Speaking the truth: Jewish engagements with Christianity

by Scott Bader-Saye in the August 15, 2001 issue

A Christian who leads a Bible study for his teammates as well as pregame prayers with the opposing team, Charlie Ward of the New York Knicks recently raised hackles with his comments about Jews printed in the *New York Times Magazine*. “Jews are stubborn,” he proclaimed to *Times* reporter Eric Konigsberg, adding, “Why did they persecute Jesus unless he knew something they didn’t want to accept?” Citing Matthew’s Gospel, Ward noted, “They had his blood on their hands.”

Though this interchange was a small part of Konigsberg’s story, the words provoked an uproar from the league, the fans and the media, and it renewed a public conversation about Christian anti-Judaism. NBA commissioner David Stern condemned Ward’s religious views, asserting that “zealotry of all types is intolerant and divisive.” Ward promptly apologized and agreed to open a dialogue with Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Surely this is a story with a happy ending—the sinner is brought to repentance and a dialogue will ensue which, presumably, will heal Ward of his zealotry.

Of course, the difficulty here is not only that Ward’s comments reflect a tradition of anti-Judaism that many Christians are trying to put behind them, but that Stern’s comments reflect the worst of liberalism’s policing of faith. In short, the real problem is not that Ward was too “zealous” but that his theology was corrupt. He is proof that despite recent changes in church teaching, the traditional stereotypes have not yet disappeared. Ward bothers liberals because he is too zealous; he bothers some of his fellow Christians because he reminds us of a past that we’d like to put behind us. However, the suggestion that we take our faith less seriously or believe it less strongly (à la Stern) only serves to trivialize both Christianity and Judaism. Rather, what we need, and perhaps what Ward will find in his dialogues with Eckstein, are opportunities for each tradition to engage and reevaluate the other while taking its own theological traditions seriously.

I recently taught a course in which we attempted just that. After examining the traditional Christian teaching of supersessionism—that is, the belief that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's chosen ones—we surveyed some of the post-Holocaust Christian literature, from the groundbreaking Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* to the many ecclesial statements and theological writings that have striven to revise Christian understandings of Judaism. We found that in the latter half of the 20th century Christian churches have proclaimed with near unanimity their rejection of supersessionism and their affirmation that God's covenant with Israel has not been revoked.

The prospects for a new relationship between the church and Israel intrigued the students, for it seemed that we were entering a new era of dialogue and mutual recognition. So, to put the theory into practice, I invited a rabbi to come talk with the class. Expecting an enthusiastic affirmation of the new turn in Christian theology, we were surprised by the words of our guest. This Jewish teacher frankly saw no compelling reason for Jews to engage in dialogue with Christians. Yes, he said, we are happy that Christians no longer teach contempt for the synagogue, and yes, we are pleased with any efforts to end the persecution of Jews. But, he continued, it is not clear that Jews need an ongoing dialogue with or about Christians in the way that Christians seem to need to come to grips with Jews and Judaism.

While the students were a bit disappointed by this response, it was instructive and challenging to all of us. Was our Christian enthusiasm about a renewed relationship with Israel a one-sided affair? Was there, in fact, no reason for Jews to make similar gestures toward Christianity?

Responding to these kinds of questions, a group of Jewish rabbis and scholars issued a statement, "Dabru Emet" ("Speak Truth"), on the eve of Yom Kippur 2000. The statement, published in the *New York Times* and several other newspapers, was intended as "a thoughtful Jewish response" to the "dramatic and unprecedented shift" that has occurred in Jewish-Christian relations, not only through reformulation of Christian teachings but through explicit ecclesial statements of remorse on the part of both Catholics and Protestants. "Dabru Emet" offers a set of "brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to each other," which include: "Jews and Christians worship the same God"; "Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book—the Bible (what Jews call 'Tanakh' and Christians call the 'Old Testament')"; "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon"; and "Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace."

The hopeful work begun with “Dabru Emet” continues in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* . The editors of the volume, who are also signers of “Dabru Emet,” believe that it is time for Jews “to acknowledge . . . recent changes in Christianity and to examine their implications for Jewish life in the Western world.” The volume constitutes a milestone in Jewish-Christian dialogue and has set the agenda for future conversations.

Two central goals characterize the essays in this book. The first is to renew Jewish self-understanding through traditional rabbinic categories, and the second is to understand and interpret Christianity from within these categories. Together these goals serve to prevent any loss of identity to a homogenous “common ground,” while they resist the tendency in public discourse, exemplified in the Charlie Ward episode, to seek harmony through the diluting of religious passion. In contrast, the methodology set forth by the editors opposes the relativizing of theological claims on the part of either dialogue partner. Only when we are clear about our own patterns of life and belief will we be empowered to embrace the other without fear that this will mean a loss of our traditions.

That this fear of being subsumed by Christianity lingers among Jews today is not surprising given that until recently “dialogue” with Christians, the wielders of cultural and political power, usually involved more polemic and proselytizing than understanding and cooperation. But the demise of Christian cultural power has changed the landscape for Jewish-Christian dialogue. It has effected a shift of attention among Christians from an infatuation with the dominion of “the nations” to a recovery of the significance of God’s people Israel. It has likewise produced a situation for the Jews in which they may engage Christians not as a political threat but as fellow travelers on the path of blessing.

The book is organized around a selection of theological loci that Jews and Christians hold in common: God, Scripture, Commandment, Israel, Worship, Suffering, Embodiment, Redemption, Sin and Repentance, and Image of God (the lack of a chapter devoted to Messiah and Eschatology is a puzzling omission, though the chapters on Embodiment and Redemption do touch on these issues). Each chapter consists of two essays by Jewish writers, who seek both to clarify Jewish teaching on a topic and to give a Jewish account of the corresponding Christian teaching. A Christian writer then responds to the previous essays by answering the questions, “Do I recognize my Christianity in what has been written?” and “What is the significance of Judaism for my understanding of Christianity?”

Many of the essayists seek common ground between Jews and Christians on the basis of our common enemies: a growing secularism that trivializes religion and a marketplace that turns religion into a commodity of personal preference. Given that these trends threaten Jews and Christians alike, we have reason to join forces as countercultures that seek not so much to remake the other in our image as simply to sustain our witness in a hostile environment. As David Novak puts it, “In this age of secularism both Christians and Jews must learn how to sing the song of the Lord God of Israel in the new exile (galut) in the strange land of contemporary society. Our relationship is therefore more than ‘interreligious’ in the usual sense of that term. For better or for worse, we have never really been without each other. And, now, we need each other in new and surprising ways.”

Some writers in the volume, including Irving Greenberg, hope or even expect that Christians and Jews might be able to confront secularism and work toward the healing of creation with a united moral vision. The Jewish basis for this hope lies especially in the Noahide Laws, a set of seven laws binding upon all humanity that were, according to rabbinic tradition, given to Noah. Thus, a gentile who follows the Noahide Laws is considered righteous by Jews. According to David Novak, these laws form a kind of natural law within Judaism.

Yet, as Elliot Dorff points out, the apparent agreement on issues such as idolatry, killing innocent life, and sexual immorality belies deep interpretive differences, not only between but within religious traditions. “Even if other faiths prohibit those things, they may not interpret them the same way or give them the same degree of emphasis as Judaism does. For that matter, within and among Christian and Jewish denominations themselves, past and contemporary debates abound as to the scope of those prohibitions; so, for example, in our own time, homosexual sex has been hotly debated within many Christian and Jewish groups. Thus, contrary to Professor Novak’s claim, these prohibitions cannot constitute a strong and clear basis for interfaith—or even intrafaith—commonality.”

I quote Dorff at length because his comments raise questions not only concerning Jewish and Christian ethics, but concerning the project of the volume as a whole. What sense can it make to seek dialogue or commonality between “Judaism” and “Christianity” when we are unable within each tradition to reach agreement on many central issues of faith and practice? Because of this ambiguity it is not always clear in each set of essays which Judaism is dialoguing with which Christianity (and with 32 contributors the ambiguity is only heightened!). Further complicating the

matter is the perhaps overly ambitious agenda of the volume—attempting not only to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue from the perspective of Judaism, but, at the same time, to renew Jewish self-understanding and provide Christian responses.

Of course, all these issues are indeed interrelated, and we do, in fact, need to bring these voices together for reflection. But for the reader the volume lacks a sense of flow or unity because with each essay one has to determine not only how the Jewish writers are thinking of Christians and how the Christian writer is understanding Jews but what kind of Jew and what kind of Christian are being brought together in this particular chapter. This observation may not be so much a critique of the volume as it is a confession that these kinds of conversations are always messy and rarely produce anything like “consensus.” What we might rather hope for, as Stanley Hauerwas suggests, are the discoveries of analogies between the traditions that might help Jews and Christians alike “survive in a world that is not constituted by the recognition much less the worship of our God.” Or, to put it differently, what we are to look for in these dialogues is not a single voice or a unified witness but, as Lawrence Hoffman suggests, an exploration of the root metaphors that we share in common, such as covenant, paschal offering and saving blood.

One of the most significant essays in the volume, the concluding Christian reflection by George Lindbeck, helps us see precisely how the recognition of analogies and shared metaphors can in fact empower a community to live its own tradition more faithfully. He suggests that what is needed by Christians today is not only the rejection of supersessionism but also a reclaiming of the understanding of church as Israel. While this may seem paradoxical—if the church is now Israel, doesn’t that imply that the Jews are not?—Lindbeck believes that in fact there can and should be an appropriation of a shared identity with the Jews that refuses to be an expropriation or commandeering of Israel’s identity. The best way Christians can resist the “pervasive pluralistic consumerism destructive of all enduring traditions and communities . . . is the reappropriation without expropriation of the church’s roots in Israel and Israel’s scriptures. For this task, Christians need the help of the original proprietors, and both parties will find that both the distinctiveness and the depth of their respective roots in the shared sacred text are increased rather than diminished by their collaboration.” Only as a people that understands itself to be elected for witness will the church (and synagogue) be able to withstand the pervasive voluntarism that would turn their communities into mere voluntary associations. At its best, Jewish-Christian dialogue will help each tradition interpret

and embody its own witness to the God of Israel and the Abrahamic covenant.

Lindbeck's distinction between appropriation and expropriation could have come in handy during the recent fracas over Johnny Hart's *B.C.* comic strip. On Easter Sunday Hart's comic depicted a menorah being extinguished candle by candle, frame by frame, as the seven last words of Jesus were recalled. In the final frame the menorah becomes a smoldering cross, and in a nearby cave (an empty tomb), bread and wine are set at a table with the words "Do this in remembrance of me." Some outraged Jewish readers took offense, assuming that the comic was meant to suggest Christianity's extinguishing and replacing of Judaism. These readers interpreted the comic as a Christian "expropriation" of Israel's identity and traditions. Hart, on the other hand, responded by denying any implication of a "replacement theology" in the strip. He explained, "I noticed one day that the center section of the menorah—the sacred symbol of Judaism—bore the shape of the cross. I wanted everyone to see the cross in the menorah. It was a revelation to me that tied God's chosen people to their spiritual next of kin—the disciples of the Risen Christ."

What Hart thought he was doing was what Lindbeck called "appropriation," the acknowledging of shared symbols and stories, even a shared identity as God's people that does not extinguish the Jews but upholds them as partners in the covenant. Lindbeck's linguistic clarification might have provided the two sides with the conceptual tools necessary to move the exchange in a more constructive direction.

What is needed still, as David Sandmel notes in the conclusion of the volume, is for the conversation and corresponding trust to filter down from the relatively small group of (largely academic) Jews and Christians to people in the pews. This is as true of Charlie Ward as it is of the rabbi who spoke to my class. "Traditional mistrust and misunderstanding are still very much alive within each community. As important as this pioneering theological exploration is—and I believe it is very important—expanding the circle of dialogue is equally important. This expansion will not be easy." What will be necessary is the patience to sustain conversations that may not produce agreement, indeed may exacerbate disagreement, but which will in the end, God willing, make us friends.

And let us not underestimate the importance of friendship, for, as Hauerwas notes in his essay, "God intends nothing less than to make us His friends and, therefore, friends with one another." Such friendship with each other may in fact be our best

hope for *tikkun olam*—the healing of the world. This volume, breaking new ground in its Jewish reappraisals of Christianity, contributes richly to this goal.