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The courtship of interfaith relations

by Tom Roberts

CHRISTIANS & JEWS -- FAITH TO FAITH: TRAGIC HISTORY, PROMISING PRESENT, FRAGILE FUTURE

By Rabbi James Rudin

Published by Jewish Lights Publishing, \$24.99

‘Christians and Jews.’ Those three words alone recall unimaginable human suffering, yet contain reassuring potential for deep common cause. No other two religions have quite the same shared stake in the Almighty, nor in the murderous hatred that can envelop siblings.

The last century holds the markers of that polarity: images of the Shoah -- Christian Germany’s deliberate attempt to eliminate Jews -- and images of a pope, who described Christians and Jews as brothers in faith, visiting a synagogue and inserting a prayer in the Western Wall.

For reassurance that the rawest hurts can heal we have Rabbi James Rudin’s *Christians & Jews*, and Cokie and Steve Roberts’ *Our Haggadah*. Both witness the fact that the healing takes place not in pulpit discourses about love but in the real work of humans gathered faith-to-faith and face -to-face.

Rudin is singularly qualified to assemble an overview of Christian and Jewish relations. He has been a personal witness to so much that has occurred in interreligious matters since the late 1960s. That’s when he began working with the American Jewish Committee, as its national interreligious affairs director, a role he continues to fill in a modified way since his retirement in 2000.

He has written a great deal and is highly knowledgeable. He knows St. John Chrysostom’s ‘Eight Homilies Against the Jews,’ which provided grist for the Nazis and a theological underpinning for the charge of deicide. He is equally conversant with *Nostra Aetate*, the 1965 Second Vatican Council document in which the church’s bishops ‘overwhelmingly repudiated the teaching of Jewish ‘guilt’ for

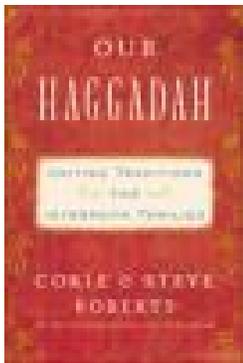
the death of Jesus and implicitly reputed the deicide charge that Jews were "Christ killers." ?

Nostra Aetate was hardly a foregone conclusion. It met resistance from conservative and Middle Eastern bishops. Rudin credits two Americans at the council, Cardinals Richard Cushing of Boston and Francis Spellman of New York, with pushing the document over the top. "They threw their influence, charisma and leadership into the Vatican council deliberations by urging their fellow bishops to adopt strong positive statements on the church's relationship to Jews," writes Rudin.

The sweep of Rudin's work is as impressive as it is tightly and accessibly told. Rudin, however, is wary of claiming success in Christian-Jewish relations. He notes that Pope Benedict XVI revived a version of the pre-Vatican II Good Friday prayer. The latest version, while eliminating the most offensive language, returns to a plea for the conversion of Jews ("that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Savior of all men") as an alternative to a post-Vatican II prayer that asks of God that "the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption." He notes Benedict's reinstatement of a previously excommunicated bishop who was then discovered to be a Holocaust denier.

If interfaith relations are a sincere courtship, it's not so different from people who fall in love first and figure out the religious entanglements later. Welcome to an increasingly plural world.

Steve and Cokie Roberts (no relation to this writer) in 2001 wrote *From This Day Forward* about the intricacies of being married with two children, two religions and two high-powered journalism careers.



OUR HAGGADAH: UNITING TRADITIONS FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

By Cokie and Steve Roberts

Published by HarperCollins, \$19.99

In *Our Haggadah*, they turn their highly personal brand of storytelling to the celebration of an annual Seder. (Haggadah is the text that guides the ritual meal at Passover.) Some religious professionals on either side of this divide -- he's Jewish, she's Catholic -- may wince for at least two reasons. First, the professionals are no longer in control of the ritual, and, second, there exists the understandable fear that the rituals will be compromised.

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Fair enough, but it's also fair to say that such arguments are but a faint echo of the objections to *Nostra Aetate*, and they were not only about its accommodation of Judaism.



The story of the Roberts' Seders is, in some respects, as American

as it is Jewish. A rabbi with whom I have had extended conversations once remarked that our meetings were historic in the sense that they were possible only because we live in the 21st century in America in the post-Vatican II era. The same might be said of Seders that gather Jews, Christians, those of other faiths and those who claim no faith.

Interfaith couples have become such a part of the American Jewish experience, writes Steve, a former *New York Times* reporter, that some synagogues now conduct organized programs of outreach to such couples. But much of Jewish life, he says, "happens at home ... not in a synagogue, and for many interfaith couples, a Seder is the perfect way to touch and taste a Jewish ritual without joining a congregation or contributing to a building fund."

It was also a way, in his case, to connect with a tradition that he had not experienced growing up in a nonobservant Jewish household.

After 40 years of running Seders in their Bethesda, Md., home, he writes: "Be not afraid. You can do it. Each Seder is the same, but also different. We all infuse the event with our own styles and personalities. Things happen and somehow they become a tradition."

Over 40 years, the Roberts' Haggadah has undergone change and updating. Their recounting of the journey into interfaith ritual is a rich and warm description of children's tales, arguments, joyous moments and stains from spilled wine that come only when family and friends gather around a table and the trust builds over years.

Under it all is an affirmation and transfer to new generations of an essential religious experience: the passage from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light.

In one of many little anecdotes set apart from the text in boxes throughout the book, a man explains overcoming his fear of leading a Seder for the first time. "I realized that there had probably been many scenes like ours around the country. I'm not sure of the significance of this. But I do think that anything that helps make Judaism a positive experience for two young Jewish girls can't be all that bad -- even if it is a Protestant dad who's trying his best."

Cokie, the noted television and radio journalist, was actually the force behind the tradition. She felt that both religions should be honored in her home. After experiencing Seders at the homes of others, she decided that it should be part of their young lives as a married couple and soon-to-be parents.

"I went in search of a Haggadah and found one in the shop of the closest temple." It became known as the Blue Book, the foundation of their tradition, but one that underwent significant revision and editing over decades, including the insertion of inclusive language.

While I'm not all that taken with books that seem compelled to include some forms of useful hints at the

end, I make an exception with these two books. Rudin concludes with valuable and time-tested wisdom about how to conduct interfaith meetings and explorations about how to talk with one another without getting bogged down in stalemated theological arguments or attacks on another's faith.

In *Our Haggadah*, two veteran storytellers include songs, recipes and additional sources to take the reader through the evolution of their ritual.

?Kol ha kavod!?

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