

Orthodox Rabbis: Christianity Is Neither an Accident Nor an Error

A statement by a group of Orthodox rabbis calls Christianity part of a divine plan in which God would have Jews and Christians work together to redeem the world.

Although signed so far by 28 rabbis mostly from the more liberal wing of the most traditional branch of Judaism, the statement marks a turning point for Orthodox Jews, who until now have limited interfaith cooperation to working on social, economic and political causes. But this statement puts Christianity in a distinct Jewish theological perspective—and an extremely positive one.

“(W)e acknowledge that Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations,” the seven-paragraph statement, issued on Dec. 3, asserts. “In separating Judaism and Christianity, God willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies.”

“We understand that there is room in traditional Judaism to see Christianity as part of God’s covenantal plan for humanity, as a development out of Judaism that was willed by God,” said Rabbi Irving Greenberg, a signatory to the statement, titled “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians.”

The signatories include Orthodox figures who have been at the forefront of interfaith dialogue efforts, such as Rabbis David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee and Shlomo Riskin, founding rabbi of New York’s Lincoln Square Synagogue.

Still, Greenberg conceded that most Orthodox rabbis will not

sign on to the statement because they reject the idea that it is the will of God to reach out to gentiles through Christianity, and that Christianity is a divinely willed phenomenon.

Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, one of the largest groups representing Orthodox rabbis, said the group values its partnerships with Christians. The reluctance to engage over theology, he said, is rooted in the teaching of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the most esteemed Orthodox rabbis of the 20th century, who prohibited engagement with other religions on theological matters.

“Soloveitchik said very clearly that each faith community is unique and entitled to the integrity of its own positions, which are neither negotiable, nor able to be fully understood by people from other faith traditions,” said Dratch, who added that Soloveitchik understood Jews as a small and vulnerable group.

“There are still groups which have as their mission the evangelization of the Jewish people,” he added.

The rabbinical statement begins with a reference to the Holocaust as “the warped climax to centuries of disrespect, oppression and rejection of Jews and the consequent enmity that developed between Jews and Christians.” It then goes on to praise Nostra Aetate, the 50-year-old Vatican declaration that repudiated the idea, once common among Christians, that the Jews killed Christ and were deserving of the centuries of persecution they had suffered.

“Today Jews have experienced sincere love and respect from many Christians that have been expressed in many dialogue initiatives, meetings and conferences around the world,” the statement continues. Though not a direct response to the anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the statement continues that the

Catholic document had paved the way for a Jewish one.

"Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between God and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes," it reads.

The rabbis who signed on to the statement, which was released by the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel, come from the U.S., Israel and Europe.

The statement has met with appreciation from Christian theologians, including Michael Peppard, a Fordham University theology professor. He noted on the blog of *Commonweal*, the Catholic journal, that while the Reform and Conservative movements in Judaism—representing most American Jews—have long engaged in interfaith theological discussions, Orthodox Judaism has in the past found such dialogue problematic.

By calling Christianity "neither accident nor error," Peppard says this Orthodox rabbinical statement is going further than a similar document titled "Dabru Emet," signed by mostly by non-Orthodox rabbis and Jewish leaders in 2000.

It may be that "Orthodox Judaism is in the midst of a serious reckoning with the fundamental tenets of Christianity," Peppard wrote. "This theologically compelling and provocative statement is quite a 50th anniversary present for *Nostra Aetate*."

The Orthodox statement includes no reference to Islam, which, with Judaism and Christianity, also traces itself back to the biblical patriarch Abraham. Greenberg said he believes Islam is not ripe for such a statement, because too much of Islamic culture currently is steeped in anti-Semitism and "almost genocidal hostility to Israel."

But as the evolution of Christian-Jewish relations has shown,

hatreds need not last for all of history, and one day, he hopes, the statement released this month can serve as a model for one on Islam and Judaism. {eo}

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