

CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

- Topic: The Gift and Challenge of Reconciliation
between Christians and Jews
- Convener: Elizabeth T. Groppe, Xavier University
- Presenters: John Pawlikowski, Catholic Theological Union
Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary
Rabbi Michael A. Signer, University of Notre Dame

The session's three presenters were introduced by Elena Procaro Foley, the Driscoll Professor of Jewish-Catholic Studies at Iona College, who expressed gratitude for their pioneering work to build new bridges between Christians and Jews. After nearly two millennia of what Jules Isaac termed Christianity's "teaching of contempt" for Jews and Judaism, the last forty years have witnessed a movement of Christian repentance, marked by *Nostra Aetate's* repudiation of the deicide charge and subsequent affirmations of God's enduring Covenant with the Jewish people. The session focused on two recent statements of importance to Christian-Jewish reconciliation: "*Dabru Emet* [To Speak the Truth]: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity" and "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People."

Michael Signer, unable to attend the session in person, contributed a paper on *Dabru Emet*. This statement, which he coauthored, was published in the *New York Times* on October 11, 2000, signed by over 150 rabbis and university professors, and followed by the publication of the companion book *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Westview Press, 2000). Signer's paper discussed the origins of *Dabru Emet*, the process of its composition, its genre, and its intention to initiate serious discussion in the Jewish community about the recent changes in Christian approaches to Judaism. The theocentric statement makes eight succinct points, which Signer described as *quaestiones disputatae* intended to spark discussion and debate. A foundational presupposition of the statement is that Jews and Christians can acknowledge and respect the otherness and difference of their two communities. Signer concluded with some reflections on the reception of *Dabru Emet* and the questions and controversies it has generated.

John Pawlikowski and Mary Boys both spoke on the statement "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People," issued in September 2002 by the ecumenical Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, of which they are members. The statement, Pawlikowski explained, was a response both to *Dabru Emet* and to recent developments in biblical scholarship that have changed the way we think about the origins of the Christian church, which separated itself from Judaism only in a long and complex process. From a Catholic perspective, "A Sacred Obligation" is also a response to Cardinal Walter Kasper's call for national bodies to speak to the question of Christian-Jewish relations in their own contexts, and it should

be read in light of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 2001 statement "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," which affirms the validity of the Jewish messianic expectation. Pawlikowski commented on several sections of "A Sacred Obligation," including section seven which states that "Christians should not target Jews for conversion," a point that has generated some strong reactions.

Boys discussed the process of composition of the statement and its intention. The statement makes ten principle points, which, she emphasized, should not be seen as the "Ten Commandments" of Christian-Jewish relations; rather, as Signer suggested with respect to *Dabru Emet*, these points are *questiones disputatae* intended to foster earnest discussion in Christian communities. Boys then reflected on the significance of the statement's title and explained that rethinking Christian faith in relation to Judaism is indeed a profoundly sacred obligation. As a practicing Catholic, she takes very seriously the church's call to repentance for the teaching of contempt and for the hatred of Jews that it legitimated. The document's intent to advance reconciliation between Christians and Jews, she explained, is a component of her own religious commitment. Boys also noted some of the challenges that the work of reconciliation faces. The enthusiastic response to Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" among many Christians has made her more sober about prospects for reconciliation, revealing a certain tone deafness to anti-Judaism among Christians, an ignorance about the history of Christian-Jewish relations, and a lack of appreciation for the ongoing repercussions of the Shoah and the deep-rooted fear that still exists in the Jewish community. Boys lamented that the fundamental changes in post-Vatican II Catholic teaching concerning the Jewish people are peripheral to the everyday life of the church, and she observed that there is a large discrepancy between official Catholic teaching on this subject and popular piety.

A lively discussion ensued. Topics of conversation included the need for better education among Christians on the history of Christian-Jewish relations, the relation of Christian-Jewish dialogue to Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue, the challenge of dialogue in a context where many Christians oppose Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's policies toward the Palestinians, the recent beatification of Anne Catherine Emmerich (whose starkly anti-Jewish writings influenced Gibson's production of his film), and the relation of Christianity's teaching of contempt for Jews to other forms of ostracism that Christians have practiced based on gender, race, and sexual orientation.

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