From CONFRONTATION to COVENANTAL PARTNERSHIP

Jews and Christians Reflect on the Orthodox Rabbinic Statement To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven

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The Import of To Do the Will – a Catholic and a Jewish Perspective

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INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIAN TRANSFORMATION, JEWISH DISINTEREST

The issuance in 2015 of the Statement To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians (hereafter TDW) with the approbation of dozens of Orthodox rabbis on three continents, is a historic benchmark in the post-Second World War “new relationship” developing between the two communities. As the authors admit, this became a possibility with the “promulgation of Nostra Aetate fifty years ago, [which] started the process of reconciliation between our two communities.” That statement had dramatically burst upon the consciousness of the general public during the Second Vatican Council on October 28, 1965. Although preceded by statements from other Christian bodies1, Nostra Aetate was released under the highest central authority of the world’s largest Christian community. Its words, therefore, had enormous influence within and beyond the Catholic world, rippling like a seismic wave throughout the many varieties of Christianity. It was clear

that its authors hoped *Nostra Aetate* could inspire reconciliation between Jews and Christians despite the antagonism and suspicion that had characterized their interactions for nearly two millennia.

In the following decades, many subsequent Catholic documents and similar declarations from other Christian communities echoed *Nostra Aetate*'s call. They urged friendship and dialogue between Christians and Jews. They also repudiated long-lived contemptuous teachings about Jews and Judaism.

Over time many Jews personally responded positively to these changes. However, the Jewish world at large remained mostly indifferent to or unaware of these unprecedented developments. Jewish religious and secular organizations apparently saw little need for any type of formal response. There are several reasons for this.\(^2\)

First, unlike Christians, for whom serious consideration of Judaism is unavoidable (e.g., their biblical canon includes the story of ancient Israel in the Old Testament; at the center of Christian faith is Jesus, born a Jew; nearly all early writings were composed by his Jewish followers), Jewish theological self-understanding does not require religious engagement with Christianity. While Jews who became aware of *Nostra Aetate* and similar texts welcomed their novel, positive tone, they tended not to see any theological significance in them for their own religious life, hence they found no need for a communal religious response.

Second, contemporary Jews are aware of a long history of Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism, with Jews sometimes having been the victims of expulsions and murderous violence. It is to be expected that many would regard the apparently sudden shift in Christian views as unimpressive or insignificant, especially in the traumatic aftermath of the Nazi genocide of two-thirds of European Jews. There was no need to respond to what might amount to a temporary aberration from the inimical Christian norm.

Third, there is no authoritative Jewish hierarchy or organization, and so no one to issue official, let alone binding declarations, unlike the Catholic Church. There are no recognized spokespersons ready to respond to Christian statements on behalf of the diverse and decentralized Jewish world.

Fourth, the Jewish culture of religious discourse as exemplified in rabbinic literature is quite different in presuppositions, methods, and categories from Christian theological procedures. Jews would therefore be disinclined to respond "in kind" to the types of theological formulations found in statements such as *Nostra Aetate*. As Deborah Weissman has concisely summarized: "Jews do not issue documents; they study texts, write commentaries on them, and then write commentaries upon the commentaries."\(^3\)

For these reasons it is unsurprising that in the five decades since 1965, there have only been a handful of attempts to give some kind of organizational Jewish response to *Nostra Aetate* and similar Christian declarations.\(^4\)

There is a further reason to call *TDW* a historic benchmark: it was the first text composed and endorsed by "Orthodox Rabbis who lead communities, institutions and seminaries in Israel, the United States and Europe." Orthodox Jews generally avoid theological engagement with Christians. This stance was encouraged by a leading Orthodox authority, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who in 1964 published an essay called "Confrontation."\(^5\) He offered several reasons why Jews should not converse with Christians about

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\(^2\) See Deborah Weissman, "Has There Been a Jewish Response to *Nostra Aetate*?," in *Paths to Dialogue in Our Age: International Perspectives*, ed. Edmund Kee-Fook Chia and Fatih Erol Tuncer (Melbourne: Australian Catholic University, 2014), 33–49.

\(^3\) "Has There Been a Jewish Response to *Nostra Aetate*?" 47.


their respective theologies and beliefs. One was the pressure that normal social interaction would place upon Jews to reciprocate friendly Christian overtures at the risk of compromising their own religious convictions: "we certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions ... to trade favors [with Christians] pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile 'some' differences. Such a suggestion would be nothing but a betrayal of our great tradition and heritage." The Rabbinical Council of America espoused Soloveitchik's views in a formal statement appended to his article.\(^6\)

**RESPONDING TO REAL REFORM**

It is therefore significant that in 2015, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, two groups of Orthodox Jews composed statements on the declaration.\(^8\) In addition to _TDW_, other Orthodox Jews prepared an essay _Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate_ (hereinafter _BJR_). This was issued under the auspices of three major Orthodox organizations: The Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.\(^9\)

\(^6\) "Confrontation," 25.

\(^7\) "Confrontation," 28–29.

\(^8\) We note publications by the American Jewish Committee, _In Our Time: AJC and Nostra Aetate: A Reflection after 50 Years_ (https://www.ajc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2017-09/AJC_and_Nostra_Aetate_IN_OUR_TIME.PDF) and the Anti-Defamation League, _50th Anniversary Nostra Aetate 1965–2015_ (https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/education-outreach/interfaith-affairs/adl-nostra-aetate-50th-anniversary.pdf). Both texts focus on the history of the declaration but do not develop Jewish theological responses, although the ADL included the text of _Dabru Emet_.

\(^9\) It is available at http://files.constantcontact.com/6f28f49f001/7ba1a585-80c5-44db-b7ea-b2b36fbcc8853.pdf. We also note the 2015 publication of a _Declaration for the Upcoming Jubilee of Brotherhood_, written by the French Jewish community and formally presented by the Chief Rabbi of France to the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris at a _Nostra Aetate_ anniversary ceremony. For the French original, see https://www.ajcf.fr/Declaration-pour-le-jubile-de-fraternite-a-venir. For an unofficial English translation, see http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1356-declaration-for-the-upcoming-jubilee-of-brotherhood. Since this short text comes from the wider Jewish community, it is outside the scope of this essay which focuses primarily on the Orthodox statements _TDW_ and _BJR_.

Now, decades after _Nostra Aetate_, both Orthodox statements acknowledge genuine changes in Catholic teaching.\(^10\) These include: the rejection of the notion of a divine curse on Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus; the condemnation of anti-Semitism; the affirmation that Jews are blessed with an eternal covenant with God; the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel; the abandonment of conversionary campaigns targeting Jews; and the hope that Jews and Christians could be partners in the service of God in the world. _TDW_ and _BJR_ thus reflect a transformed world. They speak in friendly tones, emphasize positive aspects of Christianity, and echo Christian hopes for cooperative endeavors.

After deciding to prepare statements for the fiftieth anniversary of _Nostra Aetate_, the authors faced the serious task of engaging with and being guided by Jewish tradition to address a topic raised only rarely in Jewish thought: the religious significance of Christianity for Jews and Judaism. Recognizing the dramatically changed situation after the Second Vatican Council, they sought to offer a positive assessment of Christians and Christianity, but as Orthodox Jews they were committed to working within the parameters of the received Jewish tradition. In this essay we ask whether the positive statements about Christianity made by these Orthodox Jews represent any departure from traditional Jewish thought and if so, in what ways?
TRADITIONAL JEWISH MODELS

As background, it is necessary first to recall the traditional Jewish division of humanity into two categories, Jews / Israel and non-Jews / the nations. About the former category, there is of course much to be found in the Jewish tradition. About the latter category, there is far less. In traditional thought, the sharp divide between Jews and Gentiles is consistently maintained, and it is this division that is one primary marker of Jewish identity generally.11 Nonetheless, already in biblical times and then with greater sophistication in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, Jews considered the theological status of those who are not Jews. Among the questions they asked were: What did God expect of them? Were they inherently evil, or could they be good without knowing the Torah? The rabbis did not assume that all non-Jews were forsaken by God. They suggested that God expected non-Jews to follow seven universal commandments. Appearing first in the Tosefta (late 2nd century CE), these were dated to the days of Noah as commands for all humanity to observe.12 Non-Jews who observed them were judged to be “righteous among the Gentiles.”13

In theory, when encountering or even thinking theologically about those from other religions, Jews need not examine their specific beliefs per se but their conformity to the Noahide principles. Did the teachings of the other religion prohibit idolatry, murder, theft, etc.? If the religion forbade such behavior and functioned with a reasonable legal system, then its followers could be considered righteous by Jews regardless of the other religion’s specific theological claims. To bring more precision to what was stated above, humanity could thus be divided into two categories: Jews and non-Jews, with the latter judged righteous or unrighteous (according to their fidelity to the Noahide laws).

When later Jews interacted with Muslims and Christians, they recognized Muslims as strict monotheists. They could fulfill the Noahide stipulations and be considered righteous human beings. They might not possess the full knowledge of God’s will that Jews in their covenantal life in the Torah had, but they rejected idolatry and could meet God’s minimal ethical standards. Christianity, however, posed unique difficulties for medieval Jews regarding idolatry: did the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation and the production of “graven images” make Christians idolaters?

The trend into the medieval period was away from theological hostility toward Christianity and in favor of some interaction with Christians, for both economic and theological reasons.14 Despite their Trinitarianism, prominent twelfth-century rabbis had somewhat tolerant views and refrained from denouncing Christianity as idolatry.15 An exception was Maimonides (ca. 1138-1204), unquestionably the most influential medieval Jewish thinker, who praised the strict monotheism of Muslims but said “that this Christian nation, who advocate the messianic claim, in all their various sects, all of them are idolaters.”16 Nonetheless, in a text cited (but not quoted) in TDW, Maimonides saw a constructive purpose for Christianity:

These words of Jesus of Nazareth and this Arab [Mohammed] who came after him were only to prepare the way for the Messiah-King and to order the whole world to serve the Lord altogether, as it says in Scripture: “For I shall unite all the peoples into a pure speech, all of them to call upon the name of the Lord and to serve Him with one shoulder [Zeph. 3:9].” ... How is this so? The whole world is already filled with the

12. They are: no idol worship, no cursing the name of God, no murder, no sexual immorality, no theft, no eating the flesh of a living animal, and establishing a legal system of justice; see tAZ 8:4.
words of [their] messiah and the words of the commandments, and these words they have spread to the farthest islands and among many obstinate peoples, and they discuss these words and the commandments out of the Torah. They say, “These commandments were true, but are already invalid today, and are not meant to be perpetual, . . . But when the true Messiah arises and will triumph and be uplifted and exalted, all of them will immediately return and comprehend that their ancestors misled them.”

In this text, Maimonides, irrespective of his generally negative view of Christian faith, concludes that despite their supersessionist attitudes toward the Torah’s commands, Christians (and Muslims) disseminate the commandments and knowledge of the God of Israel everywhere. When the true Messiah comes at the end of days, they will see the error of their past devaluing of the Torah as Jews understand it.

Maimonides thus nuanced the previous categorization of Jews and non-Jews (righteous or unrighteous) by viewing certain non-Jews as agents in furthering God’s intentions for the world. He could regard them positively, not on their own religious terms as Christians or Muslims, but by showing how their actions align with Jewish hopes. They respect Israel’s scriptures and yearn for a genuine connection with the God of Israel. Because of particular features of their religion vis-à-vis Jewish belief they are not merely generic Noahides anymore.

A later theologian, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), should be brought into this discussion, both because of his high status in the Orthodox community to this day and because both TDW and BJR refer to his work. A German Jew committed to traditional Judaism and also to integration into contemporary society, he describes quite favorably “the peoples in whose midst we live today.” At the lowest level, he speaks of them as generic non-Jews who are expected to comply solely with the Noahide laws. He then raises his assessment, for he recognizes that he lives among Christians, who accept the divine origins of the Bible and the existence and sovereignty of God. This higher status, however, rests on their contribution to Jewish goals. It is because Christians “have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation” and “helped disseminate among the nations” its beliefs that they are set apart from pagans and idolaters. He does not speak positively or negatively about their particular Christian views. In those he is uninterested; what prompts his praise are Christian claims that parallel Jewish claims.

JEWISH TRADITIONS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY AND TDW AND BJR

With this theological and historical context in mind, it is possible to more fully assess the claims made about Christianity in the contemporary statements TDW and BJR. There are relatively few resources in the Jewish tradition for them to draw upon in order to speak theologically about Christianity, for it is a topic that has been taken up by only a small number of thinkers. The Orthodox authors are influenced by, and indeed see as normative, the views of revered figures such as Maimonides, Hirsch, and a few others, and this limits how much their views of Christianity might be revised. Thus, in general they do not engage with Christianity on its own terms.

20. He quotes here Rabbi Jacob Emden.
21. Though there are exceptions in TDW; see below.
Rather, like Maimonides and Hirsch, they attend to the particularity of Christianity when praising Christians for furthering Jewish or generic goals. Fifty years after Nostra Aetate and the emergence of profound changes in Christian theologies of Judaism, they are strongly influenced by earlier, pre-Nostra Aetate Jewish theologians. While they are far from indifferent to the changes that have taken place since the 1960s, they seek continuity with views established centuries ago.

In TDW these include “articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity” and “perfect[ing] 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.” Recalling traditional praise, the authors celebrate what Christians have in common with Jews, which besides moral values includes acceptance of “Jewish Sacred Scriptures” and “the ethical monotheism of Abraham.” They go so far as to claim that Jesus “strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically,” in essence recalling the Jewishness of the historical Jesus. Like earlier writers, they cast these Christian beliefs as grounded in Christian faith but valuable according to a Jewish calculus.

Likewise, BJR includes similar reasons to praise Christians. On religious grounds, they “share common beliefs in the Divine origin of the Torah” (i.e., they believe what Jews believe). Using the ethical terminology of Noahides, Christians are asked to undertake “peaceful collaboration for the betterment of our shared world and the lives of the children of Noah.” These are humanitarian goals, but indicate no engagement with the particularity of Christianity.

These excerpts illustrate the enduring influence of traditional approaches to Christianity and reflect the dominant perspectives of the Statements. However, there are three places where the authors of TDW tentatively move beyond the traditional model and affirm the religious legitimacy of Christianity in its own terms, as Christians might do for themselves. These hint at some possibilities for broader future reflection. For example, they write “We Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us [including] the relationship with the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who loves and cares for all of us….” The phrase italicized here (it is not italicized in the original) can be read to imply that Christians have a genuine, living connection with the God of Israel. This suggests a step beyond a one-way communication, of Christians praying to and yearning for God, and points toward something embracing two parties, Christians and God, interacting somehow. Surprisingly, the authors hint at the depth of that relationship by placing it in parallel with the Jewish relationship with God, about which they have no doubt. This is unexpected. While the authors otherwise speak almost entirely about the good that Christians do and can do, they hint here at a quality not just in Christian actions and beliefs but in God’s involvement in the world with Christians. Notably, this relational aspect of Christianity is not valued because of its role in furthering Jewish goals. Rather, the authors suggest that it has an inherent value, akin to the Jewish relationship with God.

A second example from TDW is a guarded affirmation of a fundamental Christian claim upon which their relationship with God depends: “We believe that God employs many messengers to reveal His truth.” Reading this as an oblique reference to Jesus (though not only Jesus), the authors appear open to the possibility that the God of Israel genuinely interacts with non-Jews. This is no gentle delusion or fantasy, but a divine if indirect disclosure (“truth”). Christians of course see Jesus as the one sent by God, though the Jewish statement, in its vagueness, simply opens up this possibility. Nonetheless, this too is a bold claim and potentially far-reaching. It is categorically different from statements about what Christians “accept,” “affirm,” “believe,” “remain dedicated to,” etc., because it speaks about what God does (“employs messengers,” that is, communicates) with Christians.

The third example is the use of the adjective “covenantal” when describing a responsibility shared by Jews and Christians: “Both

22. They quote Emden here.

23. While in Jewish tradition God is shown interacting with non-Jews, in this context the interaction seems to be of a higher religious order.
Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty. The idea is repeated in TDW's closing sentence: "Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in redeeming the world." Covenantal language is of course central to Jewish identity. It captures the relationship between God and the people as well as the content or terms of the relationship, usually understood as commandments to be observed or responsibilities on both parties. Its usage in TDW is another hint of a special status for Christians, for in speaking of a Christian covenantal mission the authors introduce a striking parallel for Christians to the traditional Jewish notion of covenant. This Christian covenanting includes not just generic moral action ("to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty") but specific religious actions on behalf of the God of Israel ("all humanity will call on His name").

A comparison with BJR is instructive. Its authors also speak positively about what Christians do, and put it in Jewish terms: "... some of Judaism's highest authorities have asserted that Christians maintain a special status because they worship the Creator of Heaven and Earth Who liberated the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and Who exercises providence over all creation." This favorable assessment assigns Christians a "special status" on account of their commitment to monotheism and more specifically to the God of Israel. The nature of this status is left unexplained, though it resembles the traditional claim (above) regarding Christians' religious faith. In contrast to TDW, there is no reflection of Christian self-understanding in BJR, nor any broader hint about God's being in a living relationship with Christians. BJR's authors give no sense that there are two "parties" involved with each other.

Catholics engage their own tradition in the light of the new relationship with Jews

TDW occasionally and with caution alludes to some kind of covenantal relationship between the One God of Israel and Christians, which, of course, is how Christians understand themselves. Although most previous Orthodox writers were not prepared to consider this, in today's post-Nostra Aetate context the authors of TDW go further along the stream of traditional Jewish thought that viewed Christianity as having a role in the divine plan and hence having some kind of connection with the Holy One.

An equivalent dynamic is evident in the Vatican's reflections for the fiftieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate, The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable (Rom 11:29) (hereafter G&C). The theological horizons of the two statements are quite different. As noted above, the self-understanding of Jews does not need to take Christianity into account. Also, the Noahide tradition provided Jews with a conceptual framework to perceive righteousness among Gentiles. However, Catholic thought after Nostra Aetate must reckon both with a Judaism that is now engaged positively for the first time and with its own recurring tendency to restrict salvation to the baptized.

In grappling with the legacy of hostile Christian teaching about Jews, Catholics must sometimes directly contradict past claims, as when Nostra Aetate declared, "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures," a view that had prevailed throughout Christian history.

Nonetheless, with some similarities to the Orthodox authors of


25. The most extreme expression of this soteriological exclusivism is probably in Cantate Domino, promulgated by Pope Eugene IV in 1441, during a period of intense competition for church leadership: The Church "firmly believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart 'into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels,' unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock . . . ."

TDW, the Catholic authors seek continuity with traditional teachings and so also begin gingerly to reinterpret received formulas. Out of many possible examples, space allows us to describe only one.

G&C declares, "Confessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith" (§35). As mentioned above, over the centuries many Christians understood this to mean that only Christ's followers were "saved." However, while reaffirming the centrality of Christ for human salvation, G&C repeatedly insists that "it does not in any way follow that the Jews are excluded from God's salvation because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God" (§36).

Just as it could be said that TDW hints at a more-than-Noahide covenantal status for Christians, so here G&C affirms an ongoing covenantal status for Jews despite their rejecting Christian claims about God's revelation in Christ. The Vatican writers bluntly state the theological challenge they face: "That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery" (ibid.).

Moreover, just as TDW showed signs of awareness of Christian self-understanding, G&C also has indications that Catholics have begun "to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." Thus, it cites a rabbinic text in its own description of the Torah, while simultaneously evoking Christian soteriological language: "The Torah is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God. Whoever observes the Torah has life in its fullness (cf. Pirkei Avot II, 7). By observing the Torah, the Jew receives a share in communion with God" (§24; italics added). Although Jews do not think of "salvation" as Christians do, the authors of G&C have learned from Jews and Jewish texts about their covenantal life with a God who saves, which therefore must (in Christian terms) somehow be "saving."

CONCLUSION

This analysis of an Orthodox Jewish text, TDW, and its comparison with a Catholic text, suggests that similar if not exactly parallel processes are unfolding in the two communities. Both sets of authors uphold the defining centers of their traditions – the Torah and Christ respectively. However, in our post-Nostra Aetate world both begin to reconceptualize traditional views of each other, although TDW does this much more tentatively. In different ways, this may prompt new understandings of their respective loci of revelation. The Orthodox writers can cautiously conceive of Christians as covenantal partners even though Christianity is not centered on the Torah, while the Catholic writers struggle with the paradox of Jews as "participants in God's salvation" even without receiving Christian revelation.

Although Jews and Catholics have different ways of doing theology, it is intriguing to see how both engage their respective traditions in response to their changed relationship. Perhaps by exploring together our respective ways of "traditioning," we can assist each other in being faithful to our particular religious identities while also enhancing our ability to learn of God from one another. TDW makes an important contribution to that prospect.

27. They here quote from the preamble to the Vatican's 1974 Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate.

28. Cf. John 10:10b: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

29. This term is defined by Mary Elizabeth Moore: "The concept of traditioning is based on the idea that the [faith] community lives in its tradition, passing on its past, living in its present, and moving toward its future... [It affirms] the importance of passing on the community's beliefs, values, and practices and the importance of reflecting on and revising the community's actions." See Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change: A New Model for Christian Religious Education (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 17-18.