



The Dabru Emet's Sister

31.01.2013 | Mary Ann Kaiser

Having grown up in a fundamentalist religious background, I long thought that other religions were dangerous. I was taught that any involvement with another religion toes the line of idolatry. As a “faithful Christian,” I was fearful of affirming too much of another religion and disobeying “God.” Now, this makes me not only want to go back into the past and hug my little self out of sadness that I believed in such a closed-minded, punishing, and grumpy divine being but also to go back and shake myself for buying into and living such a mindset.

Nonetheless, as I grew out of my home-town thinking and began to see the deep and various problems with such a perspective, I became embarrassed about my ignorance of Judaism and Islam, in particular. Over the past few years I have felt strongly that I need to learn about the tradition and beliefs of these sisters and brothers of mine. Not only did I believe we all benefit from knowing “the Other,” but in recognition of the politics of religion, I also believed that as a member of the religious majority in America, I had social privilege that I need to be responsible with. Thus, I have believed ecumenical work is important and interesting. However, diving deeply into Spirituality and the Holocaust has transformed my understanding. It has taken my surface level grasp of the importance of interfaith dialogue and greatly expounded upon it. Whereas I have been a contributor to an interfaith blog with little belief my role as a Christian is important beyond listening to others, I am now thrilled to have the opportunity to engage interfaith dialogue in a public sphere. I get it now—the deeper reasoning behind why ecumenical work is a vital piece of being a prophet in the 21st century—and for this, I am grateful.

The perk of having grown up in a Christian fundamentalist world is that I have access to the reasoning behind many of the actions and beliefs of those I disagree with in my own religion. This makes it much easier to enter into difficult conversations and “prophesy” in a way that can lead to change. When I hear another Christian expressing their fears about Judaism, I have the background to speak to their fears in such a way that they might listen, because unfortunately, I have been there. This is why I think it would be helpful to have a Christian written Dabru Emet printed directly beside the original. Two communities speaking together to two communities from the perspective of both religions. Unfortunately, it often takes talking to (or reading) a person who holds the same privilege before you can really understand or get on board with an issue—especially one that asks you to change.

“The Truth Be Told”

A Christian Statement on Judaism and Christianity

Only a few short decades have passed since the occurrence of the Shoah. Although for many years, both Christians and Jews were mostly silent about its everlasting effects on myriad spheres of life, voices have begun to emerge. As survivors share their stories, the second generation continues to find its meaning, and theologians of both religions grapple with the reality of

unprecedented human evil and divine inaction, we realize conversations about the Shoah are only beginning. In the midst of sharing stories and theologizing, there must also be discussion of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. As much as many Christians would love to ignore the role of our tradition in the persecution of the Jewish people, neither they nor we can afford such a luxury. The effects of the Shoah did not end when liberation occurred. They reverberate through politics, religion, society and personal lives and they will continue to do so for decades to come. If we are to heal as a world, a necessary step is the reconciliation of Jews and Christians. Our relationship has been one of hostility for centuries. It will not be an easy or a quick fix. However, it is a struggle worth pursuing and worth dedicating our time, energy and hearts.

As we work towards a religiously pluralist society, there are a number of things Christians must keep in mind. In order to live out our calling as those who love our neighbor and work in partnership with God to bring reconciliation and peace to the world, we must prioritize our relationship with our Jewish sisters and brothers. We have long missed out on benefiting from an intimate relationship with the Jewish tradition and community. It is well beyond time to humble ourselves and kindly ask for another chance. However, along the way there are a few things we must keep in mind in order to create a safe space for reconciliation. As a first step, I offer eight brief statements about how Christians might relate to Jews and Judaism in hopes of finding healing for the brokenness between us.

1. First and foremost, Christians be patient.

The rift between Christians and Jews is so deep and wide that Christians absolutely must be patient in dialogue. Rightfully so, many Jewish people are far from ready to seek reconciliation. Since the very formation of the Christian faith, there has been a rift between the two religions. Both were marginalized under the Roman Empire and in hopes of defining the difference between the long-standing Jewish tradition and the newly forming Christian tradition, the two did not band together. Instead, over time Christians began persecuting the Jewish people claiming they were at fault for the crucifixion of Jesus. When the power of the Roman Empire was on the Christian church's side, such anti-Semitism grew far and wide for both religious and political purposes.

As the Shoah grew closer and closer, the theological claims and biblical interpretations of Christians acted as a firm foundation for the brainwashing the German civilians. The framework was already built for Hitler to convince people that the Jews were inherently problematic. Although Christianity was not directly the cause, it was certainly an indirect contributor. During the Shoah, the Christian churches also played an indirect role in its perpetuation by doing absolutely nothing to stop it. With the exception of a few, particularly those within the "Confessing Church," Christians found their anti-Semitic theology to be a justification for themselves as they did nothing to help the Jewish people. Even after the Shoah, many Christians remain anti-Semitic, denouncing the religion of Judaism and feeding into negative stereotypes of Jewish people.

With such a history, it is remarkable that any Jewish person would be open to reconciling with Christians. Yet, many are. The only appropriate response is to remain patient, not only with those who have chosen to be in dialogue but also with the many who are far from ready. It is a perfectly justifiable position and if we are to seek true healing, we must be patient and recognize the vulnerability of their entering into relationship with us. To rush dialogue would be to dismiss the centuries of hostility the Christian tradition has directed at the Jewish people.

Also, Christians who see the importance of such dialogue must also be patient with Christians who do not yet. It is not the place of Jews to have to deal with the pains of the ignorance of Christian people. It is the role of Christians to help other Christians out of their ignorance and into relationship. It is far too easy for progressive Christians to dismiss our more conservative members. When we refuse to work with them and dialogue with them, we simply abandon them to

their anti-Semitism. As a Christian who used to be narrow minded, particularly in terms of religious pluralism, it was the teaching and the patience of more progressive Christians that helped me find my way to a more inclusive faith. Without those Christians, I might very well be right where I was a decade ago. We need progressive Christians to be patient with conservative Christians; that is, patient, but not accommodating. Being patient in no way affirms any idea, belief, or claim that demeans Jews, but only refuses to abandon them to their close-mindedness where they can continue to cause harm to the Jewish community and to themselves.

2. Christians must listen.

If we hope to reconcile with the Jewish community, we must first stop talking. When someone has been harmed by another, it is not up to the one who has done the harming to enlighten the harmed. It is quite the opposite. Before we can offer our remorse, we need to know what it is we have done and continue to do and the repercussions our faith has had on the Jewish community. This knowledge should not come first from Christian historians, academics, etc. It should first come directly from those who have experienced it – the Jewish people.

Listening can be difficult. The horror stories of the Shoah are hard to stomach. Many would rather pretend it didn't happen or at least, acknowledge it did but steer clear from any of the details. However, we must listen. Because it was not our tradition that was persecuted, because it was not our family members who were tortured and killed, because it is not our story being ignored, we cannot expect to know until we hear. The only people who can give us insight into the Jewish experiences of the past and the present are Jews. Not Christians. We must listen to the first and second hand accounts of the people who actually experienced the Shoah and contemporary anti-Semitism. Christians get plenty of talking room – too much talking room. There absolutely must be times and places where we acknowledge our need to be silent and truly hear the words of our Jewish sisters and brothers. Until we hear, we should not speak. Otherwise, we are at risk of perpetuating the very problems we seek to resolve.

3. Christians must be willing to be honest about our past.

The Christian religion has been the cause or contributor to incredible amounts of violence throughout the world. From the crusades to the inquisition to the Shoah to contemporary misogyny and homophobia, the church has a dark history. It is painful to admit these events. When we acknowledge that the Christian tradition has contributed to so many people's demise, we must face the reality that we fall short. We have to admit that we have been unfaithful to our own religion in our contribution to the Shoah. We know very well that idle passivity is not our calling, and that love and faithful risks on behalf of others are at the very heart of our faith. Jesus, our model as Christian people, assures us that laying our lives down for our friends is the greatest example of love, yet Christians refused to do such in the Shoah.

It is much easier to disregard the horrors of our past. We don't want to deal with the hard questions that come with such honesty. We don't want to have to change anything about what we're doing today. We don't want to be held accountable – mostly because we are scared.

I think many people fear the darkness of our role in the Shoah because its troubling reality might be too much to handle while remaining faithful to our religion. If Christianity has done so many horrible things, is it possible to acknowledge them and still remain a devoted Christian? Isn't it contradictory to be remorseful about the violence of our faith yet stand firm within the tradition? At first thought, perhaps. But, there is a delicate and faithful space which can be held by those who are willing to look backwards with honesty and forwards with hope. We can hold our contemporary religion accountable by looking faithfully at what the tradition has done. Until we can admit and embrace our wrongdoings, we can't change anything. The Shoah cannot be ignored, but its reality

does not have to threaten our devotion to Christianity—only to the parts which must change.

4. Christians must acknowledge our contemporary privilege.

If we have done a good job of listening and of acknowledging our past, we should be led directly to the next step – acknowledging our privilege. In contemporary America, Christianity holds all the power. Political rhetoric and social norms are built upon Christian assumptions that all too often lead to exclusivity. If we hope to be reconciled to the Jewish community, we must be willing to acknowledge all of the social power we hold and relinquish it. Until the winter holidays are not explicitly Christian, until political rhetoric includes the Jewish perspective, and social slang does not use “Jew” as a derogatory term, Jews have little reason to believe Christians are ready for real reconciliation. Of course we cannot fix all of America’s problems before dialoguing well with our sisters and brothers, but we must at least acknowledge the difference it makes that we have the social power we do as Christians.

5. Christians must commit to the memory of the Shoah.

Because we hold the social privilege we do, we are in a powerful position to use it responsibly. A number of people continue to deny the very occurrence of the Shoah . As much as we would like to think these are simply ignorant people who have no social influence, such is not the case. Books are published and lectures are given which include various theories about the “lie” of the Shoah. These proclamations are working in tandem with school curriculum which seems to be lessening or eradicating teachings on the Shoah and the persecution of the Jewish people. Meanwhile, the few survivors that remain to testify about their experience are getting older and older. The memory of the Shoah is under great threat. Christians are in a particularly important position to help the memory survive.

Our social and political privilege should be used responsibly in conjunction with a commitment to the memory of the Shoah. We have the opportunity to take up the issue of school curriculum with our local district school boards. We have no reason not to preach, teach, and study the Shoah within our congregations. Our theological schools could easily commit to requiring or at the very least, offering a class on the Shoah to every student who passes through. Without the memory of the Shoah, not only do we dishonor all the lives lost and wounds that remain, but we run the risk of doing it all over again. We must be reminded that Western, educated, “civilized” people are just as capable of such atrocities as anyone else. The Shoah reminds us of this fact. Christians must be committed to using our social privilege to help the Jewish community preserve the memory of the Shoah for centuries to come.

6. Christians must understand that religious pluralism is not a threat to Christianity.

There is a longstanding belief that affirming other religions will inherently threaten the claims of Christianity. This assertion has kept far too many Christians from doing what they might otherwise intuit as correct and loving. It is a complete contradiction to the Christian faith to do anything but love and support all people and only denounce beliefs which directly bring harm to others. In absolutely no way does the Jewish community harm the Christian belief system. For far too long, Christians have understood other religious claims to be over and against the claims of Christianity as if other religions are as concerned with trying to convert us. Because the Christian tradition has been so evangelical, there seems to be a lingering belief that other religions are just as interested in converting us. This is simply not true. The Jewish community has absolutely no interest in converting Christians.

Rather than imagining that all religions are competing against one another to prove who has the

“right” perception of God, we must begin thinking about religions as different ways to explain the spiritual experiences of humanity. If the Christian claims speak to your own experiences and beliefs about life and the beyond, fantastic. Stick to your religion and devote your all to it. However, if the Christian framework has no spiritual relevance for someone else and Judaism does, also fantastic. Such a person causes absolutely no threat to the Christian devotee. Christians who claim to be concerned with the well-being of all humans should be delighted about anyone finding spiritual and traditional nurturing, regardless of whether or not it reflects one’s own beliefs. Contrary to popular thought, different does not equal incorrect.

7. Christians must be willing to let the Shoah affect Christian theology, ethics, and biblical interpretation.

After the Shoah, our theology, ethics, and scripture must be re-evaluated. The issue of theodicy inherently becomes more problematic for Christian theologians than ever. If we were to ignore the horrors of the Shoah, perhaps we could sneak our claims about God’s goodness and power through theological loopholes here and there. However, to be genuinely open to reconciliation will not allow such. We cannot be partners to the Jewish community if we do not allow their experiences of the Shoah to affect all aspects of our own faith. If it means we never find any solid claim acceptable regarding theodicy, that is perfectly fine. Being a Christian does not mean having the answers; it means we remain faithful in the midst of the questions. The same goes for Christian ethics. We must deal honestly with what we now know humans are capable of. We know that humans can remain coldly apathetic to the torture and genocide of their neighbors. We know that humans can participate in absolutely evil acts of torture and abuse without hesitation. These realities inherently affect our ethical frameworks. We must be open to letting them shift and grow as they need.

Also, our scriptures can be used in ways that only perpetuate the anti-Semitism reflected in the Shoah. We must re-evaluate any and all claims which advance anti-Semitic thinking. Again, this is not a threat to the faith, as the faith has nothing to do with hatred of others.

8. Christians must recognize the interconnectedness of us all and the beauty of being in relationship with our Jewish sisters and brothers.

We are all finite creatures. No person can live independently of others. No single mind can know it all. No life can encompass all of history and the future. We need one another, not only to flourish but to simply survive. The Christian belief system and experience in the world is good, is important, and on its best days, has much to offer the world. But it is just one among many good, important contributions to the world. The Christian perspective is incredibly finite. In order to be in a real place of openness with our Jewish siblings, we must recognize our need for them. They do not need us any more than we need them. We are a key to each other’s wholeness. Our lives can be enriched by knowledge of their traditions, their questions, and their beliefs. Our finite perspective in partnership with their own finite perspective brings us one step closer to the infinite.

Until we can show up to the table with a firm and certain knowledge that we have many wonderful things to learn from the Jewish community and that in fact, we are closer to being whole when we are in relationship with them, we still leave little reason for reconciliation to occur.

These eight statements are not meant to demean the Christian religion or punish the Christians of today for the horrors of the past. They are actually meant to help the Christian community become more faithful to its own belief system—a system built upon inclusivity, love, and peace. We are most Christian when we are creating spaces of reconciliation, when we are emptying ourselves of our privilege and opening ourselves to relationships. The path to reconciliation is long, but if we are the people we claim to be, then we will recognize the hard work of self-transformation is well worth the

genuine healing of relationship with our siblings.

Mary Ann Kaiser is a third year Master of Divinity student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary whose goal is to continue her studies in a PhD program focusing on Ecofeminist Theology. She is a member of the United Methodist Church but maintains a complicated relationship with her identity as a Christian. With deep convictions about the ability of religion to both hurt and heal, she continues to struggle with her place in the Christian tradition.

Mary Ann received her B.A. in Organizational Communication with a minor in Social Welfare. After college she spent one year living in Nigeria where she was shaped greatly by the cross-cultural experience and relationships formed. She now works part-time as a hospital chaplain and recently completed an internship at WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual) in Silver Spring, MD. Between her passion for exploring the mystery of the Divine and her interest in a wide range of justice issues, she is challenged daily to grow in openness, resolution, and kindness.