



Dabru Emet: Some Reservations about a Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity

28/02/2003 | Berger, David

Description: Rabbi David Berger, professor of history at Brooklyn College (New York), mounts a vigorous critique of Dabru Emet, objecting to the notion of 'theological reciprocity' between Judaism and Christianity.

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on Christians and Christianity

Shortly after the publication of [Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity](#) in *The New York Times* of September 10, 2000, I was contacted by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America to formulate a brief reaction. What emerged was the following paragraph, which was posted on the Union's website and later adopted by the Rabbinical Council of America as its official position on the document.

This is in many ways an admirable statement composed by people for whom I have high regard. I agree with much of it, including the controversial but carefully balanced passage denying that Nazism was a Christian phenomenon. However, I did not agree to sign it for several reasons. First, for all its exquisitely skillful formulation, it 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. Second, 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 or component 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 religious 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.

On this occasion, I have the opportunity to address these and other issues raised by this very important document more fully. Let me begin with reciprocity, which I consider the most dangerous problem generated by interfaith dialogue. *Dabru Emet* formulates this expectation in its most benign form, but I am uneasy with any document that accepts such a framework. For Jews, the dynamic of interfaith dialogue has produced pressure from within or from without to see Jesus as a

prophet, or even as a Messiah for non-Jews; to see the incarnation as a theologically acceptable, even if erroneous belief; to downplay the problem of "foreign worship" (*avodah zarah*); and to engage in interfaith prayer services. For Christians, it has produced pressures to deny the historicity of sections of the Gospels; to see the New Testament as an antisemitic work; to demand that it be revised; to question even eschatological confirmation of Christian truth, an issue to which I shall return; to see Judaism as an absolutely equal religion and to regard as morally abhorrent the denial that it can provide salvation just as effectively as Christianity.

Let me elaborate briefly on this last point. In the ecumenical arena, Christians who will not grant Judaism full salvific force are denounced by both Jews and Christians in language appropriate for characterizing moral miscreants. But the reason given for granting Judaism such status has nothing to do with morality at all but rather with the assertion that the first covenant remains in force—a purely theological point. A Christian who rejects this position may or may not be making a theological error from an inner Christian perspective, but he or she is not guilty of a moral defect unless one is prepared to posit a universal moral principle that every religion must be granted full salvific efficacy.

While I do not believe that anyone has the right to tell someone else what that person's own religion teaches, or should teach, in matters of belief, there is a right to level criticisms, even demands, of a universal moral sort. This creates the temptation to make theological demands on the grounds that the issue in question has moral consequences. There is sometimes truth, even overwhelming truth, in such assertions, but I am a very strict constructionist on this matter. Once Christians are prepared to break the link between a doctrine and its possible anti-Jewish consequences, Jews should refrain from any further intervention. Since pressing such points can—and does—generate backlash, and the only reason for pressing them is pragmatic, the wisdom of intervention must be scanned even without reference to the moral imperative of leaving Christian doctrine to Christians. Participants in the Christian discourse may, of course, wish to address these issues out of an internal moral dynamic. Jews can and should express appreciation for this, but they should do so as engaged observers, not as aggressive participants.

Once we become accustomed to arrogating to ourselves the right to intervene in the other's faith, we can lose our sense of proportion even when dealing with moral issues where some expression of opinion is appropriate. Jewish reactions to the Catholic Church's treatment of its own heroic and not so heroic figures are a case in point. I do object (mildly) to the canonization of Pius IX. I object vehemently to the proposed canonization of Isabella, whose transformation into a saint would be the rough equivalent of canonizing a deeply pious early-twentieth-century Catholic who had been instrumental in carrying out lynchings. But I do not object to the canonization of Edith Stein. I thoroughly disapproved of Jewish pressures to open the Vatican archives in the hope of demonstrating Pius XII's moral deficiencies. Within the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), I argued vigorously both orally and in writing against going ahead with the joint commission on Church behavior during World War II, a project whose bad end should have been perfectly evident to anyone who thought the matter through.

Despite my aversion to any gesture toward expectations of theological reciprocity, I am of course aware that perceptions of the other are affected by interaction. Sometimes Jewish perceptions of Christianity have become more favorable because relations improved, sometimes even because

they became more tense. The latter point is counterintuitive, but medieval Christian attacks on anti-Gentile discrimination in the Talmud led Jews to insist on a legally significant distinction between Christians and the pagans of old, a distinction some came to believe in full sincerity—and one which I believe to be correct in the eyes of God. Nevertheless, the expectations generated in contemporary theological dialogue have become institutionalized, part of the structural warp and woof of the enterprise, and they are deeply threatening to a traditionalist. John Pawlikowski may well be correct in his appreciative comment about *Dabru Emet* in a commencement address at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in May, 2001: "The dialogue will be stymied if Christians affirm a theological bonding with Jews...without an acknowledgement of such bonding from the Jewish side." To the degree that this observation is true, however, it reinforces my concerns.

Let us now turn to the actual content of *Dabru Emet*. "Jews and Christians," it asserts, "worship the same God." This statement, I believe, is simultaneously true and false. In *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, the volume that emerged out of *Dabru Emet*, David Novak writes, "Idolatry is the worship of a 'strange god' (*el zar*). The wrong worship of the right God is 'strange service' (*avodah zarah*), which means the worship of God by humanly constructed rather than by divinely revealed means." This is not flatly incorrect; there are indeed rare forms of *avodah zarah*, notably the worship of the golden calf according to some interpretations, that fit this definition. Nonetheless, it is misleading. Jewish legal and theological terminology make no use of the term *el zar* despite its appearance in Psalm 81. *Avodah zarah* almost always refers to the formal recognition or worship as God of an entity that is in fact not God. For one who denies the divinity of Jesus, classical Christianity is clearly included in this definition. Thus, it is *avodah zarah* not merely because of the means of worship but also because of the object of worship.

Even medieval Jews understood very well that Christianity is *avodah zarah* of a special type. The tosafists assert that although a Christian pronouncing the name of Jesus in an oath would be taking the name of "another god," it is nonetheless the case that when Christians say the word "God," they have in mind the Creator of heaven and earth. Some later authorities took the continuation of that Tosafot to mean that this special type of *avodah zarah* is forbidden to Jews but permissible to gentiles, so that a non-Jew who engages in Christian worship commits no sin. One medieval authority, Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri, may even have believed that a Jew engaging in Christian worship is not guilty of *avodah zarah*, though no other rabbi of any standing endorsed this position. In the final analysis, then, virtually all Jews understood that Christian worship is distinct from pagan idolatry because of its belief in the Creator of heaven and earth who took the Jews out of Egyptian bondage, revealed the Torah at Sinai and continues to exercise his providence over the entire cosmos. Some asserted that the association (*shittuf*) of Jesus with this God is permissible for non-Jews. Virtually none regarded such association as anything other than *avodah zarah* if the worshipper was a Jew. Do Jews and Christians, then, worship the same God? The answer, I think, is yes and no.

It bears noting that this issue is not entirely a one-way street. Some evangelical Christians object to interfaith prayer even with monotheists on the grounds that it is idolatry to participate in a service with those who worship anyone but the triune God. I have difficulty understanding how this position can survive scrutiny from a purely biblical perspective. While Christians have traditionally believed that the Hebrew prophets understood and even alluded to the triune nature of God, it is difficult to assume even from a Christian perspective that the Israelite masses during the First Temple period were aware of this, and yet prophetic denunciations of idolatry allude only to the worship of pagan deities. At the very least, a nontrivial number of Israelites must have worshipped the God of Israel

without understanding the trinity, and yet the prophets never refer to this form of idolatry. Nonetheless, I can construct a (weak) response to these objections, and even if I could not, my difficulty in understanding this position would not justify my denying others the right to maintain it. They have this right, and I do not harbor the slightest resentment at their exercising it.

If Christianity is *avodah zarah* even for non-Jews, does that mean that Judaism denies Christians salvation? I do not believe that this is so. The question of salvation for Christians—or even the relationship of Christianity to what Jewish tradition calls the Noahide covenant binding on all of humanity—is not addressed in *Dabru Emet*. I suspect that one reason for this is that raising this question would have been very uncomfortable in a document that does not even want to say that Judaism is true in a way that Christianity is not. In *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, Prof. Novak does address the matter, suggesting that Christians, because they meet the key Maimonidean criterion of believing that the Noahide laws are divinely revealed, are the quintessential example of non-Jews who attain salvation. This suggestion, for all the attractiveness of its central insight, requires the adoption of the "liberal" view about the permissibility of "association" for non-Jews and fails to address other complicating features of the Noahide laws that make the assertion that Christians observe, or even endorse, all of them less than certain. It needs to be supplemented by the position of Rabbi Jacob Emden, who asserted in a responsum that non-Jews, even those who engage in technical *avodah zarah* because of mistaken adherence to ancestral tradition, can attain salvation if they observe the key moral laws in the Noahide code. Non-Jews need not attain a perfect score in observing their obligations any more than Jews need to do so in observing theirs.

We move now to the final concern that I expressed, namely, unease with *Dabru Emet's* "uncomfortably relativistic message." "The humanly irreconcilable differences between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the world as promised in Scripture." The paragraph that follows this heading goes on to assert that the key difference regarding the proper way to serve God "will not be settled by one community insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other." Here again Prof. Novak's remarks in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* illuminate both the careful thought that went in to this document and the stubborn problems that remain. In providing guidelines for Jewish-Christian dialogue, he counsels the avoidance of both relativism and syncretism. The section on avoiding relativism is formulated with admirable vigor. It sits, however, very uneasily with the section on avoiding triumphalism, which asks, "What...of those Jews who assert that it is precisely at the end of days that the triumph of Judaism will be manifest, and what of those Christians who assert that at the Second Coming Christianity will triumph?" And it answers, "We must answer that the final judgment of all human history is not yet in."

For many traditionalists of both faiths, the affirmation that the key tenets of one's religion will be verified at the end of days follows ineluctably from the conviction that they are true. The dialogical environment has created such distortions that basic religious affirmations of this sort have become suspect, even morally unacceptable. As I wrote in an article on *Dominus Iesus*, "We ... face a remarkable paradox. Precisely because of its striving for interfaith respect and understanding, dialogue would become an instrument of religious imperialism."

On this last point, let me cite a letter of mine published in the *Forward* in response to an article by Rabbi James Rudin:

Jews engaged in dialogue with Christians succumb all too often to the temptation to tell Christians what to believe about their own religion. While Christian revision of teachings that contain the potential of spawning antisemitism is very much in the Jewish interest, Jews need to be cautious about making demands that can create resentment and backlash and even legitimize Christian demands for reciprocal revisions in Judaism.

Though this is a longstanding problem about which I have often expressed concern, I was stunned by A. James Rudin's assertion ("While the Messiah Tarrys," February 22, 2002) that Catholics must not only assert that the Jewish longing for the Messiah is "valid"; they must assert that "the messiah's identity remains unknown, and Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the messiah, is not waiting at the end of days for Jews to recognize the 'error of their ways.'" How does one believe that Jesus is the messiah and simultaneously refrain from asserting that Jews will discover this at the end of days?

Rabbi Rudin apparently believes that Jews have the right to demand that Christians reject one of the core beliefs of Christianity. We have no such right, any more than Christians have the right to demand that traditional Jews give up their conviction that at the end of days all the world will recognize the messiah—and that he will not be Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, at this delicate moment in history, I need to add something about *Dabru Emet's* passage on Israel even though I did not address it in my initial single-paragraph reaction. "Christians," say the authors, "can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel." This statement is surely true, and its validity is demonstrated by the many instances of manifest Christian enthusiasm for the Jewish state. Nonetheless, Christian attitudes toward Israel in the current crisis have once again raised serious questions in Jewish minds about the value of dialogue. Support for Israel in the organized Christian community comes primarily from those who eschew theological dialogue and support conversionary efforts aimed at Jews. Churches and organizations most involved in dialogue are far more ambivalent and even hostile. The very habits of mind that produce the dialogical imperative—the desire to redress grievances and achieve justice for the historically oppressed—produce sympathy for Palestinians. In the view of most Jews (myself decidedly included), this sympathy has led to an inversion of morality in which mass murder in response to an extraordinary peace proposal, education toward jihad in the bloodiest sense, and mass dissemination of the vilest antisemitism evoke next to no protest or even diminution of sympathy. Rather, it is Israel's efforts at self-defense, usually carried out with exemplary concern for innocent life, that arouse passionate moral disapproval.

As long as this state of affairs persists, the Jewish-Christian relationship, at least on the level of the Jewish street, will not be determined by theological documents on either side. It will be determined by an assessment of who cares about the survival of a Jewish state and the fate of its citizens—and who does not.

A paper read at the inaugural meeting of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR) in Baltimore, October 28, 2002.

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