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The Gospel of Contradiction: An Interview with Mary Gordon

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The Bible is a book, in the material sense, more or less like any other book — it is even an all-time bestseller. But people don't read it the way they read other books: for many readers, this is a text we measure our world against, rather than the text against the world.

Mary Gordon is an accomplished novelist, memoirist, and teacher—most recently the author of *Circling My Mother*, *Pearl*, and a collection of short stories. She is also New York's official State Author. Her latest book, *Reading Jesus*, brings a writer's eye to the narrative focal point of the Christian scriptures, the four Gospels. After a lifetime struggling with her Catholic faith (and her father's abandoned Judaism), Gordon turned to these texts more resolutely than she ever had before. What she found there is messy and contradictory, far from the packaged certainties of radio preachers and the theocratic elements of American politics. But why, she wonders, do people so consistently read them that way?

I spoke with Mary Gordon at the dining room table of her New York City apartment, across the street from Barnard College, where she now teaches English.

What caused you to write a book about Jesus? What readers did you have in mind?

When I started, I was concerned with the prevalence of fundamentalism today. The question that I kept asking myself, which I always try to ask myself as a fiction writer, was: why is this succeeding? It was feeding some appetite. It's easy to say that all fundamentalists are stupid, or wicked, but that didn't seem like enough to me. The Bible registers for them on an emotional level, mainly as fear and rage. I was hoping to open a way of accessing the consolation and the richness that the Gospels offer.

Over the years, I keep coming back to them because they seem to hit more tones and evoke more human possibilities than other texts that I know. Yet that very amplitude makes them difficult. I felt I could understand where the fundamentalists' need comes from, but it seemed to me like that that hunger was being fed with junk food.

I wanted to meet people at the point of their hunger and say, "This other way is difficult, but at the end of the day, it's more satisfying." I was thinking of people who have turned to fundamentalism out of fear, as well as intellectuals who can only see religion as it is in the hands of fundamentalists. I felt that the Bible's complications had been hijacked, and I wanted to open them up.

When interpreting a text, one always brings something to the process. What are you bringing? Is it experience, or reason, or even the Holy Spirit?

One of the things that I wanted to explore in this project is what kind of reading scripture demands. In one sense, it's reading, just like reading the instructions for your DVD player, or *King Lear*, or a graphic novel. But that verb isn't adequate for all these different experiences. This is a text that you may have thought—as I once did—was the Word of God, literally containing your salvation or damnation. It has a whole overlay of your personal history, your anguish, and the culture of the West. It has your coloring book and it has Bellini. It has the horrible ranting of anti-Semites and of people who hate the body, but it also has Oscar Romero and George Herbert. The Gospels carry so much in them, so the reading can never be simple. It is a uniquely complicated experience.

The book is called *Reading Jesus*, but sometimes it feels more like you're arguing with him, in a way that one doesn't see very much in Christian writing. It seems more Jewish.

Well, I'm half Jewish; my father was a Jew. As my mother would say, I come by it honestly. When my father died, I was 7. Everybody said, "It's okay, he's in heaven." At that moment, I pledged myself to never ignore the difficulty in any situation. I thought it was a terrible betrayal. Similarly, it would have been a betrayal of those who have struggled with Jesus and left him for good reasons not to take seriously the parts in the Gospel that would give you a good reason for giving up on it. I had to read the parts of the text that I didn't like. At the end of the book, I am still with Jesus. But I felt that I could only do that with integrity if I fully grappled with the parts of him that I really didn't like at all.

How do you imagine this book will come across to Jewish readers?

My great wish is that Jews who haven't read the Gospels will trust me enough to look at a text which perhaps they've been afraid of or thought has no relevance to them. I'm not trying to convert them. If I had a fantasy, it would be Abraham Joshua Heschel saying to me, "That was very good. I liked that." Of course, he did read the Gospels. But there is a cohort of very high-minded Jews who feel the Gospels are dangerous, and I understand that completely. I hope I can be trustworthy enough to the Jewish community that I can lead them to more familiarity with a very great text.

A number of times you bring up Thomas Jefferson's abridgement of the Gospels. He seems to be someone who, in some ways, you're identifying with

but also making very different choices from.

I don't have the luxury of just snipping out the parts of the Bible I don't like. Whereas I greatly admire Jefferson and the Enlightenment figures for their courage in blasting through so much that was oppressive and corrosive and damaging, there are times when their blind spots are so evident. I don't want to be flippantly rejecting of the Enlightenment, but I am post-Enlightenment in that I am a postmodernist. Postmodernism gets a bad rap, but what it tells us is that all we see depends on where we're standing, which is only one place among many. That is the liberation and the grief of postmodernism—you have to always know that you're not seeing something of possibly enormous importance. To ignore that challenge is to ignore the challenge of our age.

Another outgrowth of the Enlightenment, too, is the historical-critical scholarship on the Gospels. How much was that a part of your process?

Not much. I revere that kind of scholarship, and I looked at it just to make sure I wasn't being a jerk, but it wasn't feeding the appetite I was interested in. It wasn't explaining the ridiculous powers that this character of Jesus has. Why is he such a hit? People went to fundamentalism and to very anti-intellectual forms of spirituality because that kind of scholarship wasn't feeding their hunger. There has to be some way, I hoped, of using reason and our analytical skills while also dealing with resonance, mystery, paradox, and conundrum. Literature, it seems to me, is one way. Words like "beauty," "love," and "consolation" don't really have a place in a scholarly diction, and those are terms that might feed a hunger which is now only being fed by fear and rage.

Did you end up, as a writer yourself, end up identifying with the authors of the Gospels?

I particularly identify with Luke. Although he has moments of being very harsh, it's also the most female text. That Christianity makes a place for maternity and childhood, we owe to Luke. The figure of the Virgin Mary and the early life of Jesus come most through him. Luke also has tenderness and lyricism, including some real poems. I felt a great attachment to that.

Do you think that a text with such unique authority and power through history could be written now? Or does it seem like a kind of creation of which we're no longer capable?

The Gospels weren't really *written* in the way that we think of writing. Luke wasn't a guy who sat down and said, "I think I'll write a Gospel." They really were functions of a community, designed for its specific needs. The whole notion of the individual author, writing for an anonymous audience—which is how one writes today—is not what writing was. I can't imagine a writer having that relationship to a community anymore.

The form of this book covers a number of different genres, including commentary, exegesis, polemic, and memoir. Was there a model in mind?

No, I didn't have any model. The books about Jesus that I went to were either very, very personal and not analytic at all, or very analytic and not personal at all. I was trying to mesh those two voices. I let the stories steer me. Originally, I intended to do some kind of Talmudic interpretation of the whole of the Gospels, but that would take thousands of pages. So I began with asking, "What are the stories that mean the most to me?" And then, "What are the ones that trouble me most?" I really wanted to end it with the coda of the Seven Last Words and the Resurrection, which are beyond reason and, in a way, even beyond language. That was my formal impulse.

Part of the power of the Gospel narratives is that they resist selective reading, though, right? They draw us out of complacency and demand that we read everything and follow everything.

Exactly. On the other hand, giving everything makes you crazy. I guess that's why the story of the washing of Jesus's feet is so important to me. He says, "I want that perfume. I want it right now, and if it means the poor aren't going to get to eat, they're just going to have to wait." That complication of the ascetic is very dear to me. There are moments when luxury is what is needed, when beauty is what is needed. That is why I find Jesus is so compelling—it's never just one thing. He demands of us a very full humanity.

I read your chapter on asceticism a couple of times over. You struggle with how the Gospels talk about happiness. Why does Jesus seem like he doesn't want us to be happy? Why is he not concerned with happiness?

It's a conflict for me. I'm drawn to the ascetic ideal and to an ideal of perfection. But I don't think it works very well in the world. Finally, the central question of everything has to be its relationship to human suffering. Does the ascetic contribute to the alleviation of suffering, or does it contribute to more suffering? When I look at people in my own life who have alleviated my suffering or who have caused my suffering, it tends to be the Prodigal Son-types who have alleviated it.

My great spiritual ideal is John XXIII. He was a big, roly-poly guy who, while vicar in Turkey, signed fake passports for Jews, allowing them to escape. One of my favorite pictures in the world is of him with a wine glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. As pope, he said, "See everything, overlook much, correct a little." He opened up the world in a way ascetics don't. At the same time, the Desert Fathers are very compelling to me, though I don't want my kids to be Desert Fathers. I don't want to be a Desert Father. I want to go to the movies. I want dogs. But if you get rid of the ascetic, everything tends toward a middle ground of comfort and well-being, and you end up with Dr. Phil. I don't want that either.

There are calls on the right and left—both in different ways—for more religious literacy. Are you, like those, urging people to know the Bible better?

It depends on what you mean by "know." Fundamentalists know yards of scripture. They've memorized it. They've clearly read it a lot. But how do they read? I would like people to read better rather than reading more. We have some fantasy that, at some point in history, things were fixed and therefore life was easier. The Gospels are not fixed, they're complicated and contradictory. A lot of the evil in the world comes from not being able to endure the pain of contradiction. Rather than endure it, people act violently, because anger and aggression cut out contradiction. They say, "We've lost something." But reading the Gospels carefully and openly means blasting through a fantasy of stability that never was.

At the end, you insist on remaining in the question rather than the answer. But aren't there times when one needs some kind of answer, when a question isn't enough?

What would the answer be? Jesus was a failure. He died on the cross. He died like a criminal. How can there be an answer to why human beings suffer? There's no good answer to that. There are only a series of bad answers: because it will all be all right after death, or because God knows better. That stinks. The only good answer to the problem of human suffering is, "I don't know." "I hope." "Love unto death." I would rather be in uncertainty than a false fixity, as painful as that is. To have an answer to meaninglessness, or to the mystery of suffering, is a little disgusting. It betrays those who have been betrayed. It betrays the innocent who have suffered. It betrays abused children. It betrays children who were born with horrible diseases and will only suffer and die. It betrays the starving. It betrays abused women. Jesus is a model of someone who suffers grotesquely. His model is of accompaniment rather than comprehension.

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