



Dabru Emet in Poland – A Personal Account

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A Polish Jewish leader explores the reception of the statement 'Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity' in Poland. He explores the reasons why, in his view, Dabru Emet has had a significant impact on Jewish-Christian relations in Poland.

***Dabru Emet* in Poland**

A Personal Account

Stanisław Krajewski

The Polish translation of *Dabru Emet* (*Dabru Emet*) that I made was published first in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and then reprinted in several other publications.¹

This effort sounds rather modest but several elements deserve to be emphasized, and once they have been demonstrated, people will conclude that the publication of the translation itself is rather noteworthy.

First, let us consider the date. It appeared in September 2000, and was the first, I suppose, printed translation into another language. Why? I guess it was because I was personally so delighted when I saw the declaration, and so convinced of its significance, that I translated it immediately and began negotiations to publish it. I was thrilled because it expressed so well the attitude I had adopted in the Polish dialogue and tried to express in my own conversations with Jews as well as in exchanges with Christians. Namely, Christianity in our era, despite all the differences and despite the burden of history, need not be a threat to us as Jews. Indeed, Jews can begin to overcome resentment and defensive

attitudes towards Christianity. More than this, Christians can be our great ally. This new alliance can be based on deep common roots, despite, “the humanly irreconcilable differences”. In addition, my experience has demonstrated that involvement in the Christian-Jewish dialogue actually helps to be more seriously involved in Judaism.

Let me add that I was most surprised, almost shocked, by one phrase in *Dabru Emet*.

The document uses the term “Jesus Christ”. How could the name Jesus Christ appear in a Jewish document! I had always tried to avoid the term, because it means “Jesus, the Messiah”, which is contrary to my belief. Of course, it seems possible to argue that the Jewish understanding of Messiah and the Christian one differ, so that the contradiction is only apparent. Still, I had avoided the term because of the fear that it would have been too easily misunderstood as an indirect acceptance by me of the Christian understanding of the messianic idea. I knew that the authors of *Dabru Emet* must have had the same feelings, so the fact that they used the name “Jesus Christ” was illuminating. I quickly understood that in such a text the use of the term is most appropriate: it is a corollary to the assumption that we should try to see the partner of dialogue as s/he sees her/himself.

The second noteworthy element of the Polish publication of *Dabru Emet*: the number of copies. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is the Polish daily paper, with the highest circulation. The weekend edition sells half a million copies. This is a lot. I wonder if until today a comparable number of copies have been printed in any other language, except, of course, the original English.

Third, last but not least, the influence of that publication was due not just to the number but also to the highly prestigious character of the paper. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is very much “the” newspaper in Poland, at least as much as is the host paper of the original version, *The New York Times*. Its role can be also compared to that of *Le Monde* in France. The Polish newspaper is even more influential than the leading papers in other countries, primarily because of the position, contacts, and personality of its editor, Adam Michnik. What I mean is that in Poland for an event to be important is, to a considerable extent, to be covered by *Gazeta*. And once *Gazeta* has introduced *Dabru Emet*, it is hard to deny its significance. And the text of *Dabru Emet* together with my commentary occupied a full page.

That commentary² emphasized the importance of *Dabru Emet* and revealed that it was more than just another document. Also, the commentary made a tentative, qualified comparison to *Nostra Aetate*: “I feel that as much as the declaration *Nostra Aetate* both expressed the new teaching and began to influence attitudes of Christians, the statement *Dabru Emet* will help Jews speak well of Christianity, and will enhance the evolution of many.” I found complete understanding and support on the part of Jan Turnau, the newspaper’s religious affairs editor, himself a Catholic with long ecumenical experience. Although apparently few other editors believed it to be such a significant development, it was enough to secure approval for its publication.

Compared to other European countries, the visibility of *Dabru Emet* in Poland is

remarkable. Why? I do think that the personal convictions and attitudes of key individuals in the media, and especially of the heads of religious sections of major newspapers and media are of utmost importance. There is something more: The idea of the declaration, and its authors were American. We, in Poland have much less anti-American resentment than do intellectuals and editors in France, and some other countries, including, I think, Germany. We are also much less in competition with Americans. If I imagine French religious news editors or Jewish intellectuals, I guess how difficult it is for them to overcome the feeling “the Americans are not going to tell us what to think.”

I am not aware of any other East European nation where *Dabru Emet* was presented in a way that could appeal to the public. I helped publish the Ukrainian translation in a Jewish literary annual *Egupets*, but I do not even know whether it has been published in Russia at all.³ It was mentioned in Hungary and some other countries, but it remains unclear to me whether it were noticed.

Arguably, the interest in *Dabru Emet* can be very roughly measured by the number of internet sites where the *Dabru Emet* declaration is mentioned. According to a search made by Altavista, the division into languages is as follows: more than a half is, not surprisingly, in English. Then 18% is in German, and then 6% in Polish and 6% in languages of the former Yugoslavia. French and Spanish have 3% each, Italian and Dutch 2% each. All the others (including Scandinavian languages, Japanese, Korean, and ... Hebrew) – the remaining 5%. To evaluate the seriousness and the depth of those mentions would be a separate task. Other search engines should be used, too. All I can say now is that in

addition to valuable English and German comments there are also good Polish ones.

All the above points show why I have been so proud to have *Dabru Emet* appear in Polish so fast, so visibly, and so prominently. I think this is a credit to the Polish Christian-Jewish dialogue scene, but I do not want to overstate this: the real support for the modern dialogue approach, expressed so well in *Dabru Emet*, has been problematic in Poland, as elsewhere, in many ways. Namely a few support it, some oppose it directly, and the majority ignores it. And, to be sure, despite the extremely influential role of the *Gazeta*, most Poles, including Polish Jews, know nothing about *Dabru Emet*. Apparently, not enough follow-up was present, which probably is due, again, to the relatively small number of those who think *Dabru Emet* has been a major development.

On the Christian side, the positive response came from intellectual Catholic circles and Catholic revivalist groups (for instance, Neokatechumenate). The response of some participants in the dialogue, like Rev. Michael Czajkowski or Zbigniew Nosowski, editor of the monthly *Wi???*, was enthusiastic. It is best expressed by two symposia with the participation of authors of *Dabru Emet*, one in Warsaw in 2001, with David Novak, and the other in Cracow in 2002, with Michael Signer. The first was organized by the monthly *Wi???*, where a discussion of *Dabru Emet* had appeared immediately after the declaration became known, under the title “Spirit comes from Baltimore”.

An unsympathetic Christian response seems to be well expressed by a little known author, Lech Stępniewski, who in a commentary, part of the series of „Right-wing lectures”,⁴ said that if the points made in *Dabru Emet* are not explained in a deeper way what remains for Christians is the Jewish offer “Don’t try to convert us, support the state of Israel, and for this we will not identify Christianity with Nazism”. Tell the truth, adds the author, “make sure this is not all you want”.

In the same vein, among some Catholic theologians the idea immediately appeared that all Jews wanted was some political gain and that no theological issues have been raised by *Dabru Emet*. While it is hard to evaluate the relative strength of various approaches, I guess that many Catholics think this way. I find this strange as it is based on a complete misreading of *Dabru Emet*, which is primarily a theological document. It is understandable only in the light of their general attitude to Jews.

On the Jewish side, *Dabru Emet* met with satisfaction of a couple of Jews who have been deeply involved in the dialogue, but otherwise, the story is similar to other countries. According to Michael Signer, in the USA „the Christian communities welcomed the statement, but it received either little notice or hostility from the Jewish community.”⁵ *Dabru Emet* was briefly noticed but then most Jews, even the readers of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, seem to have forgotten the strangely sounding Hebrew name. Attitudes to the Church are based mostly on resentment and reactions to political news, and to what is happening in nearby churches. No need for general statements on Christianity is felt.

Dabru Emet was written to initiate discussion within the Jewish community. With the exception of some hostile reactions (Neusner, Levenson), “the response from the American Jewish community has been one of silence or indifference.”⁶

No vigorous and wide-spread discussion followed. Only those who had been active in reflecting about Christianity expressed their opinions openly. I feel that personal rivalry has been an important reason for *not* signing the declaration. Some of those who felt “I would write that better”, refused to sign. Some of the Jewish polemics misrepresent the declaration so much that they seem to be based on anger („How come I am not the author?”), not just divergent views.

Furthermore, to my mind, the number of signatures is not as large as it could be. I feel that the search for potential signers was not broad enough. The fact remains that nobody else from Eastern Europe has joined the signatories. Of course, almost nobody from Western Europe has. Why? The reasons varied, from disagreement to lack of contacts with the authors of *Dabru Emet*, to anti-American sentiments. It seems clear that the anti-American bias could hardly be the reason in the East, while it could have been quite essential in the West. If in my part of Europe there had been Jews sufficiently committed to the cause advocated by *Dabru Emet*, they would have found their way.

I still hope that in the future there will be a possibility to sign for the scholars who

feel that their approach to the Jewish-Christian dialogue is expressed, but *not*

necessarily all the details of their positions on various issues.

To me the approach of Jews and Christians to *Dabru Emet*, and by extension to the whole enterprise of the contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue, is a matter of attitude and approach rather than specific opinions, theses, facts. Below, one illustration is given.

A significant polemic emerged after a lecture during the celebration of the Day of Judaism in the Polish Catholic Church. The main events of the sixth Day of Judaism took place on January 16, 2003, in Białystok, and were organized with care, on a high level, with bishops and local notables present. Everything would have been fine, and would have meant a next step in the building of mutual respect, had it not been for a lecture by Rev. Henryk Witczyk, professor at the Catholic University in Lublin, who spoke immediately after Rabbi David Rosen.

I was deeply upset by his lecture which was offered as if the Second Vatican Council never happened. A traditional analysis of St. Paul's words resulted in the thesis that God's mercy for Jews means that they can still convert. It was shocking that this kind of approach, a rejection of the modern style dialogue, was presented precisely on the occasion of the Day of Judaism.

I wrote an article to the prestigious liberal Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*

explaining the problem, Rev. Witczyk wrote back, then I again and he again; the exchange was summed up by Rev. Czajkowski. Here is a summary of the articles.

My original article “Day of the Overcoming of Judaism?”^Z

stressed that many people in the audience, not only Jews, were disturbed by Rev. Witczyk’s address. He modified the text that had been printed, and in response to remarks made earlier by myself and D. Rosen said that converting the Jews was not the purpose. Still, the main point remained: Jews are unfaithful, have ignored the Messiah, and the Jews who have not met Jesus are still in the situation of Saul of Tarsus. This lecture could have been a good introduction to a seminar on St. Paul but it was meant as an address, with no discussion planned to follow, and was directed also to the Jews present there. I felt cheated because there was no time allotted for presentation of other approaches to St. Paul’s legacy.

Furthermore, it seemed that our meeting was chosen by Rev. Witczyk for a fundamental polemic against the present day Christian-Jewish dialogue. In place of dialogue a program of religious rivalry was proposed, and in this sense it was anti-dialogue. I added that I didn’t want anyone to hide his views, but the point is that some attitudes create obstacles for a meaningful dialogue. For this reason they are not proper for the occasion.

If one expresses triumphalism, rivalry or other attitudes typical of our historic traditions rather than the attitude of full respect for the partner, then no dialogue in the modern sense is possible. This modern sense is expressed in both *Dabru Emet* and in the response to *Dabru Emet* by the Christian Scholars Group, “A Sacred Obligation”.

The situation in Bialystok was, though unintentionally, a confirmation of the approach of

those Jews who are against any participation in the dialogue; the Church, they say, will use the occasion to delegitimize Judaism and to missionize.

Rev. Witczyk in his reply “Day of Learning about Judaism”⁸

stresses that he did not try to convert Jews but only said, after St. Paul, that their redemption is possible only because of the resurrection of Christ. There is only one way to redemption, and the model of God’s entry into the lives of his beloved is given by the experience of Saul of Tarsus. The lecture in Bialystok was based on recent studies of Romans (by Aletti and Fitzmyer), so the accusation that it could have been presented before Vatican II is unfounded. Jesus is the completion of the Jewish Scriptures, and the plan of redemption is revealed to Jews and Gentiles in different times. “The Jew Paul has the most joyful news for his brethren, the Jews.” It was a pity there was no discussion, but the epithets by Krajewski are in contradiction with the atmosphere of the event, with the joint prayers, and nice gestures during the meal, etc. We need no summary evaluations but a deeper discussion. Controversial documents, like “A Sacred Obligation”, are not as important as are the holy books which should remain our principal point of reference.

My rejoinder “Beyond diplomacy”⁹ was accompanied by an

article by Rev. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel,¹⁰ where he said that the Day of Judaism should be seen as an occasion to thank Jews for the Scriptures, and to apologize to them for antisemitism; missionary tactics are inadmissible. He added that “to invite Jews in order to make them listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans about the redemption of Jews, reminds one of those practices of old, when Jewish

representatives were forced to be present at sermons before Easter.”

In my article, I referred only to the last article by Rev. Witczyk. I understand that he was sincerely surprised that his words about God alone choosing the moment of revelation could be seen as provocative. After all, he spoke about the redemption of Jews, and not about conversion. In my opinion, the term “Christocentric inclusivism” can be accepted in dialogue only if it admits the redemption through Christ even without any awareness of the infidel. When, however, the words of St. Paul are seen not as a matter for historical analysis but as a message to present-day Jews, the missionary attitude prevails. If a Muslim told Christians that God’s mercy is still with them because they can become Muslims, would it not be seen as confrontational? Similarly, I wouldn’t accept as proper for the real dialogue the Jewish opinion according to which Christians must be reminded that their doctrine contains idolatry, and the purpose of dialogue is to teach them about the absolute unity of God. Finally, I think that diplomatic encounters are good, even if superficial, because due to them the remarkable modern dialogue, based on full respect, is made easier.

Rev. Witczyk replied with the text “Mixing the levels”,¹¹

where he says that he hoped that the Christian-Jewish dialogue reached beyond a diplomatic game, beyond the level of dictating the other side what is acceptable. It is a pity, he claimed that “Krajewski proposed only a dialogue on a diplomatic level.”¹²

Theological dialogue appears to be very difficult. It should attempt two things: supporting the spirit of openness, and joint prayer. Irving Greenberg asked the right questions: Jews should strive to understand the main Christian mysteries. Christian theology must be treated

seriously in the dialogue; otherwise we would limit ourselves to easy and neutral topics. On the theological level we can see the deep bond between the two religions.

The last article in the series, “Everything is Mixed Up?” was written by Rev. Michael Czajkowski. It is a pity that Rev. Witczyk chose for the occasion “the topic ‘God’s mercy for Israel’ rather than the planned ‘Covenant and Lovingkindness in Christian tradition’”. We shouldn’t interpret the Bible as if nothing has happened since St. Paul. Jews are not to be seen as “not-yet-Christians”. Dialogue is above all an attitude, which may be hard to understand for theoreticians. However, Rev. Witczyk’s appearance in Bialystok was a *felix culpa* – it made possible the polemic that deepened our understanding of dialogue.

I also feel that Rev. Witczyk did express something important. I find it essential that the polemic was conducted in an elegant way, without assuming ill-will on the part of others. I appreciate this and do not try to take it for granted. And yet, this does not mean that we found a common ground. The public discussion has made clear that our attitudes are not equivalent. The exchange has strengthened my conviction that the modern Christian-Jewish dialogue is a matter of attitude or approach rather than exclusively a matter of scholarship. We all have to deal with a lot of traditional opinions and of scriptural statements, together with old interpretations, that express no respect to the other side. We can either perpetuate them or try to overcome them without losing the main message of the tradition. The assumption that this is possible constitutes a point of departure for the practitioners of this modern dialogue. Among them, I guess, are the signers of *Dabru Emet*.

Notes

1. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 30.09.2000, p. 24, *Studia Judaica* 3 (2000) nr 2(6), 271-276, *Wi??* 8/2001, 56-58, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 21/2001, *Studia i Dokumenty Ekumeniczne* Nr 1/XVII, 2001, 27-29, *Znak* 1/2003, 61-64, and other periodicals.
2. An extended text, „Respect Christians as Christians”, is available in English on ICJS web page.
3. The Russian version is available on, e.g., www.jcrelations.net.
4. „Jews and Christians”, published in „*Najwy?szy Czas*”, October 2000. Original: „je?li ?ydowskie tezy o chrze?cija?stwie nie zostan? szybko podj?te, pog??bione i rozszerzone, to w gruncie rzeczy do chrze?cijan dotrze tylko niezbyt ciekawa oferta: ‘Nie nawracajcie nas, wspierajcie pa?stwo Izraela, a my za to nie b?dziemy stawia? znaku równo?ci mi?dzy chrze?cija?stwem a nazizmem’. Powiedzcie prawd?, upewnijcie nas, ?e nie o to jedynie wam chodzi.”
5. M. Signer „The Reception of *Dabru Emet*: Some Controversies”, Aachen November 2002 Symposium.
6. Signer, *ibidem*.
7. „Dzie? przewyci??ania judaizmu?”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 26.01.2003, 8.
8. „Dzie? poznawania judaizmu”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2.02.2003, 11.
9. „Ponad dyplomacj?”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 9.02.2003, 11.
10. „Dzie? przeproszania ?ydów”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 9.02.2003, 11.
11. „Pomieszanie poziomów”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 23.02.2003, 11.
12. It is noteworthy that a similar unjust argument was put against *Dabru Emet* by a Jewish critic: DE is to “avoid any candid discussions of fundamental beliefs and to adopt instead a model of conflict resolution or diplomatic negotiation.” (J. Levenson, *Commentary* December 2001, 33).

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