



Dabru Emet': A Jewish Dissent

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Rabbi A. James Rudin, Senior Interreligious Adviser of the American Jewish Committee, explains why he declined to sign 'Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity.'

"Dabru Emet": A Jewish Dissent

By A. James Rudin

More than 170 rabbis and Jewish scholars recently signed a Statement on Christians and Christianity titled "Dabru Emet" (Hebrew meaning "Speak the Truth"). The Baltimore-based Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies provided the impetus for the document.

Just eight paragraphs long, Dabru Emet is an ambitious attempt to present a "thoughtful Jewish response" to the "dramatic and unprecedented shift" in Christian-Jewish relations. When the statement's sponsors asked me to join the other signatories, I refused because the Baltimore statement fails to adequately and accurately address the critical issue of Christianity and the Holocaust.

In 1997 the Interdenominational Group of Catholics and Protestants in Milan, Italy, correctly recognized that the Holocaust is central in all religious encounters. The Italian Christians declared, "The starting point for the question of God today can be no other than Auschwitz, a point behind which there is no return."

And in 1998 Pope John Paul II said, "The crime known as the Shoah (Holocaust) remains an indelible stain on the history of the (20th) century."

The signers of Dabru Emet declared: "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. 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."

A high school English teacher taught me to beware of long sentences filled with "coulds." She urged us to write straightforward declarative sentences.

Unfortunately, my teacher's sage advice was not followed in Dabru Emet. The result is an inadequate and surprisingly diffident description of an undeniable historical reality: Many Christian teachings and actions throughout the centuries prepared the seed bed - the moral, spiritual and intellectual climate - for the rise of genocidal Nazism.

Why didn't the statement's Jewish authors address this significant point with the same accuracy and power that many Christians have done? Why is the United Methodist Church's 1996 General Conference declaration on Christian-Jewish relations clearer and stronger about Christianity and the Holocaust than Dabru Emet?

The UMC asserted: "Especially critical for Christians ... has been the struggle to recognize the horror of the Holocaust as the catastrophic culmination of a long history of anti-Jewish attitudes

and actions in which Christians, and sometimes the Church itself, have been deeply implicated."

And the Milan Interdenominational Christian Group was even stronger: "The Shoah is an event, which happened in modern and Christian Europe, that was planned and executed by baptized persons. Christians cannot escape this fact. They must confront the challenge that here in Europe people tried "to kill God by killing God"s people.""

I did not sign Dabru Emet because of another problematic sentence dealing with the Holocaust: "If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians." I believe this is an inaccurate and dubious assertion.

Christianity was an anathema to many Nazi leaders, and there were attempts to co-opt the authentic Church by creating a Nazi-based Christian puppet church that attracted some clergy and lay people. Of course, the Nazis murdered "inferior" Slavs, including many Polish Catholic priests, as well as Christian intellectuals, the most famous being the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

But the Baltimore statement is misleading at best, and dangerous at worst, because it sets up a moral equivalency between the undeniable Nazi attempt to kill every Jew in the world and an unprovable historical prediction that the same "murderous rage" would be aimed at "Christians" in general. The language is too sweeping and self-assured, and it makes no distinctions about the kind and number of Christians the Nazis might have murdered.

Because the Baltimore statement will be widely read in Christian churches and institutions of higher learning throughout the world, I asked several young Protestant seminarians to study the Holocaust paragraph of Dabru Emet. They unanimously and independently agreed the document sends the message that Jews and Christians were both primary targets of the Nazis. That is simply not so.

Elie Wiesel has wisely noted, "Not every victim of the Nazis was a Jew, but every Jew was a victim."

The troublesome paragraph concludes: "We do not blame them (Christians) for the sins committed by their ancestors." No argument here. But beyond rejecting blame there is need for genuine responsibility on the part of Christian churches to search their past regarding the Holocaust. That specific call is lacking in Dabru Emet.

Fortunately, one religious leader has urged Christians to "examine themselves on the responsibility which they too have for the evils of our time."

His name? Pope John Paul II.

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