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*Distinguished Faculty Lecture 2017*

**Response to the Distinguished Faculty Lecture**

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## **Response to the 41<sup>st</sup> Distinguished Faculty Lecture**

**Margaret R. Miles**

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Professor Seidman’s fine lecture has shown us the emergence of a strategy in the long saga of Christian attempts to proselytize Jews. *Why* did this project seem so urgent to Christian leaders? Several possible answers range from social, to psychological, to theological. Probably the answer must be “all of the above.” On the social level: In the early centuries of the Common Era, Judaism, an ancient and honorable religion, commanded much more respect than did Christianity, a “new religious movement.” Judaism occupied a privileged social niche in the Roman Empire, a niche that Christian leaders sought to appropriate —not share—appropriate. On the psychological level, in relation to Jews, Christians evidenced the most intimate and deeply rooted of hostilities, namely, sibling rivalry, in Naomi’s words, “simultaneous affinity and aversion.”

On the theological level, supersessionist theology, according to which Christians claimed to have “inherited” and fulfilled Hebrew scriptures as well as some of Judaism’s ritual practices was embarrassingly undermined by the continuing presence of Judaism. If Jews could be quietly tucked into the Christian fold, such claims would seem to have more legitimacy.

Leaders such as Augustine of Hippo worked overtime to position Judaism in relation to Christianity. “The Jew,” Augustine wrote, “carries the book from which the Christian takes his faith. They have become our librarians, like slaves who carry books behind their masters.” He taught that “the whole content of Jewish scriptures is either directly or indirectly about Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Judaism, he said, was a “foreshadowing” of Christianity: “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old Testament becomes plain in the New.”<sup>2</sup> When such flamboyant efforts at argument-disguised-as-exegesis failed to result in mass conversions, Augustine, like Luther many centuries later, turned—as revealed in the title of his late treatise—“Against the Jews.”

Naomi has spared us a recital of the incredibly short steps from Christian attempts to convert Jews to murderous violence. I will also spare us; shortage of time is my excuse to avoid a narration of the utterly horrifying effects of anti-Jewish rhetoric from the New Testament forward. For medieval and early modern evidence, I refer you to Professor Christopher Ocker’s important 1998 article, “Ritual Murder and the Subjectivity of Christ,” in which he shows that medieval increments of new devotions to the passion of Christ (such as Corpus Christi devotions) were inevitably accompanied by violence against Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Fast forward to the present. I was a hospice volunteer for seven years. One of my patients, the ninety-year-old daughter of immigrant Russian Jews—let’s call her Sylvia (because that was her name)—told me one day about her childhood experiences of being taunted and ostracized in a school playground in Chicago with the repetitious chant, “You killed Jesus.” I told her, “Jews didn’t kill Jesus, Romans did.” She replied sadly, “Why didn’t I know that 85 years ago?”

Sylvia didn’t know that 85 years ago because of what Hans Georg Gadamer has called the “effective history” of an idea. Gadamer insisted that the history of the *use* of an idea must be part of the interpretation of that idea. I once heard a lecture (not at GTU, and by a scholar who will remain unnamed) on a New Testament passage attributed to Paul in which

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<sup>1</sup> *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 56.9.

<sup>2</sup> *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 73, on Exod. 20.19.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Ocker, “Ritual Murder and the Subjectivity of Christ: A Choice in Medieval Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 91, No. 2 (Apr. 1998): 153-192.

“the Jews” are accused of killing Jesus. The lecture claimed, with the scholarly air of *finally* resolving a major misunderstanding, that Paul did not intend to implicate *all Jews*, *only* those who participated directly in Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Apparently, this point was lost on generations of Christians who participated in the effective history of this allegation.

An important moment in that effective history was Martin Luther’s 1543 treatise, “Against the Jews and Their Lies,” published three years after the Cracow Yiddish translation of the New Testament. Circulation of Luther’s anti-Judaism was expedited by his vigorous use of a sixteenth-century new technology, namely, the printing press. In his treatise, Luther urged that Jewish synagogues and homes should be burned and all evidence of Jewish ritual and teachings either burned or buried, and that rabbis be forbidden to teach “on pain of loss of life and limb.” He advocated that German princes should deny safe conduct and protection to Jews and that Jews should be expelled from German principalities. Recently, several scholars have studied the “effective history” of Luther’s treatise from its publication in the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century when Hitler quoted parts of it in his speeches at Nazi rallies. Today, Lutheran groups around the world have publicly repudiated and repented Luther’s anti-Judaism, acknowledging that it is “not a fringe issue, . . . [but] a sad and dishonorable part of[Luther’s] legacy.”<sup>4</sup>

Professor Seidman’s lecture has shown us a relatively benign moment in the Christian effort to proselytize Jews, an effort that must *nonetheless* be understood in the context of a very long “effective history.” She observes that in translations of the New Testament, notes and commentary were omitted in order “to avoid doctrinal controversy.” But intentions are not the same as effects. Those of us who study texts both in translation and in their language-of-origin, recognize that translations, heavily scented by the translator’s multiple choices, are (even without notes and commentary) inevitably and necessarily already *interpretations*. (Indeed, that is *why* scholars learn the languages of the texts we study: *so that* we recognize that translations *are* interpretations.)

In conclusion, I want to remind us of a very interesting suggestion Naomi made. She said that the effectiveness of translations of the New

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<sup>4</sup> Missouri Synod Doctrinal Statements, archived 25 February, 2009, 30.

Testament into Yiddish and other languages Jews spoke and read, should not be evaluated by the admittedly “paltry” number of converts that may have been produced. Rather, these translations should be understood, in her words, as “performative rather than instrumental.” A subtle point but highly important. Judaizing translations were themselves, in her words, “*already achieved Jewish-Christian conversions* in their textual conflation of the Jewish and the Christian.” In short, the Yiddish New Testament was “not a medium of communication but the message itself.” Jewish *people* proved impervious to conversion, but a text, in its passivity and vulnerability,<sup>5</sup> *could be* so “converted.” Here is a cautionary tale that should alert all of us who translate texts not only to the politics, but also to the ethics of translation.

Thank you, Naomi, for a truly distinguished 2017 faculty lecture.

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<sup>5</sup> Already noted by Plato, *Phaedrus* 275e.