

# InClass

A spotlight on faculty and their work

**A**MY-JILL LEVINE, WHO teaches New Testament at the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion, knows her ancient languages—Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic. But she speaks modern “Christian,” too. And contemporary “Jewish.”

That is, she is multilingual in interfaith dialogue—a translator perched along the testy frontier of Christian-Jewish relations.

As scholar and lecturer, she’s eager to help people talk beyond misconceptions and mutual incomprehension. She’s also keen to expose anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and other strains of religious hatred, one of today’s fiercest obstacles to world peace.

Word is out about Levine’s fluency. Reporters, pastors, rabbis and high school students keep her phone ringing, anxious to talk about flashpoint Mideast politics, or the sexual politics of Apostle Paul, or the intrigues of *The Da Vinci Code*.

“My agenda is to recover for the church the Jewish Jesus, and instruct the synagogue in what Christians are thinking,” she says. “Christians need to know that Judaism is not ‘legalism.’ And I tell Jews it’s not true that Christians don’t care about good works. If I can stop the demonization of the person on the other side, and get a conversation going, then I’ve done my job.”

Her skills come with the territory: Levine

is a world-acclaimed New Testament scholar, a teacher of future Christian ministers and teachers of biblical studies.

She is also Jewish.

That combination—plus her mastery of the field, a monumental work ethic, and a high-spirited sense of humor—keep her ever in demand as a visiting lecturer in local congregations, as a keynoter at colleges and national forums, and as an expert on CNN specials about Jesus.



Her vitae is 29 pages long (single-spaced). “I’m a Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Protestant divinity school in the buckle of the Bible belt,” she offers as a self-description.

Working at that cultural-religious crossroads has become a calling. At Vanderbilt, Levine is the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Car-

## Common Ground

*On the testy frontier of Christian-Jewish relations, Amy-Jill Levine finds a calling.* By RAY WADDLE, MA’81

penter Professor of New Testament and director of the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender and Sexuality. She is currently editing the 14-volume *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* series. Her essay “Jesus Who?” was included in *Best Jewish Writing 2003*.

She’s also a hit on DVD and tape, having completed three lecture series for the Teaching Company’s “Great Courses” audio and video catalog: “Introduction to the Old Testament,” “Great Figures of the Old Testament,” and “Great Figures of the New Testament.”

She will go anywhere to speak about issues she is passionate about—Christian origins, the Jewish roots of Jesus, formative Judaism, interfaith understanding, social justice, feminism, biblical perspectives on sexuality, and exposure of (willful or unwitting) religious bigotry, including that among religious liberals who otherwise preach tolerance.

“I try to make the text more relevant and interesting and show how deep biblical interpretation can go,” she says. “How do Jesus’ parables work? They’re supposed to be edgy, but today they aren’t. I try to recover Jesus in his Jewish context—a teacher provocative enough that people wanted to follow him, and edgy enough that people wanted to kill him.”

Last year she trekked to the Philippines to lecture to Catholic seminarians, reli-

*continued on page 84*

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DANIEL DUBOIS

**Holdings** *continued from page 21*

of Luciano Pavarotti's Rise to Fame, 2004, Doubleday]," Womack says. "He had arranged for tickets and for Clarise to have a special pass that allowed us into Pavarotti's suite backstage." There, for the better part of an hour, the great singer sat and talked with DeQuasie, holding her hand and murmuring terms of endearment. "He was really a regal presence, attended by his staff. Clarise was his only guest, yet she felt perfectly natural with him," recalls Womack. "In fact, Pavarotti said words to the effect that Clarise was the most genuine person he knew, that she was her own person, with no pretenses, and there was no one else like her."

**In Class** *continued from page 26*

gious educators and lay people about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. During the stint of more than two weeks, she stayed in a Maryknoll convent in Manila. (She went as representative of the Catholic Biblical Association of America.) Evidently, she bonded with her audiences.

"At the end of her last lecture, instead of the usual words of gratitude, I decided to ask the audience to sing the Filipino liturgical song 'Hindi Kita Malilimutan,'" says Victor R. Salanga, president of the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines. "As soon as the audience began singing, A.-J. removed her shoes, sat comfortably on the stage floor and listened. At the song's end, I think there were tears in her eyes. I also sensed the same tears in the audience's. It was, I think, the best image of a conversation between Jews, whom A.-J. represented, and Catholics."

Lately, she has added a new venue to her long list of appearances—prison. For the first time, in fall 2005, she taught her seminar on the Gospel of Matthew at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, a Tennessee state prison in Nashville. A dozen divinity students make the weekly drive there, where they are joined by nine inmates.

She calls the experimental Riverbend class a rewarding experience.

"It's very helpful for the divinity students who are studying to be ministers to work pastorally with people who have a take on,

A little over a year later, DeQuasie died. She donated her body to medical research and later, according to her wishes, her ashes were sprinkled in the yard of Evins' home at McKendree Village. Her collection of Pavarotti memorabilia now sits in 22 boxes in the Library Annex, waiting to be cataloged. "This is the hardest kind of collection to process because you have to go through each box and all the items individually," says Kathleen Smith, associate university archivist. "It's a treasure waiting to be mined—we just don't have the resources to process it yet."

When it is, the tale of the Vanderbilt librarian and the Italian tenor will provide a happy ending for anyone researching opera, Pavarot-

ti, or that memorable time in the late 20th century when an opera singer was more popular than most rock stars. And, if it is true that collections are as much about the collector as they are about the items collected, the Clarise DeQuasie Luciano Pavarotti Collection will also shed light on another life and career—one perhaps not as illustrious as Pavarotti's, but one as richly enjoyed and generously shared with others in its own quiet way.

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*Angela Fox writes feature articles about the arts and travel from her Nashville home.*

say, forgiveness, or hope, or community that is extremely different from those of the rest of us, and that's what's happening here," she says.

Harmon Wray, a Divinity School adjunct professor who co-teaches the Riverbend course with Levine, says she treats the inmates with sensitivity and respect.

"She is with them the way she is with the divinity students," says Wray, a longtime activist in prison and justice issues. "She looks for ways to make the material relevant, and she affirms what kernel of creativity and truth she finds among the students, and she pushes for more."

An Orthodox synagogue member teaching Jesus at a mostly Christian theological school sounds unlikely neither to Vanderbilt nor to Levine.

"She has a real gift," says James Hudnut-Beumler, dean of the Divinity School, "for working with people who want to be Christian ministers, especially around two topics—the issue of what the gospels really say, and on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It's a very valuable gift to bring to Vanderbilt, given Vanderbilt's long-standing commitment to the validity of both religious traditions."

Studying the New Testament, Levine says, "makes me a better Jew."

"It recovers a part of my history that the synagogue didn't keep," she says. "It contains some very good Jewish parables. And I find the New Testament extremely informative

about the social freedoms Jewish women had at the time. They owned their own homes, they traveled freely. They had use of their own funds. They worshiped in synagogues and the Jerusalem temple.

"And Jesus is a quite splendid Jewish teacher. I find much of what he says about the kingdom of God compelling. What would society look like if people actually took care of each other? If we did forgive debts? If we recognized that we are all children of God?"

"I just don't worship the messenger."

Levine has been on the case—pondering the complicated co-existence of Judaism and Christianity—since her girlhood days in New England. Growing up outside New Bedford, Mass., she was raised in a Jewish household in a Portuguese Catholic neighborhood. Her friends were Catholic, and she relished the invitations to the many feast-day celebrations, tree trimmings and Easter egg hunts.

The surrounding Catholicism could also occasion a young Jewish girl's wild surmises about the meaning of it all. In her introduction to *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, Levine recounts some early musings about another Jewish girl, Mary the mother of Jesus.

"The Virgin Mary made me nervous. When I was a child growing up in a predominantly Roman Catholic town in Massachusetts, my friends informed me that Jesus would return the same way he had come before—that is, a Jewish virgin would be his mother. Being the only Jewish virgin in the

neighborhood, I might therefore become the messiah's mother.

"Consequently, during much of second grade, I was absolutely petrified that an angel would appear in my bedroom, say, 'Hail, Amy-Jill,' and tell me I was going to be pregnant."

Soon, however, the rich religious pluralism of her grade-school years took a difficult turn when she was confronted by a kid on the school bus.

"You killed our Lord," a girl said to her.

Levine recalls: "I had never heard that before. I took it personally. I couldn't figure out how this beautiful Christian tradition could say such horrible things about me. I started asking questions."

So began a line of inquiry that carries forward to this day—her attempt to get to the heart of religious meaning and unpack misconceptions and prejudices, all while honoring the integrity of historical faiths.

Lately, she has been outspokenly critical of anti-Jewish interpretations—sometimes indirect or unintended—in liberationist Christian or other church publications, the habit of exalting Jesus by denigrating the Judaism of his time. "As long as Jesus is divorced from Judaism and Judaism is portrayed as the evil side of religion, there is no hope for peace," she says.

Levine has confronted publishers and other ecclesiastical gatekeepers bluntly for tolerating official materials that casually or

new and different Deity than the one revealed in Torah and worshiped in the Synagogue. This is the liberation-theological spin on that old canard of the Old Testament 'god of wrath' versus the New Testament 'God of love.' The false god is now the 'god' (lowercase g) of Pharisaic Judaism or the god of the Jewish tradition."

It's not a new problem; anti-Semitic readings of scripture have persisted for centuries, she notes. But world-scale terrorism has turned religious hatred into a recruiting tool and selling point, and it exists in subtle ways even among preachers of interfaith virtues. It's become everybody's problem, she says.

What, then, is to be done?

"First, Christianity—its scriptures, theologies, liturgies, saints, everything—is on the whole splendid," says Levine. "Thus, Christians should learn how to celebrate the glories of their own tradition without having to use Judaism as a negative foil. And, since Christianity—like Judaism, Islam and all other religions—has certain aspects that are less positive (aspects manifested in scripture, in history, in theology, etc.), then Christians need to acknowledge these points as well. Rather than blame 'the Jews' or 'the rabbis' for problems in scripture, Christians might recognize that the material is in their canon, take responsibility for it, and so find means other than anti-Semitic invention for addressing it."

## World-scale terrorism has turned religious hatred into a recruiting tool and selling point, and it exists in subtle ways even among preachers of interfaith virtues. It's become everybody's problem.

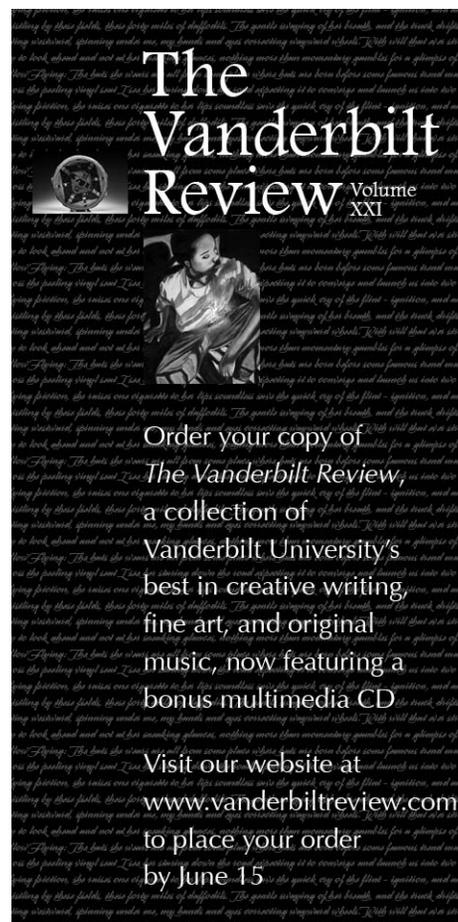
naively condemn first-century Judaism as oppressive, narrow-minded and anti-female.

"It's sloppy scholarship based on a false construct of Judaism, which leads to anti-Semitism, and liberals would be appalled if they knew they were doing that," she says. "Jesus was not—contrary to stereotype—the only Jewish teacher of the time who treated women with respect."

In a recent address she declared, "Worst of all is the assertion that Jesus introduces a

She says Jews, too, need to study Christianity more diligently and learn about the diversity of the Christian community—and do "remedial work" about their own Jewish religious traditions.

Are church and synagogue destined to remain on separate spiritual and political parallel tracks, always flirting with mutual alienation or hostility? The solution, Levine says, is finally a matter of belief and ethical action—mutual respect and generosity of



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spirit under the one God:

"If we just look with our human eyes, we see separation. But if we look at those tracks on the horizon—if we look with God's eyes—then we see that the tracks meet. Jesus and his followers were all Jews; in the far past, there was no break between Judaism and Christianity. But history and hate have intervened. If we look to that other horizon, that future time, those tracks meet again. For we are all traveling in the same direction, with the same destination of love of God and love of neighbor."

A.-J. Levine embraces the roles of interfaith advocate and Bible teacher with energy and hope, not discouragement, in an era bent on polarization and violence. Says her boss, Dean Hudnut-Beumler: "She's turned a lifetime quest to the best possible advantage for both Jews and Christians."

*Ray Waddle, MA'81, is a Nashville-based writer and author of Against the Grain: Unconventional Wisdom from Ecclesiastes.*