

# The Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity<sup>1</sup>

## Psychological and spiritual aspects<sup>2</sup>

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### Genuine Encounters

True dialogue is based on the values and skills found in genuine encounter. This has been described by philosophers including Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, and is today researched by contributors to relational psychoanalysis such as Jessica Benjamin. The values displayed in genuine encounters are honesty, modesty, compassion, and the acceptance of uncertainty (Benjamin, 2004). True dialogue goes beyond tolerance and pragmatism; it requires a pluralistic worldview that accords the dialogue partner a valuable point of view, and frees the individual from the existential blindness that naturally results from their own history and narrow humanity. These values are particularly significant for Jewish-Christian dialogue, which has suffered painful experiences in the past.

Participants in interreligious dialogue need certain mental abilities that cannot be taken for granted. So-called Intersubjectivity, "the process by which we become able to grasp the other as having a separate yet similar mind" (ibid.) is especially important. Although Intersubjectivity is considered an innate ability, being able to use it is a developmental achievement. It is human nature to be interested in the internal perception of one's vis-à-vis, but one must also be able to withstand and deal with the narcissistic insults inherent in these encounters.

Otherness is considered threatening to the self, occasionally causing fear and aggression. In interreligious encounters, the strain is particularly great, as the participants not only fear for their own identity, but for their religious tradition as well, with which they identify, consciously or unconsciously. The participants

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<sup>1</sup> The full declaration appears in the appendix.

<sup>2</sup> This article was published as Chapter 6 in Ahrens et al, *From Confrontation to Covenantal Partnership*.

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feel a psychological conflict between their need to approach representatives of other religions and their loyalty towards their own allies in faith through the generations.

The more complex one's own personal or religious identity, the better the prospects for genuine dialogue. Complexity here means a healthy balance between autonomy and bonding, without falling into the extremes of self-isolation or loss of identity. Mature eloquence is equally useful. It is speech that allows us to bear other viewpoints and interests, and protects interpersonal encounters from degenerating into a murderous power struggle." (Lacan, 1975). As with other abilities, skill in Intersubjectivity comes with practice. People experienced in interreligious dialogue can confirm that the ability to participate in dialogue is like a muscle that is strengthened through training.

Within dialogue, intersubjectivity permits what Benjamin (1995) calls "mutual recognition." Participants perceive others as similar and different subjects at the same time. In other words, as human beings with their own psychic inner worlds that include faith, narrative, and feelings. The recognition of the other has to be worked on because it conflicts with inbuilt prejudices formed for psychological reasons. "Re-cognition" means "think again" and this is exactly what it is all about: reconsidering and correcting prejudices that one has formed about fellow human beings or other cultures and religions.

Jessica Benjamin points out the paradox that the satisfaction of our personal need to be recognized by another person depends on our ability to recognize that person as an independent subject. This is the reason why people who try to control and dominate others become entangled in a vicious circle within which they become more and more distrustful and fearful. The less a dictator allows his entourage to have their own opinions, the lonelier and more paranoid he becomes. Recognition feels real only when freely given. The same applies to fundamentalists: the more they hide behind religious walls, the more threatening other religions appear to them. Even when offered a hand in dialogue, they smell deceit and hostile intent.

In the interreligious context, recognition means to respect the other religion as a legitimate and independent form of belief - similar to and at the same time different from one's own form of belief. If one side is able to take the

initial step of recognition, it will be easier for the other side to take a reciprocal step. The development of the Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity (as described by Rabbi Jehoshua Ahrens in this book) depicts this process very well. Moreover, the preface of the Statement shows that the rabbis recognize the conciliatory steps taken by the Christian side (“the hand offered”) as real. Based on this, they appreciate the Vatican declaration *Nostra Aetate* in detail (item 2). What the rabbis say is more or less this: “Over the past 50 years you Christians have turned around and revised your distorted image of Judaism. You recognize our religion as an independent path to salvation. You have let deeds follow your words and granted respect and love to our people.” This is followed by a reciprocal recognition of the salvation-historical relevance of Christianity, which from a Jewish point of view is rather revolutionary (item 3).

The positive mention of Jesus in a quote by Rabbi Yakow Emden, an important Jewish authority, is particularly moving. Jesus is extremely significant in the lives of numerous Christians, whereas for many Jews, up to now Jesus has been a symbol of anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews, and is therefore like a red rag to a bull. In each interreligious conversation, Christian participants will sooner or later ask the anxious question: what do their interlocutors think about Jesus? Mentioning him benevolently in the Statement shows that the Jewish signatories have a thorough understanding of Christian concerns.

## Inner images and real encounters

Throughout their histories, all religions have developed ideas about and images of other denominations. These are usually pejorative and devalue “the alien” or “the heathen” in comparison with co-religionists. These images have not been developed for the sake of real encounters with others, but for internal discourse, and are mainly aimed at strengthening the religion’s own identity. Daniel Boyarin (2004) impressively illustrated these processes through the parallel histories of early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism in the first few centuries CE.

To actually meet the other means confessing the inadequacies of the images one has so far visualized. Within interreligious dialogue, traditional

concepts do not necessarily need to be discarded. In the course of this new dialogue situation, a reinterpretation can often be reached. Idolatry and the biblical figure of Esau as the eternal opponent of Jacob/Israel are pejorative concepts traditionally connected in Judaism with Christianity. Both concepts are named in the Rabbinic Statement and put into a new hermeneutical framework (items 4 and 5), demonstrating that the aim of the Orthodox signatories is not to break away from Jewish categories of thinking, but to reconcile them with an improved relationship with Christianity, and to organically embed interreligious dialogue as a whole into Rabbinic Judaism. Mentioning familiar Jewish values, such as love, holiness, an intimate relationship with God, the image of God in humankind, and striving for the salvation of the world, serves the same goal, while deliberately including known verses or Jewish prayers (item 4). Furthermore, six respected Jewish authorities from different epochs are cited, who have spoken benevolently about Christianity (items 3, 4 and 5). All these features indicate that reconciliation with Christianity does not mark a break in the signatories' identity, but complies with the true spirit of Rabbinic Judaism.

## Fears, distinction, and aggression

The Statement mentions fears that have affected the relationship between Jews and Christians for generations. One central fear on the Jewish side is explicitly named: the possible misuse of interreligious dialogue for missionary purposes, which runs counter to the values of true dialogue. Furthermore, there is a call to overcome "understandable fears" on both sides (item 3). Indeed, real dialogue must not ignore mutual fears. Being threatened by the other, and the aggression that results from this, is undeniably a basic human experience, as Sartre's well-known dictum "*L'Enfer c'est les autres*" (hell is other people) succinctly puts it. Intersubjective encounter, therefore, requires a continuous review of what is really happening between the participants. Ricoeur supports a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to critically question the motivations of the dialogue participants. Only after deep mutual trust has been established through dialogue over a long period can fears, defensive images, and even aggression be communicated. Telling each other about inner prejudices and fantasies during a personal discourse can be amusing and liberating. Switching to and fro between

inner images and the real presence of the other constitutes the essence of the intersubjective encounter and makes it possible to break free from the dead end of “mismeeting” (Martin Buber). Dialogue participants need to be willing to take responsibility for their own complexes and guilty entanglements, and whenever possible combine this with a good dose of humor.

Between the need for distinction and recognition, there is a natural tension that has a place in genuine dialogue. It is only when this tension breaks down, and self-assertion and mutual recognition are played off against each other, that the wish to dominate, to humiliate, or to eliminate the other arises (Benjamin, 1995). The Jewish-Christian relationship is strongly marked by the historical humiliation of the Jews, by the ritualized forced surrender of Synagogue to Ecclesia. Paradoxically, it is this devaluation of the other that makes recognition impossible for both sides. Once the other has lost their subjectivity and dignity, their recognition is no longer of any worth.

One’s own aggression needs to be projected onto the other: it is they who do evil to me, poison my wells, etc. Or else fantasies of omnipotence are developed to avoid admitting any influence of the other on oneself. These solutions to the problem of otherness are based on fantasies that cannot withstand verification by reality, sometimes leading to difficult moments in dialogue when one person wants to tell the other: “You must be crazy – and if you’re not, then I am!” (Benjamin, 2004). This is why honest dialogue requires that mutual fantasies, fears, and aggressions are admitted and worked through. As the pioneer of relational psychoanalysis Stephen Mitchell (1997) wrote: one becomes part of the solution by being willing to be part of the problem. This is why we need to accept feelings of loss, shame, and our own vulnerability (Benjamin, 2004), and be willing to accept the possibility that our religious tradition is not always beyond all doubt. Thus, outside criticism loses a lot of its threat. In this context, it is good to keep in mind the useful differentiation between surrender and submission that Emmanuel Ghent (1990) brought to the psychoanalytical discourse: surrender means being ready to loosen one’s own need for control without submitting to the other. In other words: one does not submit to the other but to the relationship or dialogue and its values.

## Spiritual aspects

"For by the light of Your face You have given us, Adonai our God, the Torah of life, and love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, mercy, life and peace" (*Sim Shalom*). In their Statement, it is obvious that the Orthodox rabbis are promoting values like love and peace. *Rachamim*, the Hebrew for mercy, originates from *rechem*, uterus, meaning to grant the other space within one's own spirit, so the other can be or become what they really are. *Rachamim* can therefore be understood as a biblical term for the intersubjective effort of mutual recognition.

As mentioned above, the Rabbinic Statement appreciates that the Christian side has let deeds follow their recognition of Judaism (item 2). This is of special importance, since from a Jewish point of view, repentance (*teshuva*) is accomplished only when changes in specific behavior follow remorse and the begging of forgiveness (Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:1). Though the Statement leaves out the term *teshuva*, the rabbis essentially acknowledge this process of repentance by many Christians, in contrast to earlier Christians' anti-Judaism. This in turn makes reconciliation with Christianity, as well as detachment from the traditional victim role towards Christians, now possible on the Jewish side. Moreover, Maimonides established the principle that begging for forgiveness should always be granted: "It's forbidden [for the victim] to be cruel and unappeasable. He should instead be readily appeased and slow to anger. When the sinner comes before him to ask for forgiveness, he should offer it to him wholeheartedly and willingly. Even if the sinner caused that person a lot of trouble and sinned against him often, he should nonetheless not be vengeful or spiteful. For that is the way of the Children of Israel, whose hearts are fixed in this trait." (ibid. 2:14). Spirituality means believing in humans and their goodwill, and not making it hard for them to repent. Reconciliation constitutes one of the most valuable celebrations of human freedom. It removes the power of the traumas of the past over the present and the future, and breaks down the roles of perpetrator and victim. All spiritual traditions support seizing the opportunities of the present moment. If it is at all possible to initiate peace between the religions now, the opportunity must not be missed.

Spiritual people are aware of being limited in their ability to think and understand. They revere God, seeing His immeasurability in contrast to their own limitedness. If this awareness is authentic, it will necessarily lead to a pluralistic worldview. Humans need one another to break free from the prisons of their own selves. Religions need one another to resist the temptation of fundamentalism. The revelation religions, as they appeared in history, could only bring mere fragments of a divine truth into the world. God's wisdom, reaching us through the Bible, has been condensed into language understandable by humans within a certain historical and social context. Even terms like "Judaism" and "Christianity" are generalizations that are often misused either apologetically or else as a battle cry. In these cases, the denigration of other religions often serves to cover up rivalries within a religion's own ranks. On the other hand, those who perceive pluralism within and between religions as a gift from God can overcome their fear of others and search for reconciliation.

In the Orthodox Rabbinic Statement, the remarks that no religion can fulfill God's mission in this world on its own (item 3) and that God employs many messengers to reveal His truth (item 6), bear testimony to this point of view. Surely these principles are true for those members of any religion who out of love of God and humility are willing to join the "Covenant of the Moderates" ("Bund der Gemäßigten" – Strenger, 2016). This applies also to Islam, the third Abrahamic religion, which from its very beginning has had much in common with Judaism both theologically and spiritually.

In conclusion, I want to remark on the daring sub-title of the Statement: "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven." It is the right and duty of religious leaders to read the signs of the times in line with their beliefs, and draw consequences from them. But it was not political or pragmatic considerations that led the rabbis to make their Statement. Nor was it secular motives, or the values of the Age of Enlightenment alone, that led them to reconsider their beliefs. Rather, they were filled with trust in God and the wish to understand and fulfill the will of the God of Israel for this generation: the foundation of a partnership between religions for the sake of the whole of humankind.

But what does it mean when the rabbis call Christianity the "willed divine outcome" (item 3)? Can we know what God wants? Can we speak of God's will

in this particular sense? Possibly we can understand this phrase by looking at world developments over the past 50 years: the change in Jewish self-esteem following the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel, as well as the revolutionary theological changes in Christianity, and by seeing that the signatories have been convinced of the possibility of embracing Christians as partners in a joint mission to serve God. "God's will" is shown by human willingness to carry the divine values of love and righteousness into the world through the unity and coexistence of different religions. Their aims are the same, their paths different. The ability to happily accept the diversity of religions as a divine gift without fear of losing one's own hard-won identity and without wishing to convert the other, is vital for achieving true peace for our world.

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## Appendix: Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity

### ***To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven:***

### ***Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians***

(December 3, 2015)

After nearly two millennia of mutual hostility and alienation, we Orthodox Rabbis who lead communities, institutions and seminaries in Israel, the United States and Europe recognize the historic opportunity now before us. We seek to do the will of our Father in Heaven by accepting the hand offered to us by our Christian brothers and sisters. Jews and Christians must work together as partners to address the moral challenges of our era.

1. The Shoah ended 70 years ago. It was the warped climax to centuries of disrespect, oppression and rejection of Jews and the consequent enmity that developed between Jews and Christians. In retrospect it is clear that the failure to break through this contempt and engage in constructive dialogue for the good of humankind weakened resistance to evil forces of anti-Semitism that engulfed the world in murder and genocide.
2. We recognize that since the Second Vatican Council the official teachings of the Catholic Church about Judaism have changed fundamentally and irrevocably. The promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* fifty years ago started the process of reconciliation between our two communities. *Nostra Aetate* and the later official Church documents it inspired unequivocally reject any form of anti-Semitism, affirm the eternal Covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, reject deicide and stress the unique relationship between Christians and Jews, who were called “our elder brothers” by Pope John Paul II and “our fathers in faith” by Pope Benedict XVI. On this basis, Catholics and other Christian officials started an honest dialogue with Jews that has grown during the last five decades. We appreciate the Church’s affirmation of Israel’s unique place in sacred history and the ultimate world redemption. 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.

3. As did Maimonides and Yehudah Halevi,[1] we acknowledge that the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations. In separating Judaism and Christianity, G-d willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies. Rabbi Jacob Emden wrote that “Jesus brought a double goodness to the world. On the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically... and not one of our Sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah. On the other hand he removed idols from the nations and obligated them in the seven commandments of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits..... Christians are congregations that work for the sake of heaven who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied.”[2] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught us that Christians “have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the G-d of Heaven and Earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence.”[3] Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d 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. As stated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel’s Bilateral Commission with the Holy See under the leadership of Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, “We are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity”.[4] Neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone.

4. Both Jews and Christians have 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. We understand the hesitation of both sides to affirm this truth and we call on our communities to overcome these fears in order to establish a relationship of trust and respect. Rabbi Hirsch also taught that the Talmud

puts Christians “with regard to the duties between man and man on exactly the same level as Jews. They have a claim to the benefit of all the duties not only of justice but also of active human brotherly love.” In the past relations between Christians and Jews were often seen through the adversarial relationship of Esau and Jacob, yet Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berliner (Netziv) already understood at the end of the 19th century that Jews and Christians are destined by G-d to be loving partners: “In the future when the children of Esau are moved by pure spirit to recognize the people of Israel and their virtues, then we will also be moved to recognize that Esau is our brother.”[5]

5. We Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us: the ethical monotheism of Abraham; the relationship with the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who loves and cares for all of us; Jewish Sacred Scriptures; a belief in a binding tradition; and the values of life, family, compassionate righteousness, justice, inalienable freedom, universal love and ultimate world peace. Rabbi Moses Rivkis (Be'er Hagoleh) confirms this and wrote that “the Sages made reference only to the idolator of their day who did not believe in the creation of the world, the Exodus, G-d’s miraculous deeds and the divinely given law. In contrast, the people among whom we are scattered believe in all these essentials of religion.”[6]
6. Our partnership in no way minimizes the ongoing differences between the two communities and two religions. We believe that G-d employs many messengers to reveal His truth, while we affirm the fundamental ethical obligations that all people have before G-d that Judaism has always taught through the universal Noahide covenant.
7. In imitating G-d, Jews and Christians must offer models of service, unconditional love and holiness. We are all created in G-d’s Holy Image, and Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in redeeming the world.

**Initial signatories (in alphabetical order):**

Rabbi Jehoshua Ahrens (Germany)	Rabbi Steven Langnas (Germany)
Rabbi Marc Angel (United States)	Rabbi Benjamin Lau (Israel)
Rabbi Isak Asiel (Chief Rabbi of Serbia)	Rabbi Simon Livson (Chief Rabbi of Finland)
Rabbi David Bigman (Israel)	Rabbi Asher Lopatin (United States)
Rabbi David Bollag (Switzerland)	Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (Israel)
Rabbi David Brodman (Israel)	Rabbi David Rosen (Israel)
Rabbi Natan Lopez Cardozo (Israel)	Rabbi Naftali Rothenberg (Israel)
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**Subsequent signatories:**

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Rabbi Todd Berman (Israel)	Rose Britton (USA)
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Rabbi Michael Chernick (USA)	Rabbi David Freilech (Australia)
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Rabbi David Ellis (Canada)	Rabbi Elisha Salas (Portugal)
Rabbi Seth Farber (Israel)	Rabbi Ronen Lubitch (Israel)
Rabbi Ben Greenberg (USA)	Rabbi Alain Nacache, Chief Rabbi of Luxembourg
Rabbi Yeshayahu Hollander (Israel)	Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, Chief Rabbi of Greece
Rabbi David be Meir Hasson (Chile)	Rabbi Menachem Sebbag (Netherlands)
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Rabbi Zvi Herberger (Norway/Estonia)	Rabbi Shaul Friberg (Germany)
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