

Rabbi finds a kosher Jesus

An American rabbi bridges the gap between Christians and Jews

WHEN an Orthodox Jewish rabbi embraces Jesus as his brother, you know something new is happening in the evolution of religion. When other rabbis pounce on him for heresy, you know it's business as usual: for some folk, nothing in their religious heritage must be allowed to change. In the modern world all religions are exposed to the same tensions between openness and rigidity, exploring the boundaries and hunkering down.

The rabbi in question is Shmuley Boteach, of New Jersey. In a book just published, *Kosher Jesus*, he reclaims Jesus as a Jew through and through, a rabbi who opposed the Roman oppression of his people and was executed for it.

"Kosher" means fitting, appropriate, acceptable and, says Boteach, Jesus' teaching brims with the best of his Jewish tradition. His Sermon on the Mount, for example, takes up and refreshes the message of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). In light of this, Jesus should be seen "as a bridge and not a wedge between Christians and Jews".

Boteach makes clear that he writes of Jesus as a man of his times, not the Jesus transfigured into a deity by the devout imaginings of the church over many centuries.

"We Jews will forever reject the divinity of any man, the single most emphatic prohibition of our Bible," he says. "And we can never accept the messiahship of any personality who died without ushering in the age of physical redemption."

But in recent decades hostility has softened. The Catholic Church has removed anti-Jewish references from its liturgies. Evangelical Christians are ardent in their support of the state of Israel – a mixed blessing, surely, since they see its establishment as a sign that the end of the world is nigh.

This new reality, says Boteach, offers the opportunity for Christians to "rediscover the deep Jewishness and religious commitment of Jesus, while Jews re-examine a lost son who was murdered by a brutal Roman state".

Obviously, though, 2000 years of anti-Semitism promoted by the church in Jesus' name have left deep scars. Many Jewish families refuse to allow the name Jesus to be spoken. A Chicago rabbi condemned Boteach's book on the title alone – *Kosher J*, he called it – without bothering to read it. In Toronto a leading rabbi forbade anyone to buy, read or discuss it. To which Boteach retorted: "America is not Iran and rabbis in the American Jewish community are not the Revolutionary Guard."

Other rabbis, while challenging dubious aspects of his scholarship, see merit in the book. Others again fear that groups such as "Jews for Jesus" may use it to try to win converts to Christianity.

Any initiative to clear ancient roadblocks of prejudice, hate and misunderstanding is to be welcomed – and there have been many in the past half-century, internationally, nationally and locally.

A number of distinguished Jewish scholars have studied the Christian scriptures and thrown light on them from the vantage point of their own religion.

On the Christian side, American Episcopal (Anglican) Bishop John Spong is among those who argue that to understand Jesus properly, it is necessary to place him within his Jewish

frame of reference. His book *This Hebrew Lord* describes how the gospels draw heavily on that framework, and often make little sense apart from it.

In 1974, while vicar of a church in Richmond, Virginia, Spong engaged with the local rabbi in six dialogue sessions arising from that book: three in the synagogue on successive Fridays, followed by a matching three at Spong's Sunday services. The sessions drew crowds, appreciation – and some abuse.

Come Christmas Eve that year, and Spong was surprised to see a leader of the synagogue and his wife present at the midnight service in his church, then go forward to receive the bread and wine of communion, symbols of Jesus' body and blood.

In a chance meeting some days later, the Jewish leader explained his reasoning.

“Was not the communion service of the Christian Church said to have originated in the Last Supper, which was supposed to be a Jewish Passover meal?” Spong agreed that was so.

“Were not all those fellows who attended the Last Supper Jews?” Again Spong agreed.

“Were any of those disciples at that meal baptised or confirmed?” Not to Spong's knowledge.

“Well, we figured that if unbaptised Jews could receive communion from Jesus at the start of the Christian faith, then we could receive it from you in thanksgiving for the dialogue that has brought us close together again.”

To that spirit belongs the future.

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