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The Dialogue between Synagoga and Ecclesia in 2024

ABSTRACT

This article examines the current state of Catholic-Jewish relations in 2024, focusing particularly on significant documents published over the past century. The author highlights the pivotal roles of *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and *Dabru emet* (2000), providing a detailed commentary and interpretation of these texts while incorporating insights from other scholars. The analysis identifies shortcomings in the efforts of both Catholic and Jewish communities to establish meaningful and qualitative relationships. The article advocates for renewed efforts in dialogue, emphasizing the importance of friendship, mutual respect, and collaborative engagement.

KEYWORDS: Christian-Jewish Dialogue, Synagogue, Ecclesia, *Nostra Aetate*, *Dabru Emet*

STRESZCZENIE

Dialog między Synagogą a Eklezją w 2024 r.

Autor skupia się na relacjach katolików z Żydami w 2024 r., opierając się zwłaszcza na dokumentach wydanych na przestrzeni ostatnich stu lat. Rozmyślając nad znaczeniem Synagogi i Eklezji, podkreśla wagę dokumentów *Nostra aetate* (1965) oraz *Dabru emet* (2000), które komentuje, interpretuje i powołując się na innych autorów, uzupełnia. Dostrzega niedopatrzienia zarówno po stronie katolików, jak i Żydów w budowaniu jakościowych więzi. Sugeruje działanie, którym powinna towarzyszyć przyjaźń, braterstwo i spotkanie w dialogu.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: dialog chrześcijańsko-żydowski, Synagoga, Eklezja, *Nostra Aetate*, *Dabru emet*

The theme of the “Synagoga and Ecclesia: Past, Present, Future” symposium evokes the rich iconography associated with the Synagogue and the Church, prominently featured in medieval cathedrals and illustrated

manuscripts. Traditionally, the Church is depicted in a regal manner: she is crowned, majestic, and commanding. Her posture and facial expression convey confidence, and she holds a scepter or staff of authority in one hand, and the chalice of the Eucharist in the other.

In stark contrast, the representation of the Synagogue often depicts a more somber image. The crown that once adorned her head is now cast aside, her staff is broken, and she clutches either a torn Torah scroll or the overturned tablets of the Ten Commandments. Crucially, her eyes are frequently blindfolded or obscured, symbolizing her perceived blindness to the Christian Gospel. For instance, the façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris shows her eyes obscured by a serpent wrapped around her head, while a 15th-century illustration depicts a demon covering her face and displacing her crown. These visual motifs not only underscore the historical portrayal of Jews as separated from Christian truth but also reflect the troubling associations made between Judaism and demonic forces in medieval iconography.

Thankfully, such depictions are no longer acceptable within the Catholic Church. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia commissioned artist Joshua Koffman to create a sculpture that reimagines Synagoga and Ecclesia as equals, adorned with crowns, and blissfully engaged in the study of their respective scriptures. I had the honor of delivering the keynote address at the dedication of this sculpture, titled "Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time," on September 25, 2015. Two days later, I had the privilege of welcoming Pope Francis, who came to view and bless the artwork. His inscription on the base of the sculpture reads: "There exists a rich complementarity between the Church and the Jewish people that allows us to help one another mine the riches of God's word."

The contrast between medieval and post-*Nostra Aetate* representations of Synagoga and Ecclesia is striking. Clearly, Jews and Catholics have made significant strides towards rapprochement, exemplifying what Pope Francis has described as their "journey of friendship." Today, I would like to reflect on a significant Jewish contribution to this journey, approaching its twenty-fifth anniversary. This contribution is the theologically significant Jewish document *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth), which I believe outlines a path for continued progress in Jewish-Catholic relations.

Although *Dabru Emet* was signed by over 200 Jewish rabbis and scholars acting in their individual capacities rather than representing institutional endorsements, the collective intellectual authority and reputations of these signatories conferred considerable significance upon the declaration. Even modern Orthodoxy in the United States, which chose not

to endorse the statement due to certain theological concerns, responded by issuing a counter-document prepared by David Berger, a disciple of Joseph Soloveitchik. Despite his reservations about interreligious dialogue, Berger engaged substantively with the issues raised in *Dabru Emet* (Berger, 2002).

Twenty-four years after its publication on September 10, 2000, it is pertinent to revisit *Dabru Emet* critically and assess the evolution of its propositions. The statement's title, derived from Zechariah 8:16 – “These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other; and render in your courts judgments that are true and make for peace” – is particularly apt. This verse underscores the centrality of both truth and peace, highlighting their interdependence: a peace that is not grounded in truth is not genuine, and a truth that fails to foster peace is of limited relevance. Peace, in this context, must be understood as an ideal applicable to all human relationships grounded in dialogue and mutual understanding.

This paper will explore the contemporary relevance of *Dabru Emet* by examining some of its more contentious points. Its first statement refers to the beliefs of both religions:

Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel (Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, & Signer, 2000).

This point was criticized by David Berger, who argued that the respective conceptions of God are not exactly the same (Berger, 2010). In Judaism there is no *shituf*, no possibility of making the kinds of “associations” that Christianity does by conceiving God as Triune or becoming physically incarnate in the person of Jesus. Some medieval Jewish thinkers considered these ideas to be *avodah zara*, unacceptable pagan worship, while others concluded that it was not correct to label Christianity as “pagan” (Skorka, 2020). I agree with Berger that the formulation of this first point in *Dabru Emet* is not precise. But this issue was further developed in later Jewish statements, especially in the institutional Orthodox text “Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*”, which acknowledged that although

core beliefs of Christianity ... create an irreconcilable separation from Judaism, ... we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends

and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world blessed with peace, social justice and security (The Conference of European Rabbis, Rabbinical Council of America, Chief Rabbinate of Israel, 2017).

Pope Francis highlighted the significance of this collaborative approach during a meeting on August 31, 2017, with several authors and signatories of *Between Jerusalem and Rome*. He emphasized the importance of cooperation by stating, “This is most important: may the Eternal One bless and enlighten our cooperation, so that together we can accept and carry out ever better his plans, ‘plans for welfare and not for evil,’ for ‘a future and a hope’ (Jer. 29:11)” (Pope Francis, 2017).

Similarly, a prior non-institutional Orthodox statement, published on December 3, 2015, titled *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*, carefully avoided references to *shituf* (associative partnership) and instead focused on the ethical commonalities between Judaism and Christianity. This document articulated a shared vision for “a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty, so that all humanity will call on His name and abominations will be removed from the earth” (Ahrens, Greenberg, & Korn, 2021; CJCUC, 2015).

These Jewish documents collectively contribute to a clearer mutual understanding between Catholics and Jews, providing a foundation upon which future dialogues can be constructed.

Dabru Emet's third statement asserts that “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.” Following the Fundamental Agreement signed on December 30, 1993, which established full diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See on June 15, 1994, there is formal recognition of Israel's legitimacy as a nation-state. However, at the time of *Dabru Emet*'s publication in 2000, there remained some ambiguity regarding the Vatican's stance on Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people.

In an email dated May 21, 2015, Pope Francis clarified that “we must distinguish between the Jewish people, the State of Israel (which has the right to exist), and the temporary governments [or administrations] that the State has. If one does not accept the first two, one falls into anti-Semitism.” This statement underscores Francis's recognition of the State of Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people.

This perspective was reaffirmed by Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI in 2018. He noted that the year 1948

... made clear [that] the Jewish people, like every people, had a natural right to their own land. ... [I]t made sense to find the place for it in the

historical dwelling place of the Jewish people. ... In this sense, the Vatican has recognized the State of Israel as a modern constitutional state, and sees it as a legitimate home of the Jewish people ...

He further asserted that the Vatican recognizes the State of Israel as a legitimate constitutional state and as the rightful home of the Jewish people (Benedict XVI, 2018, pp. 178–179).

Emeritus Pope Benedict also wrote that

a strictly theologically-understood state – a Jewish faith-state that would view itself as the theological and political fulfillment of the [biblical] promises – is unthinkable within history according to Christian faith and contrary to the Christian understanding of [those] promises (Benedict XVI, 2018, p. 178).

However, the theological question of whether the State of Israel can be seen as the realization of God’s promises to the Jewish people merits analysis by Christian theologians, just as it does for Jewish scholars.

The “Prayer for the State of Israel,” used by Jews globally, describes Israel as “the first flowering of our redemption,” implying a beginning rather than an end – a notion akin to the “already but not yet” framework found in Christian eschatology. While *Dabru Emet*’s assertion that “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel” is valid, it suggests that further exploration is needed to understand if the State of Israel might be considered a form of this “first flowering.” Benedict XVI further remarks that “in another sense, [the State of Israel] expresses God’s faithfulness to the people of Israel” (Benedict XVI, 2018, p. 179). This perspective indicates that while the theological implications are complex, there is room for continued theological reflection and dialogue regarding the state’s role in fulfilling biblical promises.

The fourth of *Dabru Emet*’s eight points asserts that:

Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah. Central to the moral principles of Torah is the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being. All of us were created in the image of God. This shared moral emphasis can be the basis of an improved relationship between our two communities. It can also be the basis of a powerful witness to all humanity for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us. Such witness is especially needed after the unprecedented horrors of the past century (Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, & Signer, 2000).

Although Jewish and Christian ethics both derive from the Torah, their interpretations of its principles can sometimes differ significantly. In the context of the ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel, Pope Francis has expressed the view that all wars lead to terrorism by all involved parties. He has frequently stated this position. Media reports indicate that in a private conversation with the president of Israel, Francis remarked that terrorism cannot be combated with terrorism. The president of Israel responded by citing Ecclesiastes 3:8: “There is a time for war, and a time for peace.” Pope Francis seems to advocate for Israel to defend itself with minimal violence, whereas Israel contends that it must dismantle the military infrastructure of Hamas to prevent future attacks. This stance aligns with the rabbinic principle: “If you know without any doubt that someone is coming to kill you, get up earlier and eliminate him” (b. Sanhedrin 72a).

Thus, there are two competing ethical values that require deeper exploration by both Christians and Jews. Nonetheless, *Dabru Emet* was correct in urging both communities to oppose the immoralities and idolatries that continue to afflict humanity.

The fifth point in *Dabru Emet* asserts:

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. Too many Christians participated in, or were sympathetic to, Nazi atrocities against Jews. Other Christians did not protest sufficiently against these atrocities. But Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians (Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, & Signer, 2000).

The statement “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon” appears contradictory when juxtaposed with the acknowledgment of “the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews.” For centuries, Christian hostility towards Jews and Judaism fostered an environment of hatred, discrimination, and prejudice, which Hitler exploited to propagate his antisemitic ideologies and influence millions of German citizens. Moreover, the claim that Nazism would have eventually targeted Christianity itself is speculative and lacks historical evidence.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, past president of the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with Jews, eloquently addressed the complexities of this issue in 2010. He wrote

The history of Jewish-Christian relations is complex and difficult. In addition to some better times, as when bishops took Jews under their protection against pogroms by mobs, there were dark times that have been especially impressed upon the collective Jewish consciousness. The *Shoah*, the State-sponsored organized murder of approximately six million European Jews, based on primitive racial ideology, is the absolute low point in this history. The Holocaust cannot be attributed to Christianity as such, since it also had clear anti-Christian features. However, centuries-old Christian theological anti-Judaism contributed as well, encouraging a widespread antipathy for Jews, so that ideologically and racially motivated anti-Semitism could prevail in this terrible way, and the resistance against the outrageous inhuman brutality did not achieve that breadth and clarity that one should have expected (Cunningham, Sievers, Boys, Henrix, & Svartvik, 2011, p. 10).

However, from *Nostra Aetate* to our days, the Catholic Church as a whole has not reworked its teachings regarding the Jews sufficiently. In a 2010 writing by Father John T. Pawlikowski, he states that,

The church cannot enter into a fully authentic dialogue with the Jewish community, nor present itself and its teaching as a positive moral voice in contemporary society until it has cleansed its soul of its role in contributing to anti-Semitism (Cunningham et al., 2011, p. 15).

This necessitates the regular refutation of *adversus Ioudaios* texts from the patristic era and the consistent reinterpretation of certain New Testament passages (e.g., John 8:43–47; Matthew 27:25) in Christian preaching. Although significant scholarly work has been published on this topic, such as discussions on the controversial presentation of the Pharisees in the New Testament (Sievers & Levine, 2021), an annotated New Testament authored by numerous Jewish scholars (Levine & Brettler, 2011), and a joint Jewish and Catholic collection of essays on selected biblical texts (Morselli & Michelini, 2019), there remains much work for future generations.

Dabru Emet is therefore correct in stating, “we encourage the continuation of recent efforts in Christian theology to repudiate unequivocally contempt of Judaism and the Jewish people” (Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, & Signer, 2000). This aspiration remains as essential today as it was in 2000, if not more so.

Dabru Emet is a product of its time, representing the first comprehensive Jewish response to the possibility of genuine dialogue between Jews and Catholics following *Nostra Aetate*. It emerged in response to numerous declarations of repentance and friendship by the Church for past errors

committed against the Jews (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1998)¹, *Dabru Emet* highlights the common elements between both faiths because its authors believed that these Christian developments “merit a thoughtful Jewish response.” They asserted that “it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism [and] ... to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity.”

Significant progress has indeed been made since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 and the publication of *Dabru Emet* in 2000. This progress continues to the present day, with the path of dialogue and rapprochement increasingly well-established. The foundations laid through these efforts will surely ensure that regressions to the situations that led to the terrible events of the past are unlikely.

Most importantly, sustained dialogue and interaction between Catholics and Jews have created unprecedented opportunities for sincere and deeply felt friendships to develop between members of both faiths. Personally, I feel immensely blessed by my long and profound friendship with Pope Francis. I have witnessed similar relationships flourish in many other contexts. Such friendships possess a spiritual dimension. As depicted in the *Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time* sculpture, these relationships allow us to draw closer to our Creator by learning from each other’s traditions about being in covenant with the Source of our being.

Allow me to conclude with two complementary quotations from a Catholic text and a Jewish text.

First, I quote from a 1985 Vatican statement:

We [Catholics and Jews] must also accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1985).

Now, consider this excerpt from the 2017 document of the Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel:

1 On October 1, 1997, the French bishops issued an apology to the Jewish people for the Church hierarchy’s silence during the Shoah. The Drancy bishops’ conference on September 30, 1997, acknowledged this “silence” and “withdrawal into a narrow vision of the Church’s mission” during the Holocaust.

We seek to deepen our dialogue and partnership with the Church in order to foster our mutual understanding and to ... find additional ways that will enable us, together, to improve the world: to go in God's ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, provide refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed, and thus merit His blessings (The Conference of European Rabbis et al., 2017).

May these encounters between Synagogue and Ecclesia deepen the dialogue between the two faiths, allowing their shared biblical values to help soothe the troubled world and forge a path that brings humanity closer to God, and the Creator closer to His creation.

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