What do we do with biblical texts that are both vital to the life of the church and harmful to another religious tradition? To put it another way, how do we unleash the power in the story of the Passion of Jesus while acknowledging that this story has also served as raw material for harsh depictions of Jews as enemies of Christ, and thus of Christianity?

How do we teach sacred texts that have been used sacrilegiously? How do we expose the shadow side without blocking the light?

*Context*

The accusation that Jews are implicated in the death of Jesus suffuses the New Testament, most explicitly the Gospel of John, but also the other three canonical gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul, of course, approaches the death of Jesus from many perspectives beyond who is responsible for the Crucifixion.

These texts, particularly the Passion narratives, are proclaimed in Christian worship; as scripture, they are sacred and normative writings. They cannot merely be set aside. Entire liturgical celebrations are built around the story in those Christian traditions that observe Holy Week.

Further, the fundamental plot line of these texts is widely known, even among those largely unschooled in the Christian tradition. Although its underlying argument is the more abstract claim that Jews “rejected” Jesus, this allegation comes alive through a drama of good versus evil, of innocent suffering and ultimate vindication. The characters are memorable, especially the villainous ones (e.g., Judas, Caiaphas, the chief priests and elders of the people, “the Jews”). Scenes from the various Passion narratives have dominated Christian art, been enacted in Passion plays and films, and been a staple of sacred music. One need never have picked up a New Testament to know the basic contours of the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus and the events leading to it. Or you could pick up Bill O’Reilly’s new book, *Killing Jesus*.

Yet, while familiar with the plot of the Passion story, relatively few Christians are cognizant of its consequences for Jews. In part, this stems from the demographic reality that most Christians in the world do not encounter Jews in their daily lives. As a result, the church’s relationship with Judaism seems tangential to their practice of Christianity. In some respects this is understandable, particularly in communities overwhelmed by poverty and violence; their degree of dislocation is already so severe that further immersion in the shadow side of the tradition could be paralyzing. Yet it is also likely that Christians in such communities, typically lacking the resources and opportunities for knowledge of the history, will therefore continue in the inadequate view of Judaism that has been part of the tradition. Still others prefer to look away from our tradition’s shadow side, lest it give credence to contemporary secular critics who revile theism, claiming that “religion poisons everything.”[1]

But whether or not Christians encounter Jews in their daily lives, we are obliged to honor the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16 and Deut. 5:20).
To put it plainly: Christians have used texts to bear false witness against Jews, albeit often because they assumed that the texts were factual. In this graced moment in history, however, we have both the resources to read ancient texts in new ways and the ethical obligation to do so. This is not a matter of rewriting but of rereading and reinterpreting them.

Framework

Thinking pedagogically about how to help Christians confront the shadow side of our tradition gave rise to a threefold heuristic of “tellings”: a trembling telling, a troubling telling, and a transformed telling. These three tellings structure the three major sections of my book, * Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians*. A word on each of them:

**Trembling Tellings.** Stories of Jesus’s death lie at the core of Christian identity. They offer an encounter with his experience of the human condition: betrayals by those closest to him, his own fear of death, uncertainty about God’s will, and the endurance of terrible suffering and an ignominious death. These stories cause us to “tremble, tremble, tremble,” as the great spiritual “Were You There?” expresses it. Moreover, the dying and rising of Jesus lies at the center of Christian liturgical life, spirituality, creeds, and doctrines. It has evoked centuries of reflection, given rise to meaningful rituals, inspired art and music, been the subject of theological exploration, motivated persons to sacrifice themselves for a cause greater than themselves, and sustained persons through times of suffering. The stories of Jesus’s death lie at the heart of what is sacred in Christianity.

Precisely because of their sacredness and the manner in which many Christians hold them dear, one must first acknowledge the power that these stories hold in various communities: the *Passion as a symbol of resistance to evil*, including protest against violence, racism, torture, poverty, and militarism; the *Passion as a mirror of people’s suffering*; and the Passion and Resurrection as the *Paschal Mystery at the heart of Christian life*. There is even a crucifix scratched on the wall of cell #2 in the infamous “Death Block” of Auschwitz I, a place of torture and death primarily for non-Jewish political prisoners.[2]

These are stories “rightly told.” Redeeming Christianity’s sacred story first requires respect, even awe, for its power for good.

**Troubling Tellings.** Yet these “tellings” have also glorified suffering, condoned passivity in the face of violence, and constricted the meaning of Salvation by associating it only with Jesus’s death—as if his life and ministry held little meaning. These “troubling tellings” are the subject of considerable reappraisal today, particularly among feminist theologians. Yet insufficient attention has been paid to an even more troubling telling: misinterpretations of the Passion narratives that have rationalized hostility to and violence against Jews as “Christ killers.” This sacrilegious telling cries out for redemption—an unfinished task for Christians.

The key move here is to connect the texts, their interpretations and their effects—*Wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of a text’s influence over time. Dorothee Sölle terms this a “hermeneutics of consequences.”[3]

Those who become more aware of the power of the Passion story must then confront its deadly aspects by looking closely at the way in which it has functioned over the centuries. This critical assessment involves examining New Testament texts about the death of Jesus that provided raw materials for hostility towards Jews. It then follows the way in which Christians have interpreted those narratives in
apocryphal texts, commentaries, sermons, formal teaching, and popular culture. It also involves probing the element of continuity between Christian teaching and preaching and the Holocaust.

**Transformed Tellings.** But respect and critique must be complemented by reconstruction. This reconstructive task is multifaceted. It involves drawing on contemporary modes of biblical scholarship that shed new light on the historical circumstances of the death of Jesus, especially the way in which crucifixion functioned in the Roman Empire as a mode of state terrorism to intimidate subject peoples and slaves into passivity. It requires exploring complicated matters of religious identity in the early centuries of the Common Era. It also entails formulating principles for interpreting New Testament texts in our time.

Moreover, we must make connections between Christian spirituality and a willingness to acknowledge the historical wounds that Christianity has inflicted. This requires a kind of vulnerability that refuses to be defensive in the face of disquieting truths. Facing our history—being responsive to it— involves dying to notions of Christianity that see it as only a force for good in the world.

Facing the tragic consequences of our troubling texts and seeking interpretations that are more just goes to the heart of the Passion. Michael Barnes, a scholar of the religions of India, suggests that the experience of Christians learning to relate to the religious Other mirrors Christ facing death.[4] In the language of Christian spirituality, interreligious encounter is an experience of the Paschal Mystery, a dying to the small, protected world of the self and a conversion to the “providential mystery of otherness.”

Writing *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* has given me greater appreciation for the depth of Christianity’s sacred story, and the obligation to live daily the process of redeeming it—and in that process, rediscovering the Cross of Jesus amid the crosses of history.
Turning Those Troubling Texts: Altering for the Altar

If indeed our bloodstained history has altered the meaning of the cross of Christ, what might be said from the altar? In particular, given the prominence of the death of Jesus in Christian liturgical life, in what ways might we “turn and turn again” troubling texts so that new interpretations might contribute to a more profound understanding of his death? In what ways might new readings of troubling texts do greater justice to the Christian relationship with Judaism?

By way of prelude, three contextual matters are important. The first involves timing: consideration of the manner and meaning of the death of Jesus should be integrated throughout the liturgical year, not limited merely to Lent or Holy Week. How preachers and teachers speak about the relationship between the Testaments, the Jewish Jesus and the Judaism of his time, the development of the church out of the Jesus Movement, the nature of the gospels, and Paul’s identity and mission provide a fundamental ground for interpreting the Passion and death of Jesus.

Second, it is vital to speak directly to the various troubling texts in the Scriptures—e.g., those texts that appear to condone violence, denigrate Judaism, demean women, and uphold slavery—whenever they occur. This does not mean belittling the Bible, nor does it suggest berating our ancestors in faith for their misuse of texts. Rather, it involves a frank admission that biblical texts and their interpreters bear the limitations and wounds of human finitude. Texts, therefore, must be read in a discerning manner. Too often, in the churches, the impression is unintentionally left that the Bible is something like a transcript of God’s voice emanating from the heavens. In contrast, it is important to recognize it as the “word of God expressed in human language.”

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As Timothy Radcliffe says, the Word “does not come from outside but gestates within our human language. The Word of God does not come down from heaven like a celestial Esperanto.” Texts need to be situated in their context as artifacts of human culture, lest we bypass the human reality in the search for spiritual meaning. Moreover, because of sinfulness, human interpretation always has a provisional character: the Scriptures “witness to people’s interpretations of God’s self-communication to them . . . . Since God enters people’s lives in the historical conditions and limitations of real life, their interpretations are colored by these circumstances and shaped by their myopia and blind spots. The human authors of the scriptures are at the same time virtuous and sinful.”

Consideration of the role of polemics in antiquity helps to enlarge the context in which we interpret troubling biblical texts and early church literature. This is not to justify the “blood curse” of Matthew 27:25 or the oratorical excesses of Melito of Sardis or John Chrysostom. Rather, it is vital to situate these claims in their broader historical-cultural-literary framework. This requires mindfulness of our propensity for anachronism, such as thinking of “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the NT era as settled and separate traditions. It also requires recognition of the internal disputations involved in any diverse group, as well as the function of rhetoric in identity formation. As Luke Timothy Johnson shows, the believers-in-Jesus (or messianists) were part of a much larger debate within Judaism over the correct meaning of Torah. Their “rhetoric of slander” was part of the language of disputation in Judaism, evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and Philo. It also must be understood as part of the conventional language of recrimination and debate in Hellenistic philosophical schools. Thus, regarding the “blood curse” of Matthew 27:25, Johnson says, “We cannot view with the same seriousness the ‘curse’ laid on Jews by Matthew’s Gospel when we recognize that curses were common coinage in those fights and there were not many Jews and Gentiles who did not have at least one curse to deal with.”

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2 Timothy Radcliffe, Seven Last Words (New York: Continuum, 2005), 73.
3 Here I draw on P. Williamson’s wording in Catholic Principles, “No ‘spiritual’ bypassing of the human reality is possible,” 30.
6 Ibid., 441.
Johnson’s argument is crucial for recognizing the polemical context in which the New Testament was forged. Yet it falters once the followers of Jesus no longer understood themselves to be a part of Israel. As “Christianity” came to be understood as a distinct religion, Christian readers of the New Testament lost the ability to recognize the genre of slander as a language of disputation within Judaism. Instead, they interpreted the polemic as an accurate depiction of Judaism—with tragic consequences. Although acknowledgment of the conventional nature of New Testament polemic frees us from its mythic force and potential for harm, we must be mindful of the immense damage that has been done by generations of interpreters who misread the messianists’ polemic as a factual portrayal of Jewish attitudes, practices, and beliefs.

Third, it is necessary to be attentive to what is deeply embedded in the religious imagination: “To ‘imagine redemption’ is to discover the difference that the death of Jesus makes right here and now.”7 Patrick Evans evoked the importance of this sensitivity in the course of leading a session on hymnody in April 2011. He shared about a hymn that had deeply affected him since his childhood, “There Is a Fountain”:

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\begin{align*}
E’r since by faith I saw the stream \\
Thy flowing wounds supply, \\
Redeeming love has been my theme, \\
And shall be till I die. \\
And shall be till I die. \\
And shall be till I die. \\
Redeeming love has been my theme, \\
And shall be till I die.8
\end{align*}
\]

He observed that whatever complex theological understandings we may hold, on our death beds we will be far more consoled by the hymnody we carry deep in our memories than we will be by more abstract formulations. His remarks serve as a vivid reminder of the importance of learning what role hymns, poetry, prayer, ritual, and visual testimony about the Passion and death of Jesus play in the lives of congregants or students. Whatever new perspectives we offer need to be in conversation with understandings already embedded. Think of this as the “redeeming love” principle.

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7 Sally A. Brown, Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now (Westminster John Knox, 2008), 47.
8 Text adapted from Zechariah 13:1; lyrics, William Cowper, 1772; “Cleansing Fountain,” attributed to Lowell Mason, 1702–1872.
Mary Boys is the Dean of Academic Affairs and Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A Roman Catholic and a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names, she has a longstanding interest in liturgical and pastoral interpretations of Scripture.

FOOTNOTES


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