

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Speaker seeks to bridge understanding between Christians, Jews

By Douglas Kindschi

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Amy-Jill Levine grew up in a Jewish family that lived in a heavily Portuguese Roman Catholic neighborhood. Almost all of her friends were Catholic, and she wanted to go to church with them.

In a 2012 interview with the magazine U.S. Catholic, she told how her parents did not dissuade her but “explained to me that Christianity, which in our case meant Catholicism, was very much like Judaism. We worshiped the same God. We prayed the same Psalms. We followed the Ten Commandments. We Jews had a few more commandments, but Christians had extra books in their Bible. We had



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Levine

some differences. And a Jewish man named Jesus was very important.”

Not everyone in the community was as understanding as her parents. She recalled the classmate who told her, “You killed our Lord,” then explained it was her priest who told her that.

Levine arrived home crying hysterically, saying she had killed God. Her mother explained it wasn’t true and “God was doing just fine.”

After a call to the diocesan office, the priest was reprimanded. That was during the Second Vatican Council but prior to the encyclical *Nostra Aetate*, which marked the Catholic Church’s major shift in the official attitude toward other religions, especially its close relationship with and

heritage from the Jewish faith.

Levine said her growing-up experiences finally led to her studying Hebrew and Greek as an undergraduate, and to her studies at Duke University, where she received her doctorate in religion. She continues as a member in an Orthodox Jewish congregation while teaching New Testament as a professor in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University.

Levine is committed to helping Christians understand Jesus by having a better understanding of the world in which he lived and preached. She is particularly concerned about the stereotypical contrast between a God of law and a God of love.

“God is a God of love throughout both testaments,” she said. “If God didn’t love in the Hebrew Scriptures, we wouldn’t have the covenant. God would not have been Abraham’s friend. God would not have allowed the cov-

enant community to survive in Egypt or bring them back from exile.”

She is increasing her presentations to mixed audiences.

“When I point out how understanding the Jewish background of the New Testament opens up new interpretations, I see the Christian audience go, ‘I never thought about that.’ I point out, for example, that if you begin a story, ‘There was a man who had two sons,’ every Jew knows the plot line. We are reminded of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Manasseh and Ephraim, and suddenly the parable of the prodigal son takes on a completely different meaning.”

“What brings me great joy is to have people recognize they can disagree. They don’t have to sacrifice their own religion in order to be in an interfaith conversation. They can stand firmly in terms of who they are and sav. ‘This is what I believe.’ and

then have somebody else say, ‘OK, I don’t believe that, but I see where you get it, and I respect it.’ That’s fabulous.”

Levine was in Grand Rapids in 2012 speaking at the Dominican Center as part of the community “Year of Interfaith Understanding.” She will return Nov. 1 as the main speaker for the annual Interfaith Consortium Conference at Calvin College. Her 1 p.m. talk is on the Parables of Jesus. It will be followed by breakout sessions, as well as a panel discussion that includes scholars from Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The 7 p.m. lecture is on Jesus in his Jewish Context.

She also will offer a workshop for Christian pastors, educators and students the morning of Nov. 2.

Registration and more information for both events is at interfaithunderstanding.org
— Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu