Provocative Reconciliation: Reflections on the New Jewish Statement on Christianity

| Barnett, Victoria

Victoria Barnett, in an article from The Christian Century (Chicago), surveys some Christian reactions to 'Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity.'

Provocative Reconciliation:

Reflections on the New Jewish Statement on Christianity

Saying that it was time "for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism," over 170 Jewish leaders from all branches of Judaism have signed a statement outlining eight points of common ground and shared purpose between Christians and Jews. The statement, titled Dabru Emet ("speak truth"), released on September 7, refers to "an unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations" since the Holocaust, and calls for a "thoughtful Jewish response" to recent changes in Christian teachings about Judaism. It affirms the shared roots of both faiths while also acknowledging "irreconcilable differences."

In the most controversial paragraph, Dabru Emet considers the role of Christians in the Holocaust. While noting the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and violence against Jews, as well as the active involvement and passive complicity of Christians in Nazi crimes, the statement nevertheless says that "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon" or even "an inevitable outcome of Christianity." Had Nazism continued, "it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians." The authors note with gratitude the Christian rescuers of Jews and those Christians today who "reject the teaching of contempt," concluding: "We do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors."

Dabru Emet quickly evoked both passionate support and vehement opposition, particularly with regard to its remarks on the Holocaust. One of the document"s authors, Rabbi Michael Signer, a professor at Notre Dame, said he has received numerous messages saying that this is a very positive and hopeful message. On the other hand, says Signer, many "think that we have betrayed Jewish history and gone much too far. They think that we have "let Christians off the hook." These people are convinced that any move toward reconciliation with those Christians who have rethought their theology of Judaism is foolish. They remain convinced that most Christians have not forsworn their triumphalism and point to the targeted proselytism of Jews by the Southern Baptists and Jews for Jesus."

Within the Christian community, it is new and troubling to some to learn that many Jews do view Nazism as the logical outcome of European Christian culture; others express concern that Christians might feel completely exonerated by the Jewish statement.

Copyright JCRelations

In some Internet discussions, Christians have interpreted the paragraph on the Holocaust as a statement of forgiveness. However, Signer says, "I would not use the term forgiveness, but reconciliation. In order to reconcile, Christians have to do an accounting of what they have done wrong and what attitudes they have had that have been harmful to Jews. As they engage in these discussions they will find their way to a more profound understanding of their own faith. Only God can forgive the sins of the past. Jews need more time to see if Christian teshuvah is real."

Father John Pawlikowski, a longtime leader in Catholic-Jewish dialogue and chair of the Church Relations Committee at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, notes the difficulty of conveying the complex truth about Christianity and the Holocaust in a brief statement. "People tend to grab on to first sentences. While I agree that there is absolutely no straight line between Christian anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, it is also true that even the Nazi ideologues used a great deal of Christian anti-Semitism to promote their values, and while that does tend to come out in the subsequent part of the paragraph, it gets a little lost."

While the paragraph on the Holocaust draws the most emotional responses, other points have also sparked criticism. Dabru Emet"s statement that Jews and Christians worship the same God is problematic for many Jews, says Christopher Leighton, director of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies. Leighton notes that the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation "strike a number of Jews as theological mumbo-jumbo that compromises the integrity of monotheism."

In turn, some Christians are shocked by the reflection of their own tradition that they find in the document. "The idea that Jews see Christians as idolatrous comes as a rude discovery," Leighton observes. "But it invites Christians to think through what their religious claims really mean. Many Christians have stopped thinking theologically. . . . The task of reexamining core Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and incarnation in the light of Jewish questions could help Christians recover the language of their own tradition, and simultaneously alert us to our susceptibility to some familiar and enduring idolatries."

The most remarkable aspect of Dabru Emet, then, is that it encourages this theological reflection within each of the traditions in the name of dialogue between them. Pawlikowski expressed hope that it "will be the beginning of a new phase of serious theological and religious reflection between Christians and Jews." In a sense, Dabru Emet is an outstretched hand, made all the more moving by the painful history that precedes it. Historically, the Jewish-Christian relationship has been adversarial, and many (perhaps most) Jews and Christians really don"t know that much about the other"s tradition.

Signer hopes the statement will help Jews "to think about themselves and their world in religious terms . . . As part of this reflection we hope that they will recognize that other religious communities--specifically the Christian community--has also gone through a period of reflection and change." In turn, he hopes that Christians will "engage in discussions with Jews. We hope that they will do this without any aim other than self-understanding and understanding the other. . . . We want Christians to understand Judaism as an independent and continuous covenant that has lived side by side and intersected with Christians in post-incarnational history."

Whatever its legacy, Dabru Emet shows that an institutional forum can enable something very noninstitutional to happen. The statement was produced by about 30 Jewish scholars who began meeting six years ago under the auspices of the ICJS. The original goal, according to Leighton, was "to examine the formation of Jewish identity and the patterns of accommodation and resistance to Christian culture." The project started with academic papers, but the format changed as scholars realized they were confronting issues that touched them personally as Jews and citizens.

For Leighton, the project demonstrated the creative possibilities of conflict. "I don"t think any of

these scholars thought they could definitively claim the truth of Judaism in all its complexity, but there was a conviction that insight or wisdom emerges only from the clash over divergent interpretations. We Christians need to learn how to argue passionately without giving up on each other. My Presbyterian experience has been that people all too often walk out when there are serious differences of opinion. The members of this group took their diversity as a great gift, a treasure. There was a sense that the conversation would be impoverished if any one were not there."

© Copyright 2000 by Christian Century (www.christiancentury.org) (September 27 - October 4, 2000).

Reproduced with permission.