

Christianity Through Jewish Eyes: Past Perspectives and Contemporary Statements

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Good evening, everyone. Thank you all for taking the time to be here tonight. It is a great honor to have been invited to deliver the annual Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Jerusalem Lecture. Before I begin, I want to thank Fr. John Pawlikowski for his introduction. Fr. Pawlikowski is a personal role model of mine, and he also happens to be my predecessor in directing the Catholic-Jewish Studies program at CTU's Cardinal Bernardin Center. I also want to say a heartfelt thank you to Cardinal Cupich, for his gracious words of introduction, and thank our hosts at DePaul University, and in particular I want to say thank you to President Gabriel Esteban for his words of welcome. Finally, to Fr. Thomas Baima, Barbara Kantrow, Dan Olsen, and to so many others, who have committed themselves to organizing tonight's lecture and to making tonight's event a success: I want to note that they, and the many sponsors of this lecture whom they represent—the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Jewish United Fund, the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, the American Jewish Committee, and the Chicago Board of Rabbis—they are models of something very special that we have here in this great city, where major Jewish and Christian organizations work together in friendship to bring our communities together. The very organization of this event was an act of the most meaningful kind of dialogue, the kind that is expressed in collaborative action.

In my work as a professor of Jewish Studies at Catholic Theological Union, and in my experience teaching at synagogues in a variety of Jewish communities, I have noticed that Jews and Christians tend to speak about their faiths in remarkably similar ways. They speak of the centrality of their faith in their personal lives, and of the challenges in thinking about how

traditions can accommodate a rapidly changing world while preserving the integrity of their heritage. I also find myself having remarkably similar conversations with Jews and Christians about the importance of biblical history, and about how learning this history can help to shape a Jew's or a Christian's self-understanding.

While I find many similarities between how Jews and Christians speak about themselves as people of faith, I also find that there is a striking difference in how Jews and Christians speak about one another. When I teach about early Jewish history and literature to Jewish audiences, Christianity almost never comes up. But when I speak about early Jewish history and literature to Christian audiences, Christianity almost always comes up. After noticing this trend, I have begun to ask my Jewish students questions about Christianity to get a sense of how they relate to the Christian religion. I begin by asking them whether they think Christianity has anything at all to do with Judaism, both in the context of early Judaism, and in the context of modern times. Is there any relationship, I like to ask, between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism? And more broadly, does Judaism have to contend with Christianity? The most common answer that I receive from these students is that Judaism has little relationship with Christianity, and Judaism has almost nothing to say about Christianity. The Torah, the Pentateuch, along with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, predates the rise of Christianity, and the authoritative books of law that the rabbis produced beginning in the second century, books which Jews have expounded upon and have continued to study all the way up to modern times—the Mishnah, and its two commentaries, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Babylonian Talmud—all of these authoritative Jewish scriptures and legal texts have nothing to say about Christianity and Christians. My students presuppose that rabbinic legal texts do not define Judaism in relation to Christianity, and that Christianity is virtually irrelevant to Judaism and to Jewish self-understanding. Some have

also noted that most Jewish religious leaders have never had to contend with Christian scriptures and theology. Christians, on the other hand, have always had to contend with Judaism, and tend to define their religion in contrasting terms to what Judaism was thought to have stood for. Christian theological frameworks are sometimes based, therefore, on artificial binaries that demarcate hard lines between Christianity and Judaism, lines that emphasize the universalist and ethical focal points of Christianity, which stand in imminent tension with the particularism and legalism of the Jewish people. And Jews, this thinking goes, were never that much interested in Christians and Christianity.

While my Jewish students are partially correct that Jews have not contended with Christianity in the same way that Christians have contended with Judaism over the past two millennia, and that some Christian theologians have problematically defined Christianity as a religion that, from its earliest origins, has operated against and not within Judaism, the story of how Jews and Christians have related to one another is far more complex than most of my students realize. There is, in fact, a substantial amount of Jewish literature that was produced in the medieval and modern periods on the topic of Christianity. These texts were written by rabbinic authorities who were not seeking to define Judaism in relation to Christianity, but were critically thinking about how Jews should relate to Christianity. And in order to address this subject, these Jews needed to think about what Christianity actually is. At the heart of this rabbinic conversation was a theological debate: should Christianity be viewed as a monotheistic religion, a religion that serves the same God as the Jews, and that shares common beliefs and values about God and about creation, good and evil, reward and punishment, and sin and salvation?

The question of the status of Christianity in Jewish law and thought had both theological and pragmatic ramifications. On the one hand, Jews struggled with how to relate to a religion that shares so much with Judaism, and yet had caused Jews to suffer so profoundly, particularly during the Crusades and the Inquisition, and had espoused a teaching of contempt which gave way to the notion that Jews were societal pariahs. There were also practical considerations that had to be considered. The early rabbis had placed prohibitions on drinking the wine of pagan non-Jews, and on deriving monetary benefit from their wine.¹ These prohibitions were based on two concerns. The first was that the wine of non-Jews could have been used for idolatrous purposes, and the second was that drinking the wine of pagan gentiles would potentially lead to inappropriate social interactions and possibly to assimilation. Some rabbinic authorities in the medieval period went out of their way to argue that Christianity was not an idolatrous religion, and that the restrictions placed on deriving benefit from the wine of Christians should therefore be relaxed. Later rabbinic authorities would make similar arguments, based on the notion that Christians believe in a single God that created the world.²

Yet other prominent rabbinic authorities who lived in the medieval period held more negative views towards Christianity. The position of the twelfth century Jewish philosopher and halakhist Moses Maimonides, for instance, held that Christianity was a polytheistic religion, due to its adherence to the notion of the Trinity and the incarnation, as well as its use of iconography. But Maimonides' position on Christianity is complex: He also notes that, because Christianity

¹ b. Avodah Zarah 2b, 22a; b. Bava Kama 113b; b. Bava Metzia 27a.

² On this subject, see David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); David Freidenreich, "Conceptions of Gentiles in Halakhic Literature From Christian Spain," Association for Jewish Studies, 44th Annual Conference, Dec 2012, United States, online at https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs00797215/PDF/Freidenreich_Conceptions_of_Gentiles_in_Halakhic_Literature_from_Christian_Spain.pdf.

derives from Judaism, and, since Christians hold the Jewish scriptures to be authoritative, Christians effectively disseminate Torah teachings into the world.³

As scholars have recently shown, most Jewish leaders living in the medieval period bore predominantly negative attitudes towards Christianity, with only a few exceptions.⁴ But in the 18th century, as the spread of the Enlightenment gave rise to universalist thought and lent new vocabulary to both Christian and Jewish theologians, some Jewish attitudes towards Christianity began to pivot and a more positive interest in Christianity and its teachings began to emerge. Ironically, the reason for this pivot has to do with the rising secularization of Europe at this time. The Enlightenment espoused the idea that individualism and rationality should guide societies towards the inevitable progress which the study of science and philosophy would yield. The spreading emphasis on individualism in the 18th century gave way to a seemingly contradictory interest in the notion of universalism: rather than imagining societies that were structured around a tiered pyramid system comprising a very few religious and political authorities at the top and an increasingly large base of subjects towards the bottom, people began to view the world as a network of systems which offered all people, at every caste level, the opportunity to increase their rational and philosophical understanding of the world.

While some intellectuals at this time began to challenge the Church's powerful hold on European kingdoms, others justified it on the basis that at its core, Christianity was a universalist religion that invited all people, however marginalized, to actively participate in its faith community. Soon this perspective would be coupled with the belief that all people would be saved in the end-time, regardless of their religious affiliation. These doctrines would become

³ On Maimonides' attitude towards Christianity, see Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 66–67.

⁴ Daniel Lasker, "Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in Light of Mass Conversion to Christianity," in *Polemical Encounters: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Iberia and Beyond*, eds. Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019) 103–116.

embodied in the late 18th century in the Universalist Church of America, and later, in Unitarian Universalism. And here is where the changing Jewish attitudes towards Christianity come in. Christian theological writings which focused on the theme of universalism espoused a very problematic implication about Judaism: Christian universalism suggested that Judaism was mired in particularism, that Judaism was a religion that was stuck in time, and that Judaism lacked the proper mechanisms to advance itself towards the superior model of universalism. Jesus, and by extensions all Christians, offered liberation from the Jewish religion, which emphasized legalism rather than ethical universalism. Unsurprisingly, many Jews who admired the values of the Enlightenment resisted the ways in which their religion was upheld as a negative contrast to its teachings.

It would not be long before Jews began to actively confront the false binary of Christian universalism versus Jewish particularism in their writings. Orthodox Jews and members of the nascent Reform movement would soon contend that Judaism emphasizes the universal, and that the care for all of humankind is its central tenet. Alongside this claim was the implication that Jews and Christians shared common goals and could work together as partners towards these goals. Abraham Geiger, credited today with being the father of the Jewish Reform movement, devoted years of work to studying the Jewish origins of Christianity and arguing for the Jewishness of Jesus. Even more remarkably, the 18th century Rabbinic scholar Rabbi Jacob Emden praised Christianity by describing it as "a gathering [or Church], [existing] for the sake of heaven, [and a religion] that will ultimately continue to exist."⁵ Emden's position was most certainly not an expression of support for Geiger and his Reform contemporaries. It was more

⁵ See Rabbi Yaakov Emden's letter to the Council of Four Lands, which he later published as an appendix to his *Seder Olam Rabbah Vezuta* in 1757. Cf. Harvey Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee: A New Look at the Jewishness of Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985) 15.

likely an attempt to ally with the Church in the face of increasing secularism that was sweeping through Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment. But Emden's view was also the natural and organic extension of a precedent that had long been established in Jewish writings which presented Christianity as a sibling religion that shared principles with Judaism, principles that Christians learned from the Jews, and not despite the Jews. This precedent must be taken into account when looking at recent developments in Jewish-Christian relations, particularly when it comes to Jewish statements on Christianity.

In fact, over the past fifty years, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council's publication of *Nostra Aetate*, and the astonishing systemic change within the Catholic Church in its official attitude towards Judaism and the Jewish people, a number of prominent and observant Jewish leaders have committed themselves to Jewish-Christian dialogue. This involvement has not only come from individuals acting independently, but from major Jewish organizations in the United States: The Orthodox Union and the Rabbinic Council of America. Both organizations have been involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue as members of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations since the 1960s. This organization, known by its acronym, IJCIC, was established as a means for Jewish representatives to interact directly with the Vatican. Still, even with institutional engagement in Jewish-Catholic dialogue that was technically pursued on behalf of the broader Jewish community, most American Jews were—and are—unaware of *Nostra Aetate* and its significance, and also unaware of the personal relationships that the Vatican has nurtured with Jewish communal leaders over the past fifty years.

Until only about ten years ago, many practicing Jews were not only unaware of the relationship between the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America with the Vatican, but they openly rejected the very notion of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Some of these

Jews were deeply influenced by a lecture given by one of the most pre-eminent rabbis in the second half of the 20th century, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Soloveitchik delivered this lecture in 1964, at the Mid-Winter Conference of the Rabbinical Council, and his talk was later expanded into an article and published in a journal called *Tradition*. Entitled “Confrontation,” Soloveitchik argued that Jewish resistance to overtures of dialogue was reasonable, since the relationship between Jews and Christians could never be equal or truly mutual. Instead, such dialogue was destined to be a meeting between what Soloveitchik referred to as the “community of the few” and the “community of the many.”⁶ Rabbi Soloveitchik also held that faith affirmations of any monotheistic believer are unable to be fully communicated to members of another faith community, which means that dialogue can never be fully actualized, if it asks one to fully share his or her convictions of faith.

Two powerful reasons to actively engage in dialogue began to emerge from within the Jewish community in the early 1990s. The first reason was that the atrocities of the Shoah, the Holocaust, while growing ever dimmer as the generation of survivors began to age, were believed by many Jews to be rooted in ancient theological and racial anti-Semitism that was, at times, actively fostered by the Church and the deployers of her mission. The second was a less reactionary motivation, which recognized that instead of viewing dialogue as something that Jews might bestow upon Christians, perhaps to reckon with and to partially absolve them of the Church’s past sins, Jews could also view themselves as the beneficiaries of dialogue. Jewish leaders thus began to endorse Jewish-Christian dialogue as an activity that could offer mutual benefits, even while acknowledging that the relationship between Jews and Christians, and Judaism and Christianity, has never been one with an even playing field.

⁶ Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6.2 (1964) 5–29, at 21–22.

The work of Jewish-Christian dialogue finally came into the public eye in the early 2000s, following Pope John Paul II's extraordinary visit to Israel in March of 2000, which was a turning point for Jewish-Christian dialogue. John Paul II's visit to Israel made the Church's efforts towards reconciliation with the Jews publicly known on a global scale, and his visit affirmed the fact that the Church no longer espoused a theological objection to the Jewish establishment of a sovereign government in their homeland. It was at this point that Jewish leaders, particularly those Jews who welcomed the Pope on his trip to the Holy Land, had to publicly reckon with the fact that the massive efforts made by the Church since 1965 had created a real and lasting shift in its attitude towards Jews and Judaism. Many Jews, in turn, were now ready to engage in dialogue, but had to consider the basis upon which they would publicly explain their reasons for doing so.

Rabbi David Rosen, the current International Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee, was one of the first Jewish communal leaders to take an active step towards engaging in dialogue with Christians not on the basis of a defensive "they need to know more about us so that they don't kill us!" line of reasoning, but on the basis that Jews can benefit in deeply profound ways from dialogue. In a 1997 article, Rosen described his own journey towards this perspective, noting that

In encountering the religious "other," I began to understand that it is in fact idolatrous for any one religion to claim that it can encapsulate the totality of the Divine; and that if the daily encounter with the Divine involves the human encounter—with those created in the Divine Image; then that experience of the Divine in the other is at its most intense

when the other is conscious of the Divine Presence in his [or] her life, and thus the respectful and non-proselytizing encounter is in fact a religious experience in itself.⁷

While this is a fascinating and innovative way to describe the experience of interfaith dialogue, I should note also that many observant Jews, even those who are deeply invested in Jewish-Christian dialogue, would reject Rabbi Rosen's comments, since it implies that truth must be a composite body of tenets which collectively belong to all faith communities, and that practicing Judaism without engaging with other religions puts a Jew into spiritual deficit.

Indeed, the first publicly disseminated written statement made by Jewish leaders on the topic of Jewish-Christian dialogue would occur only three years later, in 2000, shortly after the Pope visited Israel, and this document makes no similar suggestion to the one that Rosen made in 1997. This statement was produced by four academics, two of whom were ordained Rabbis who worked in the field of Jewish studies: Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Rabbi Dr. David Novak, Dr. Peter Ochs, and Rabbi Dr. Michael Signer. These scholars were recruited by an interfaith organization in Baltimore called the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies to address foundational questions regarding Judaism and its relationship with Christianity. The document that they ultimately produced based on this project, known as *Dabru Emet*, was published in the New York Times on the 10th of September in 2000, and was ultimately signed by over two hundred rabbis and leaders who worked in a variety of denominational communities.

Dabru Emet comprised the following eight affirmations: Jews and Christians worship the same God; Jews and Christians seek authority from the same Scriptures; Christians can respect the Jewish claim upon the land of Israel; Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of the

⁷ David Rosen, "Orthodox Judaism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue," https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_rosen.htm#_edn11

Torah; Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon; the differences between Jews and Christians will not be settled until the end-time redemption; a new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice; and finally, Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.⁸

Yet not all Jewish leaders who were invested in Jewish-Christian dialogue endorsed the statement, and some publicly opposed it. Scholars such as Dr. David Berger of Yeshiva University and Dr. Jon Levenson of Harvard University refused to sign the document, and wrote critiques which accused *Dabru Emet* of ignoring fundamental differences between Judaism and Christianity in favor of advancing a simplistic and syncretistic view that absolved Christian theology from being partly responsible for the crimes of the Shoah. As Berger put it, *Dabru Emet* implies that Jews should reassess their view of Christianity in light of Christian reassessments of Judaism. This inclination toward theological reciprocity is fraught with danger...although it is proper to emphasize that Christians “worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth,” it is essential to add that worship of Jesus of Nazareth as a manifestation...of that God constitutes what Jewish law and theology call *avodah zarah*, or foreign worship—at least if done by a Jew. Many Jews died to underscore this point, and the bland assertion that “Christian worship is not a viable choice for Jews” is thoroughly inadequate. Finally, the statement discourages either community from “insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other.” While intended for the laudable purpose of discouraging missionizing, this assertion conveys an uncomfortably relativistic message.⁹

⁸ The full text of *Dabru Emet* is available online at http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_-_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html.

⁹ This paper was presented at the first annual meeting of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR) on October 28, 2002.

For Berger, *Dabru Emet* falls short because it ignores essential differences between Judaism and Christianity, and because it fails to sufficiently acknowledge the extreme suffering of Jews at the hands of Christians. Jon Levenson made a similar point in an article published in *Commentary* aptly entitled “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” noting that

the goal [of documents like *Dabru Emet* have become] reaching an agreement, in the manner of two countries that submit to arbitration in an effort to end longstanding tensions, or of a husband and wife who go to a marriage counselor in hopes of overcoming the points of contention in their relationship. Commonalities are stressed, and differences—the reason, presumably, for entering into dialogue in the first place—are minimized, neglected, or denied altogether. Once this model is adopted, the ultimate objective becomes not just agreement but mutual affirmation; the critical judgments that the religious traditions have historically made upon each other are increasingly presented as merely the tragic fruit of prejudice and misunderstanding.¹⁰

Levenson is clearly objecting to the problematic notion, which he finds implicit in *Dabru Emet*, that foundational theological differences between Judaism and Christianity are too threatening to face, and must therefore be ignored. While Levenson applauds dialogue, he questions the usefulness of the kind of dialogue that does not allow each side to openly articulate the views that distinguish them from their dialogue partners.

At the time that they were written, these critiques garnered support from within the American Jewish community. But the past ten years or so have seen a remarkable change within the Jewish community when it comes to its attitude towards Jewish-Christian dialogue. Such

(http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet__Some_Reservations_about_a_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christi.2719.0.html?)

¹⁰ <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/how-not-to-conduct-jewish-christian-dialogue/>.

dialogue, which once involved a few select Jewish leaders, has now gained significant support in all sectors of the Jewish community.

Today, some of the most active Jewish Catholic dialogue is led, on the Jewish side, by Orthodox Jews. In fact, the second major recent Jewish document on Jewish-Christian dialogue, a statement called *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*, was issued in December of 2015, exactly fifty years after the Nostra Aetate declaration, and it was spearheaded by the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel. This organization was at the time directed by Shlomo Riskin, David Nekrutman, Pesach Wolicki, and Eugene Korn, all Orthodox American rabbis.

Like *Dabru Emet*, *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven* seeks to legitimize Jewish dialogue with Christians, despite the long-damaged relationship between the two religions. To defend its position, the statement cites medieval and modern rabbinic authorities who expressed respect for Christianity, and whose writings are supposedly precursors to present-day Jewish-Christian dialogue: Maimonides, Judah ha-Levi, Jacob Emden, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Shear Yashuv Cohen. *To Do the Will of our Father in Heaven* only briefly cites the writings of these authorities, and does not necessarily do justice to the complexities of their positions. The statement has been criticized, for example, for misrepresenting Moses Maimonides' position on Christianity. According to *To Do the Will of our Father in Heaven*, Maimonides believed that Christianity is the "willed divine outcome and gift to the nations...[God divinely] willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies." This statement does not adequately capture the very complex attitude that Maimonides

held towards Christianity. As I have noted earlier, Maimonides believed that Christianity derives from Judaism, and is not, in his opinion, a partner or a sibling religion to Judaism.¹¹

To Do The Will of Our Father in Heaven likewise cites the 19th century German Jewish scholar, Samson Raphael Hirsch, noting that Hirsch

taught us that Christians have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the God of Heaven and Earth as proclaimed in the Bible, and they acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence.¹²

Again, I am not certain that this description adequately captures Hirsch's attitude towards Christianity, and *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven* seems to gloss over the reality that on the one hand, many major Jewish leaders have been antagonistic to Christianity, and on the other hand, many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, have historically believed, and some continue to believe, that the Jews are a people whose covenant had been wrested away by God, who had grown tired of their continual sinfulness, and that Jews are a people condemned to be cursed and wretched, a people who have perhaps been permitted to survive, but who deplete the gifts offered to them by Christianity and who pose a threat to the wellbeing of Christians. Like *Dabru Emet*, then, *To Do the Will of our Father in Heaven* selectively cites classical Jewish sources which do not confront problematic Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism. On the other hand, this statement recognizes that the historic oppression of the Jewish people is linked to Christian theology, and in that sense, it goes farther than *Dabru Emet*.

The third and most recent major Jewish document on Judaism and Christianity was presented to Pope Francis by representatives of the Conference of European Rabbis, the Chief

¹¹ Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 60–61.

¹² The statement is available online at <http://cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>.

Rabbinate of Israel, and the Rabbinical Council of America in August of 2017. This document, entitled *Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate*, acknowledges the theological differences between Jews and Christians in a way that goes well beyond the statements of *Dabru Emet* and *To Do The Will of Our Father in Heaven*. The differences between these three documents are especially clear when looking at how they each treat the matter of the Shoah, the Holocaust.

All three documents—*Dabru Emet*, *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*, and *Between Jerusalem and Rome*—refer to the controversial question of the degree to which the Church, and Christianity in general, played a role in the atrocities of the Shoah. But each of these three statements approach the Church’s role in fostering the anti-Judaism which led to the Shoah in different ways. The authors of *Dabru Emet* make a hard separation between Nazi anti-Semitism and Christianity, noting that, “without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold, nor could it have been carried out.” And yet, the authors of *Dabru Emet* also assert that “Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians.”

To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven makes stronger accusations against the Catholic Church, and it blurs the lines between the anti-Semitism which led to the Shoah, and the ancient Christian teaching of contempt toward the Jews. According to this document, the Shoah “was the warped climax to centuries of disrespect, oppression and rejection of Jews and the consequent enmity that developed between Jews and Christians. In retrospect, it is clear that the failure to break through this contempt and engage in constructive dialogue for the good of humankind weakened resistance to evil forces of anti-Semitism that engulfed the world in murder and

genocide.” Yet the authors of *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven* also readily acknowledge the remarkable turn-around made by Church leaders in the wake of the Shoah, and they do so more strongly than the authors of *Dabru Emet* by noting that “since the Second Vatican Council, the official teachings of the Catholic Church about Judaism have changed fundamentally and irrevocably.”

The most recent Jewish document produced on Jewish-Christian dialogue, *Between Jerusalem and Rome*, speaks even more strongly about the interplay between Christian anti-Judaism and the Nazis’ project to exterminate the Jews. According to this document, “the Shoah constitutes the historical nadir of the relations between Jews and our non-Jewish neighbors in Europe. Out of the continent nurtured by Christianity for over a millennium, a bitter and evil shoot sprouted forth, murdering six million of our brethren with industrial precision, including one and a half million children. Many of those who participated in this most heinous crime, exterminating entire families and communities, had been nurtured in Christian families and communities.”¹³ But *Between Jerusalem and Rome* also highlights the new page of history that was written in the years following the Shoah, noting that, “with the close of World War II, a new era of peaceful coexistence and acceptance began to emerge in Western European countries, and an era of bridge-building and tolerance took hold in many Christian denominations. Faith communities reevaluated their historical rejections of others, and decades of fruitful interaction and cooperation began.”

The reason why I am going through the trouble of citing these different documents’ statements regarding the Shoah is because they reflect the broader, essential differences between these three texts: *Dabru Emet* seeks to bond Judaism and Christianity together by emphasizing

¹³ *Between Jerusalem and Rome* is accessible online at <https://www.rabbis.org/pdfs/BetweenJerusalemRome.pdf>.

their similarities, but *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven* and *Between Jerusalem and Rome* place increasing responsibility on the Church for the crimes of the Shoah, while also giving the Church increasing credit for working to exorcise anti-Judaism from Church teachings in the years following it. The increased recognition in these documents of the pain which characterized the relationship between Judaism and Christianity for so long, and increased acknowledgment of the courageous moves on the part of the Church towards reparation, suggests that Jewish leaders engaged in dialogue have moved away from focusing only on similarities based on the premise that Jewish-Christian dialogue is theologically fragile and vulnerable to foundational disagreement. Jewish-Christian dialogue has now evolved into a relationship that can readily face differences and the hurt of the past, without compromising the strong bonds that have only recently been forged. Dialogue between Jews and Christians has indeed become sturdier, and more reliably independent, an entity unto itself, whose members have the confidence to articulate their disagreements without worrying that they are threatening the foundations of their friendship. Given this new reality, perhaps Rabbi Soloveitchik, who so opposed Jewish-Christian dialogue in the 1960s, might have reconsidered his position, had he lived long enough to observe the state of Jewish-Christian dialogue today, which allows both sides to be uncompromising and unrelativistic in their theological worldviews.

I have tried to show that, as the roots of dialogue have become more deeply implanted within our respective communities and have begun to yield fruit, Jewish statements on Christianity have become increasingly focused on the insurmountable differences between Judaism and Christianity. I have also tried to show that this is a good thing: it means that the friendship between Jews and Christians is no longer conditional, or dependent on coming to a

certain agreement or common worldview. Our friendship now transcends our foundationally divergent theologies.

But there are also signs of concern which suggest that more work needs to be done, and that we must proactively and intentionally commit ourselves to dialogue, or else we will move backwards. Recent statements by some Church leaders suggest that supersessionism, the notion that Christianity may be read back into the Old Testament, and that the covenant with Israelites was permanently broken and replaced, is still present in the thinking of some Church leaders and their constituents. The reality that this position still prevails among some Catholics raises the most difficult question of all: If true dialogue requires both sides to state their theological differences of opinion, and that facing difference in approaching our scriptures is preferred over ignoring insurmountable difference, then can we allow it to stand within the experience of dialogue? Or is such supersessionism always off limits? Can we ever say to our partner in dialogue, “you have no right to hold this view?” This question is all the more resonant today given our political climate, in which the question of free speech is coming into conflict with profoundly hateful, offensive, and sometimes utterly false statements about the Other.

I find myself holding back from being so open-minded as to allow for extreme supersessionism, since I believe that a non-supersessionist teaching of the Hebrew Bible need not threaten the stability of a healthy Christian theology. In other words, I hope that Christian theologians can affirm Judaism as a living, thriving, and evolving covenantal religion whose scriptures speak directly to Jews, without worrying that in making this affirmation, their own connection to the scriptures is undermined. I am also sensitive to my own subjectivity in selectively determining what kind of differences are acceptable, and which are not. Perhaps it is incumbent upon all of us to actively seek out those who hold views which we deem untenable:

not to change others' minds, but to practice how to engage in dialogue which does not seek to change the other.

The Jews and Christians sitting here in this room tonight, who are actively seeking out dialogue, remain in the minority of their faith communities. While Christian leaders and Jewish leaders now both advocate for active engagement with the Other, many Christians and Jews have approached me to say that in their communities, there has been little trickle-down effect from their leadership to their lay communities on this issue. Some Catholics, particularly those living in South American, African, and Southeast Asian communities where there are few Jews, and where the Catholic Church is growing, have never heard of *Nostra Aetate* and the landmark shift that it represents. Many of them have never even met Jews, and have not encountered Judaism as a living, thriving religion. They, along with others from all over the world, even those living near vibrant Jewish communities, understand 21st century Judaism through the lens of first century Judaism, and don't comprehend the complex layers and varieties of Jewish life as it is lived today. We also have a long way to go when it comes to Eastern Orthodox Christian churches, which have a less developed connection with Jewish leaders, and no document that is equivalent to *Nostra Aetate*.

Jewish leaders committed to dialogue likewise have not sufficiently encouraged their constituents to invest in Jewish-Christian dialogue. While many rabbis today have actively endorsed such dialogue, others have asked me why I bother to engage in dialogue, and why I don't focus primarily on applying my teaching skills to my own community. Other colleagues of mine who have been part of a small cohort of scholars engaged in interfaith dialogue feel the same way: Jewish-Catholic dialogue is no longer necessary. But, as opposed to some of my Jewish friends, who believe that dialogue with Christians is not worth the investment because

Christians will always have contempt for Jews, my friends engaged in Jewish-Catholic dialogue argue the exact opposite: they believe that our main problems are now solved. A colleague once recently remarked to me that “all the work between Jews and Christians is done, and we need to move on.” But I believe that he is wrong. The work has only begun. I’ll demonstrate this point, and close my talk tonight, with an analogy. When the Jesus movement was getting off the ground in the late first and early second century, Christianity was not yet a religion that had separated from Judaism. The Roman Empire viewed the followers of Jesus as partaking in a superstitious and treasonous sect of Judaism, while most Jews believed that these Jesus followers were Jews who had gone astray by following the teachings of a false Messiah. If you look at second century Christian writings by Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, however, you will get the impression that by the second century, Christianity was an entity that had long broken off from the Jewish religion, and that the two communities had no essential relationship with one another, except to serve as contrasts to the other.

While the Church Fathers painted a portrait of Christianity as a self-standing religion which stood in theological opposition to Judaism, the reality on the ground was that most followers of Jesus were still Jewish, and that many of these Jews remained entrenched in their Jewish identities and practices. In fact, we now know that the separation between Judaism and Christianity did not take place until the fourth century, or perhaps even later.¹⁴ It took four centuries for the break between Judaism and Christianity to take place. Whereas in the early centuries of the Common Era literature was being produced that conveyed a hard line between

¹⁴ See, for instance, the work of James D. G. Dunn, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The ways that parted: Jews, Christians, and Jewish-Christians ca. 100-150 CE,” Harvard University, preprint, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10861143>; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Judaism and Christianity, but historically this was not the case, today, statements are being produced that bind Judaism and Christianity to one another in dialogue, but the reality is that most Christians and Jews know little about this literature, and rarely engage with the religious other in dialogue.

It may take another four centuries to concretize a lasting friendship between all Jews and Christians. While it may seem to us in this room that the hard work is already behind us, not all Jews and Christians are as committed to engaging with one another as their community leaders are. It's up to us to be ambassadors of this dialogue, and to "spread the good news." Thank you.