

For some, the idea of one person being both a Professor of the New Testament and Professor of Jewish Studies seems extraordinary but for Professor Amy-Jill Levine from Vanderbilt University (USA), her two positions are intrinsically tied.

On June 23 Professor Levine will join (via video conferencing technology) with three other diverse panelists to present at the BBI-ACBC 11<sup>th</sup> National eConference, titled 'Religion: Catalyst for Violence or Peace? Probing the Abrahamic Traditions for Answers'. Her talk will be focused on the topic 'Jewish Dialogue with Christians and Muslims: Neighbours or Strangers, Reconciliation or Respect?'

We caught up with Professor Levine to find out a little bit more about her specialised areas of study and how the upcoming eConference relates to the Jewish tradition.

### **You are both professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt, how do these two areas complement each other?**

The New Testament is part of Jewish studies, for several reasons: the majority of its major figures – Jesus, Mary and Joseph, James and John, Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha, etc. – are all Jews; the text speaks directly about 'Jews'; Jewish history has been substantially impacted by select, and often negative, Christian interpretation of the New Testament's references to Jews.

To ignore the New Testament is to leave a gap in Jewish history. Similarly, to ignore Jewish history – the historical context in which the materials in the New Testament took shape – risks misunderstanding of what the New Testament says.

### **What does the Jewish tradition share with the other two Abrahamic traditions?**

While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all speak of Abraham, we understand the patriarch through such different lenses –Rabbinic literature, the New Testament, the Qu'ran – that even the term 'Abrahamic traditions' may be at best less an historically and theologically accurate term than a rhetorical effort at inter-religious cooperation.

We have had a number of years of speaking about our similarities; the more difficult conversation is to address our differences. Dialogue should not require the sacrificing of our particular traditions on the altar of interfaith sensitivity.

### **Your profile states that you have a commitment to eliminating anti-Jewish, sexist, and homophobic theologies. How do you achieve this mission?**

I begin by recognizing that all people are in the image and likeness of the divine, and that most of the people who express hurtful statements are either ignorant of the harm their words cause, or they are not fully informed about issues concerning religion, gender, and sexuality, or they are trying to be faithful to their own understandings of their Scripture and tradition. Then we have conversations about what the texts say, and how they have been interpreted over time. My focus is on not just historical information, but also on personal and pastoral concerns.

## **How do current global conflicts affect public opinion about the Jewish religion?**

The issue is less about the Jewish 'religion' than the Jewish people. Most non-Jews know very little about the Jewish religion in terms of Jewish traditions, rituals, sacred texts, theology. Most non-Jews do not realize that Jews are not just a religion but also a people, as the Irish and the Greeks are a people, with a homeland and a sense of common origins, languages, foods, art-forms, etc. And many non-Jews will criticize the State of Israel for not living up to biblical values, a standard to which they hold no other nation.

Today, old, false, and toxic stereotypes about Jews and Judaism are on the rise. From Eastern Europe to Asia, and from America to Australia, claims surface that Jews have an international conspiracy to corner global economics to assertions that we use children's blood to bake matzoh. Zionism – the aspiration of Jews for a homeland – gets reduced to settler colonialism and labeled racism, when the national aspirations of other groups are hailed as liberation movements.

Given the negative views of Jews and Judaism carried from the earliest New Testament interpretations to the present, if not carried in the New Testament itself, the infection of anti-Judaism is present throughout Western history. The symptoms continue to appear, and in our global environment, the infection continues to spread within and beyond New Testament readers.

## **How have historical conflicts shaped the culture of the Jewish people and their religion?**

Historical conflicts shape all religions, since all religions exist within history and in relation to other religious communities. Because Jews are not simply a religion but also a people, we are particularly attentive to our history, from our stories of slavery in Egypt to the destruction of our Temple first by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C.E and then by the Romans in 70 C.E., to curtailment of rights by Christian and Muslim states, massacres by Crusaders, expulsions from England, Spain and Portugal, pogroms in Eastern Europe, the Shoah, the expulsion from Arab lands of close to a million Jews in

the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel, and now claims that the State of Israel, the one Jewish state in the world, has no right to exist.

Nor should we forget how interreligious/intercommunal exchange has also shaped the Jewish people—from engagement with Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman culture in Antiquity to the Convivencia in Spain to the role of Nostra Aetate and the programs in its wake.

### **Do you think there is a difference between the anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes and sentiments?**

Judaism is a religion; Jews are a people; and Israel is a nation-state. What exactly then do we mean by being ‘anti-Jewish’? Do we hate the people? The traditions? The history? And what do we mean by ‘anti-Israel’? Do we think the state should not exist? Are we critical of some of its policies?

Some people have concluded that the New Testament is anti-Jewish, and certainly much of its interpretation has been, but much of this interpretive tradition, such as the claim that all Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus, has nothing to do with the State of Israel.

If someone concludes that the Jewish people, of all the people in the world, are the one group to be denied autonomy in their own homeland, then an anti-Israel view could bleed over into something anti-Jewish. If someone criticizes the policies of the present State of Israel for its settlement expansion, the statements by some cabinet members against there being a Palestinian state, or the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim statements some officials have made, such critique I take to be true to the Jewish tradition, which demands the pursuit of justice.

### **Professor Amy-Jill Levine**

Professor Amy-Jill Levine is Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies, and Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Science, USA. Read more about Amy-Jill Levine here: <http://www.bbi.catholic.edu.au/econferences/Amy-Jill-Levine>