



2011 Corcoran Chair Conference  
March 28-29, 2011  
Boston College

**Are Jews and Christians Living in a Post-Polemical World?  
Toward a Comparison of Medieval and Modern Christian-Jewish Encounters**

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**RATIONALE**

Much of the history of the Jewish-Christian encounter includes a vigorous debate in the form of polemics—literature, public disputations, forced sermons, and the like. This debate produced a major body of medieval literature (*Adversus Judaeos* on the Christian side; various *Books of Nizzahon* on the Jewish side) which encapsulates the elements of religious and theological disagreement between the two groups. It was once taken for granted that this literature was produced in the context of Christian attempts to missionize Jews and Jewish attempts to fend off Christian approaches. Christians were invariably the aggressor; Jews invariably the defender.

General changes in contemporary Christian-Jewish relations have brought with them changes in perception of this literature, and indeed of the whole encounter. Questions have been raised about the conversionary context of the polemics, and more nuanced views of what the

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

### **MONDAY, MARCH 28, 5:30-7:00 P.M.**

#### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

THE HEIGHTS ROOM, CORCORAN COMMONS, CHESTNUT HILL CAMPUS

Welcome: Dr. James Bernauer, SJ, Director of the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning and Kraft Family Professor of Philosophy

Session Chair: Dr. Daniel J. Lasker, Norbert Blechner Professor of Jewish Values at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the 2010-2011 Corcoran Visiting Chair at the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

#### **-Christian Encounter from the Middle Ages to**

Dr. David Berger, Dean and Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies of Yeshiva University

### **TUESDAY, MARCH 29, 9:00 A.M.-12:15 P.M.**

#### MEDIEVAL POLEMICS

9 LAKE STREET, BRIGHTON CAMPUS ROOM 100

Session Chair: Dr. Dwayne Carpenter, Professor of Hispanic Studies and Co-Director of Jewish Studies at Boston College

#### **9:00-10:15 A.M. MORNING SESSION #1**

Dr. Daniel J. Lasker, Norbert Blechner Professor of Jewish Values at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the 2010-2011 Corcoran Visiting Chair at the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

#### ***Disputatio: Ambiguous Motivations and Unintended Consequences of a Long-lived G***

Dr. Robin Vose, Associate Professor of Medieval History at St. Thomas University

#### **10:15-10:30 A.M. - BREAK**

#### **10:30-11:45 A.M. MORNING SESSION #2**

#### **c between Jews**

Dr. Alexandra Cuffel, Independent Scholar



## SPEAKER ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

### -Christian Encounter

Dr. David Berger, Dean and Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History  
at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies of Yeshiva University

The Jewish-Christian debate in medieval times was marked by both stability and change. On the one hand, the Scriptural component of the discussion centered on a group of core proof texts that remained largely the same, though even here we find new approaches arising from time to time. On the other hand, arguments based on unaided reason become more sophisticated; Christian use of the Talmud introduces new opportunities and new dangers, and expanded Jewish use of the New Testament provides room for creative approaches to the figure of Jesus as well as new arguments for the abiding validity of Judaism. This debate is hardly confined to abstract intellectual discourse. It both reflects and influences mutual perceptions and behaviors ranging from the growing monotheism.

Deep transformations mark the modern age. In the nineteenth century, Christians and Jews debate an issue that was entirely peripheral in the Middle Ages and now moves to center stage: the ethical standing of the respective faiths. And in a post-Holocaust age, genuine rapprochement brings its own set of tensions focusing on challenges both old and new: the limits of dialogue, the abiding validity of the covenant with the Jews, the propriety of Christian missionizing, the Church and the Holocaust, the relationship between religion and the political sphere, and the moral, national, and religious standing of the State of Israel.

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David Berger is Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History and Dean at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. For many years he was Brookludian Professor of History at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He was also co-chair of the Academic Advisory Committee of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and has served as a member of the Academic Committee of the Rothschild Foundation Europe and of the Executive Committee of the American Academy for Jewish Research, where he is a Fellow. He serves on the Council of the World Union of Jewish Studies and the editorial board of *Tradition*. From 1998 to 2000, he was President of the Association for Jewish Studies.

He is the author of *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, which was awarded the John Nicholas Brown Prize by the Medieval Academy of America, and co-author of *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, a finalist for the Jewish Book Award in Jewish Thought. His book, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, which has also been published in an updated Hebrew version

Dr. Daniel J. Lasker, Norbert Blechner Professor of Jewish Values at  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the 2010-2011 Corcoran Visiting Chair  
at the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

The old narrative of the Jewish critique of Christianity was simple: Jews criticized Christianity as a reaction to the Christian mission to the Jews; if Christians had not attempted to convince Jews to convert to Christianity, there would have been no reason for Jews to say anything negative about the majority religion. Judaism is a religion of tolerance, at least towards members of other religions, and, therefore, it was not a Jewish concern how Gentiles worshipped. But as medieval Christians tried more and more to convince Jews to convert, Jewish thinkers answered this challenge by developing arguments to be used against Christian doctrines.

**uous Motivations and Unintended  
Consequences of a Long-**  
Dr. Robin Vose, Associate Professor of Medieval History at St. Thomas University

From ancient to modern times, Jews and Christians alike have understood the rhetorical effectiveness of using communities. In medieval times, such attacks occasionally took the form of staged two-way disputations in which Jewish spokesmen were pitted against Christian preachers with a more or less clear understanding that the performance could have but one outcome: a public claim of victory for the side whose representative was backed up by force of arms. After the removal of Jewish communities from most of western Europe, such live debates could no longer be formally staged, yet for centuries Christian sermonists continued to vehemently condemn imagined ad ceased to perhaps confirming that edification of believers was rather the intention all along.

Yet while actual engagement with religious opponents may not have been the efforts did not go unnoticed by the other side. Christians anxiously sought access to the latest in Rabbinic discourse as well as to *Hebraica veritas* and Talmudic wisdom, just as Jewish scholars took pains to examine and rebut their -circulated writings. Such unintended theological exchanges dialogues of a sort resonated long after the flames of medieval pogroms and inquisitorial autos-de-fe had been extinguished, and to some extent their echoes remain with us today. While clearly marred by negativity of tone and often lamentable political consequences, they also represent a historical legacy of serious interfaith engagement which should not be ignored amid general shifts toward

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Robin Vose studied History and Middle East Studies at McGill, Haifa and the University of Toronto before completing an interdisciplinary PhD at the University of N associate professor of History at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick (Canada) where he lectures

## Dr. Alexandra Cuffel, Independent Scholar

While explicitly polemical documents, whether cast in the form of a dialogue or debate between members of different religious communities or embedded in hagiographical, poetic, or historical texts, are extremely important for understanding of theological differences between and attitudes toward other religions, they are far from the only, or even, the most important form of polemic in the Middle Ages. In this paper I will explore non-written forms of polemic between medieval Jews and Christians, focusing primarily on Western Europe in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. Specifically, I will examine the audiences and functions of church sculpture, both external and internal, forms of public punishment, renaming objects, places, or people holy to the religious other to demonstrate their lack of worth, songs, sermons, and oral tales. I argue that these forms of polemic served several potential purposes: as quotidian reminders that the religious claims of those outside the community were unworthy, even laughable; as outlets of scorn and anger for the religious other when such emotions could not be expressed in more direct ways due to danger of reprisal or church sanction; as (quasi-

nity boundaries and reminders of difference in the face of regular social, economic, and even religious interactions between Jews and Christians. Because many of these forms of polemic were frequently repeated or seen and required little to no learning or active effort to grasp, they, much more than the written polemical disputations, reflected and had the potential to shape the interactions and religious attitudes between medieval Jews and Christians at multiple levels of society, from the illiterate to very specific, educated audiences, such as the Christian clergy who used the choirs and choirstalls decorated with sculpture with anti-Jewish symbolism.

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Alexandra Cuffel received her Ph.D. in medieval history from New York University in 2002. She is the author of *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* published by University of Notre Dame Press, along with various articles on medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations. She is currently working on a second monograph, *Shared Saints and Festivals among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Medieval Mediterranean*, for which she received an ACLS grant and a Women's Studies in Religion Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School, and next year she will be on fellowship at Ruhr University, in Bochum Germany, starting a collaborative book with Adam Knobler of The College of New Jersey on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim imaginings of the ten lost tribes of Israel in the medieval and early modern periods. Alexandra Cuffel is an independent scholar.



Dr. Irven Resnick, Chair of Excellence in Judaic Studies  
at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

In the religious debate between Jews and Christians, the biblical dietary laws come to illustrate important as . Early medieval Christians asserted that Christians were not bound by the dietary laws and tended to explicate them allegorically or figuratively. Although the biblical dietary laws prohibit

became central to the debate. Christians will assert not only that the consumption of pork proclaims a correct messianic theology, but also that the Lord, like a good physician, ordained a special diet for the Jews because they and not Christians have a corrupt bodily nature that is subject to deleterious influences from pork that incline Jews to gluttony and wantonness. Therefore, when a Jew converted to Christianity, the consumption of pork became a sign of his transfer from one religious community to another, as well as a sign of a physical, intellectual, and moral transformation.

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Irven Resnick has a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and holds the Chair of Excellence in Judaic Studies. He has been with the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga since 1990. He has been a Corresponding Fellow at the Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies at Bar-Ilan University (Israel) since 1996, and a Senior Associate at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (England) since 2003. In 2006 he was elected a faculty associate at Oxford University's Oriental Institute. For fall semester 2006, he was a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. In 2003, 2006, and 2010, Professor Resnick directed a five-week NEH summer institute for college and university faculty, "Representations of the 'Other': Jews in Medieval Christendom"; in summer 2008 he co-City in classical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His recent publications include On the Causes of the Properties of the Elements (*Liber de causis proprietatum elementorum*) (2010), (2008), and Dialogue Against the Jews (2006).

**Polemical Remnants, Irenic Ambivalence and Internal Politics:  
Catholic-Jewish Relations in 2011**

Dr. Mary C. Boys, Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology  
at Union Theological Seminary

Although anti-

characteristic. Vatican II announced a church open to dialogue with the religious other, and *Nostra Aetate* is still frequently cited. Nevertheless, subsequent documents and decisions reveal considerable caution, even wariness, lest something be learned through the process of dialogue that might challenge long-

not always viewed favorably within the hierarchy of the church because it necessarily involves critical examination of Catholic teaching and behavior.

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Mary C. Boys has been the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City since July 1994. Prior to that appointment she taught for many years at Boston College. Among her books is *Has God only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*. She is a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names.

Dr. Eugene Korn

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**Land, Sovereignty, and Jewish Identity:**  
**The Patristic Legacy and Contemporary Christian Polemics**  
Rev. Dr. Christopher M. Leighton, Executive Director, and Dr. Adam Gregerman,

The Center for Christian-Jewish Learning is devoted to the multifaceted development and implementation of new relationships between Christians and Jews that are based not merely on toleration but on full respect and mutual enrichment. This defining purpose flows from the Mission of Boston College and responds to the vision expressed in Roman Catholic documents ever since the Second Vatican Council.

The building of new, positive relationships between Jews and Christians requires sustained collaborative academic research. Therefore, under the Center's auspices scholars and thinkers representing diverse Jewish and Christian perspectives engage in intense and ongoing study of all aspects of our related yet distinct traditions of faith and culture.

Educationally, we are committed to the goal that "Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in [Christian religious education]: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated" (*Notes*, 2). We are convinced that Jews and Christians enrich and deepen their respective identities by joint educational endeavors. The Center is thus dedicated to conducting educational research and to offering programs, both in the university and the wider community, in which Christians and Jews explore their traditions together.

In short, the Center applies the scholarly resources of a Catholic university to the task of encouraging mutual knowledge between Christians and Jews at every level (*Notes*, 27).

[*Notes* = Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985).]

### **CONTACT THE CENTER**

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