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Confronting Supersessionism

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Mary C. Boys. *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*. Paulist Press, New York and Mahwah, NJ, 2000

The world-famous 13th century stone figures of two women in the European cathedrals of Strasbourg, Freiberg, Bamberg, Magdeburg, and, in Paris, Notre Dame, all convey the same triumphant message: a crowned woman proudly representing the conquering Christian Church stands in glory next to a blindfolded and bowed figure who symbolizes the defeated Synagogue.

No words of interpretation are needed when a person views such sculptures. For more than 700 years these graphic stone images have transmitted a potent spiritual claim: Christianity and the Church have replaced Judaism and the Synagogue.

The technical term for this widely held belief is supersessionism, which asserts the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. As a result, Judaism is obsolete and the stubborn Jews, rejected by God, are a theologically surplus people. To this day, supersessionism remains one of the major obstacles in the Christian-Jewish encounter. Throughout history, it has provided Christians a theological justification for the teaching of contempt toward Judaism and, tragically, supersessionism has frequently led to physical violence against the Jewish people.

Happily, Sister Mary Boys, a prominent Roman Catholic scholar, has confronted supersessionism head-on in her extraordinary new book whose title says it all: *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Paulist Press).

Boys, the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary In New York City, ardently believes authentic Christianity does not require the spiritual annihilation of Jews and the destruction of Judaism. Her remarkable book is of historic importance because it thoroughly repudiates the spiritual arrogance and religious competition that have bedeviled Christian-Jewish relations for 2,000 years.

Has God Only One Blessing? destroys the carefully nurtured belief that is artistically embodied in the cathedral statues. Writing in an effortless style, Boys takes her readers back to the "complex world of first-century Judaism" when Christianity began. She vividly describes the dynamic Jewish civilization into which Jesus was born, and she describes the "parting of the ways" between Judaism and what came to be known as Christianity.

That parting, Boys asserts, was "neither orderly nor sequential." She believes the separation process took centuries, not decades, and Boys shows that even 800 years after the death of Jesus, some Syrian Christians "could not distinguish between Judaism and Christianity." While she doesn't call for the church's "reunion" with Judaism, Boys urges her fellow Christians "to acknowledge ... the complexity of the partings" and to set aside any oversimplified and erroneous understanding of that event.

Boys tackles many "hot button" issues including the divinity of Jesus, the cross as a symbol of

Christian faith and Jewish dread, the Trinity, anti-Semitism, the Nazi Holocaust, the state of Israel, the Pharisees, the virulent anti-Jewish writings of some Church Fathers, and the discredited charge that Jews are "Christ killers."

But the major achievement of the book goes far beyond *Boys*" superb scholarship. From 1993 through 1995, she directed a unique program that involved 22 Catholic and Jewish educators who wrestled with many aspects of Jewish relations.

During those two years, the participants strengthened their own faith commitments because of the intense encounters with members of the "other" religion. They also discovered that their previous beliefs about the "other" were sharply challenged when the "other" was present in the same room.

One Catholic educator said she now understands the gospel in a new way and thinks of her Jewish colleagues whenever she hears painful negative references to Jews and Judaism in her church services. When Christians and Jews seriously engage one another face-to-face, long-held stereotypes, cliches, and caricatures often disappear. It's one thing for Christians to mouth ancient negative teachings about Judaism when no Jews are present, but it's far different when one recites those same teachings in the presence of religiously committed Jews.

I consider *Has God Only One Blessing?* one of the most important books I have ever read. It is the gold standard for faithful Christians who wish to end 2000 years of religious enmity toward Jews and Judaism. The book has the compelling power to replace inaccurate and negative beliefs with accurate and constructive ones.

It may be impossible to remove the cathedral statues after all these centuries, but thanks to *Mary Boys* it is now possible to clearly see those stone figures for what they really are: transmitters of a spiritual poison regarding Jews and Judaism. She reminds us God has many children - and more than one blessing.

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