoned hostile teachings might not one day be restored.

Two boys who attended a local Catholic middle school were especially skeptical of changes in the Church because of experiences they reported. A religion teacher who really liked one of the boys told him that it is too bad that such a nice person as he will be going to hell. The other boy was singled out in

class because every morning when the class recited the Lord’s Prayer, he did not say it. The teacher said that she did not want to mention any names, but if any student was not saying the prayer he was being disrespectful and should say the prayer out of respect for her and for the rest of the class. Following the teacher’s reprimand, even though his classmates attempted to intimidate him, he refused to say the prayer.

Following the reading of *Nostra Aetate* and exploring the theological developments in the Catholic Jewish relationship, we read together the 1995 German Catholic bishops’ statement, “Opportunity to Re-Examine Relationships with the Jews.” In a recent class the text was introduced with an explanation of the teaching authority of bishops in Catholic understanding, something that two students who attended Catholic school already understood. After we read the German bishop’s statement, there was silence in the room. The students were moved by this expression of remorse. It was more than I had expected. This was a defining moment for one of the two boys who attended Catholic school. Although he had been the most resistant to the idea of Christian remorse, he finally accepted that a real change in the church was possible.

As a result of reading the Church documents the students began to categorize “Christians” as “pre-Vatican II” and “post-Vatican II.” Although they misapplied this categorization to those Christians for whom *Nostra Aetate* is not authoritative, the classification shows that they had internalized the possibility that Christian churches could reform because of the *Shoah*, an idea which they had at first refused to accept. I suspect that the public controversy over the Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, helped to enhance the Vatican II distinction for them. They clearly gained some understanding of the incredible importance of *Nostra Aetate* to the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

D. The charge of deicide

The history of Christian condemnation of Jews as “killers of God” or “Christ-killers” is new information for the students. One time, after talking about the deicide charges, I was challenged by a student who said that her Catholic friend never heard the charge that the Jews killed Christ even after many years of religious education. My student challenged me and said that I was in error. In another class, I asked the two students who had attended Catholic school if they ever heard this accusation. They said no. Questioning whether they heard the charge of deicide and did not remember it, I asked them if they were sure that they never encountered it in Catholic school. My skepticism ended when one boy answered, “If anyone ever said that to me I would punch his lights out.”

It appears that for this generation, at least in this locality, Catholic children are unaware of the deicide charge. They do not hear it in a Catholic school and apparently do not hear it at home either. And yet, the picture is not entirely positive. One year, one of my students was confronted in her eighth grade classroom with the deicide charge. The teacher was discussing U.S. immigration patterns and asked which group settled here who had lived in exile for many years. My student answered, “The Jews.” A boy then said, “And they killed Christ.” The student from my class disputed him, repeating what we had read in class from a Catholic religion textbook. The boy was not able to respond to her. The teacher commented, “She is absolutely correct.” The boy was Baptist and the teacher was Catholic. The story spread in the local Jewish community and the parents told me how pleased they were that their daughter was prepared for such an encounter.

World Events and Personal Experiences of Antisemitism

This course allows us to study current topics on religion or prejudice. For example, the death of Pope John Paul II allowed for discussion on the life of the Pope and his contribution to the new relationship between Catholics and Jews. The elevation of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the position of Pope led to a discussion of his childhood. One boy continued to call him the “Nazi Pope.” It provided a lesson on Benedict’s boyhood experiences and his family’s views on Hitler and Nazism.

When the Gibson film became an important topic of the day, some of the students asked to go to see the movie as a class. One girl saw the movie with her Christian friends and told us that she and her friends all cried at Jesus’ death and she saw nothing anti-Jewish about the movie. After we discussed the anti-Jewish issues at length, no one wanted to see the movie. I asked the girl who saw the movie if she still thought there was no antisemitism in it. She said, “What did I know when I watched the movie? I’m only a kid.”

Each time I have taught this class it is clear that antisemitism is ever-present in the students’ lives. The subject matter offers them an opportunity to speak of the antisemitic incidents that they feel they have encountered with their Christian classmates. Yet, the students are cautious about discussing these occurrences and begin to disclose such incidents only as the class progresses and as they feel secure. In retrospect, I know of no other forum that offers the opportunity to discuss this matter openly and within a “safe” environment. A discussion of antisemitic experiences occurs late in the course and only in response to the “teachable moment.”

It should be noted that the students do not display any “victim mentality” in regard to antisemitism, probably because they have no background in contemporary Jewish history.

Nevertheless, they all have experiences they understand to be manifestations of antisemitism. Some examples are:

- being told to “stop acting like a Jew”
- the only Jewish child in the school being told by eighth-grade classmates that “she looked” Jewish
- after answering “yes” to a lunch hour question, “Are you a Jew?” the questioner never spoke to the Jewish child again
- after Jewish kids say, “Jesus was a Jew,” others say, “But you guys rejected him” or “You’re just making that up.”
- Jews being told they will go to hell for not believing in Jesus
- a boy who excels in algebra believes the other kids think it is because he is Jewish

Even though in the class students share these disturbing stories, these same students do not discuss their experiences of antisemitism with their parents. Parents are generally unaware of antisemitism in their children’s schools and react with great surprise when they learn of it. When I asked the students why they do not discuss these antisemitic incidents at home, one said her parents would “freak out” if she gave them this information. Others in the class agreed. Why this hesitation to talk about it? For some, it appears that they believe that antisemitic comments are unique to them, but as soon as one student speaks of an antisemitic remark, the others will affirm that they had similar experiences. For others it might be that the antisemitic comments are so hurtful that they have trouble talking about it. Some Jewish teens think that when their friends say such things to them it is all in fun. They would not want their parents to “go ballistic” over something “trivial.”

In general, the students seem to take for granted that antisemitic incidents are “the way it is.” They may not think about the real hurt until our class conversations jar their memories. Nevertheless, when asked directly, “Does antisemitism exist among your classmates?” there is a very clear affirmative answer which seems to have become more intense in more recent classes.

Concluding Observations

My experiences teaching Jewish students about Christianity have convinced me that the students rather immediately take the information they learn in Hebrew School outside the classroom. However they understand the information at their age level, they use it to engage in dialogue with their Christian friends. It opens up a door for them to ask questions of these friends on the subject of Jesus and Christian practice. They seem confident in their ability, not always justifiably, to approach these questions.

Invariably, during the first class of the course, they criticize their Jewish education, or lack of it, comparing themselves unfavorably to Christian friends who they presume know all about their religion. They think they know nothing and the Christian teenagers know so much more. As the religious minority they have expressed feeling pressured by Christian classmates by “always having to explain ourselves.”

At the end of the course they feel empowered to ask questions of their friends. As a result, they claim now that they know more about religion [both Judaism and Christianity!] than their Christian friends since their Christian friends cannot answer their questions. It does not seem to occur to them that their friends have not had the occasion to look at their own religion from an outsider’s religious perspective, an experience that forces them to learn more about their own tradition and

motivates them to engage in direct interreligious conversation. Whereas before the course they felt inadequate to answer Christian questions about Judaism, now they were inadvertently putting their Christian friends on the same spot and recognizing that the friends knew as little as they! The conclusion is that typically neither Christian nor Jewish students are prepared to respond to questions posed from the other's unfamiliar perspective, but the course gave encouragement to the Jewish students to at least begin the conversation.

There is also an interesting dynamic that I have observed in terms of sensitization. As a result of the introduction to Christianity course, the Jewish students acquire some knowledge of the religious origins of Christian anti-Jewish teaching that contributed so much over the centuries to social animosity against Jews and to racial antisemitism. With this new knowledge, they are sometimes too quick to detect "antisemitism" (understood very broadly as anything that might smack of negativity toward Jews) in their everyday lives. For instance, in one class a group of Jewish students who attend the same school told me that their World Civilization book had information in it that was anti-Jewish. The lesson in question presented in summary fashion the origins of Christianity with particular attention devoted to the apostle Paul's work among the Gentiles. When I read the lesson, I found it to be well done, if perhaps a little dense, but not anti-Jewish. What the Jewish students missed was any reference to the (unbaptized) Jewish side of the separation of the two traditions, something beyond the scope and purpose of the lesson, and they interpreted this to reflect "antisemitism."

On the other hand, with their new sensitivity to Christian-Jewish interactions, the students can also be better equipped to appreciate positive experiences. When one of the girls in the same group who had been concerned about the World Civilization book attended our annual community-wide

Jewish Catholic Seder, she spontaneously used the blank back cover of the Haggadah to take notes for the class on the bishop's brief opening remarks. She took these notes, she explained, because what the bishop said resonated with her from the information we discussed in class. She related to the class that he said that "we worship the same God" and we share the "Exodus story" among other things. It seemed to me that she understood the implications of the bishop's remarks better than most of the Jewish adults who were present.

Another consequence of the course worth mentioning is that after the course, the Jewish students nevertheless remained unable to appreciate the diversity of Christian practice. They know there are differences but could not grasp the idea intellectually. Comparing it to differences in Jewish practice did not seem to help. For them, you are either Jewish or not. You are either Christian or not. These are the defining categories with which they operate, and whether someone is Methodist or Catholic or Baptist is a meaningless distinction from their Jewish perspective. This categorical dynamic may be the result of the centuries of conflictual relations between the two traditions, one that continues to exercise its influence in both communities today.

Operating with these primary categories of "Jewish" and "Christian," they were somewhat able to set aside their initial judgmental and defensive attitudes while the class material was being discussed. There was a conspicuous breakdown of some of the stereotypes and neat categorizations of Christians and Christianity, and they acquired some familiarity with and appreciation of the many of the differences between the traditions.

The only other course that equally catches the attention of this age group is one on the Holocaust. Perhaps because it touches on their everyday lived experiences, the Jewish students are very interested in learning about their Christian

friends' traditions. This interest presents an opportunity for teaching traditional Christian, as well as traditional Jewish religious ideas that these students in other after-school settings would never have the opportunity to learn. Unanimously, the students (and their parents) reported that the information they encountered was not superficial and they came away with the idea that they learned important things.

These observations taken into account, I conclude from these experiences that participating in an introductory course on Christianity is valuable and necessary for Jewish students. Overall, I hear comments from parents long after the course has ended that their children learned so much in my class. This is, of course, gratifying, but given the student's initial reticence to discuss some of the course topics, I am not sure how many details they actually convey to their parents. So why do I feel the course is an important experience for Jewish young people? Beyond simply being more informed about the majority religious community, I would note the following benefits:

First, although their Christian friends might be surprised to learn this, the Jewish students have had little or no experience in talking about God prior to this class. In response to the encounter with the Christian "other," the course offered them an unusual opportunity to discuss matters of Jewish belief and the importance for them of being Jewish.

Second, the Jewish students also had to overcome a widespread reticence among Jews to consider or discuss Jesus or Christianity. Perhaps the experience of oppression as a religious minority has established certain patterns of avoidance among many Jews in this regard. The class helped the Jewish young people to "demystify" Christianity to some degree and alleviate the discomfort that many adult Jews experience when talking about things Christian.

This may be reflected in the comment of one student when asked, "What did you think of this class and learning about Christianity?" She replied, "It's pretty cool when your friends ask you what you learn in Hebrew school and you say 'We're learning about Jesus.'" It needs to be clearly understood that the reason for the course is not to choose between Judaism and Christianity, an understanding very rarely voiced by some students at the outset. Far more important is the goal of enabling Jewish students to live more comfortably and knowledgeably among the larger Christian population. It may be that a new confidence about a previously unknown and threatening subject was what motivated my student to say, "It's pretty cool."

Third, a major aspect of defining identity, including Jewish identity, is the distinction drawn between ourselves and "others." Learning about another religion's traditions inevitably encourages thinking about an individual's own beliefs and practices, and this is especially true for the related traditions of Judaism and Christianity. At a time when adolescents are deciding for themselves whether or not God exists and what that should mean for their own lives, the self-reflection on their Jewish identity sparked by their encounter with the Christian "other" is an important consequence of the course.

Surprisingly, the inevitable self-reflection that takes place in this course revealed a strong sense of Jewish identity among the students. At no time was there even a hint of interest in conversion. The course did not generate or increase their sense of identity but it allowed it to emerge with greater clarity for them. Although one sometimes hears that Hebrew School classes do not have sufficient time to be able to teach Judaism *and* such superfluous topics as Christianity, my experiences with these several groups of Jewish teenagers point in the opposite direction. Their encounter with an introduction to Christianity was time well spent in the enrichment of their

Jewish knowledge and in the formation of their own Jewish self-awareness and identification.