

Rabbis term church a divine 'partner'

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [January 6, 2016](#) issue

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.

Signing the document released in December were 28 rabbis from the United States, Israel, and Europe, 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.

"We acknowledge that Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations," asserts the seven-paragraph statement. "In separating Judaism and Christianity, God willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies."

Days after the Orthodox rabbis' statement, the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews released a document, "The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable," saying Catholics should take a different approach to Judaism than to other religions in its evangelism efforts.

"In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed toward Jews," the document said.

The Orthodox rabbis who signed the statement titled "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians" include those who have been at the forefront of interfaith dialogue efforts, such as David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee's international director of interreligious affairs, and Shlomo Riskin, founding rabbi of New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue.

"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 Irving Greenberg, who also signed the statement.

Still, Greenberg said, 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 the notion that Christianity is a divinely willed phenomenon.

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. He said the reluctance to engage Christians on theology is rooted in the teaching of 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.”

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 that the Jewish people killed Christ and deserved the centuries of persecution they had suffered.

The Orthodox rabbis wrote, “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.”

Though not a direct response to the anniversary of *Nostra aetate*, the statement says 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 statement, which was released by the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel, has met with appreciation from Christian theologians, including Michael Peppard, a Fordham University theology professor.

On the blog of *Commonweal*, a Catholic journal, he noted that the Reform and Conservative movements in Judaism—representing most American Jews—have long engaged in interfaith theological discussions. But by calling Christianity “neither accident nor error,” this Orthodox rabbinical statement goes further than a similar document, titled “Dabru Emet,” signed by mostly by non-Orthodox rabbis and Jewish leaders in 2000, Peppard wrote.

It may be that “Orthodox Judaism is in the midst of a serious reckoning with the fundamental tenets of Christianity,” he wrote.

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 Muslim culture currently is steeped in anti-Semitism and “almost genocidal hostility to Israel.” But he hopes that one day the statement can serve as a model for one on Islam and Judaism.

The Vatican commission produced its new text to mark the anniversary of *Nostra aetate*. Until reforms in the 1960s, prayers at Catholic masses on Good Friday described Jews as “perfidious” and called for their conversion.

The Catholic statement focused on the situation of Christians in Israel as a “litmus test” for how religious minorities are treated.

“In Jewish-Christian dialogue the situation of Christian communities in the state of Israel is of great relevance, since there—as nowhere else in the world—a Christian minority faces a Jewish majority,” it said.

Vatican-Israeli ties were strained in early 2015 when the Holy See signed a historic agreement recognizing the state of Palestine. Catholic-Jewish relations are expected to grow stronger when Francis visits Rome’s Great Synagogue on January 17. He will be the third pontiff to visit the site.

Speaking at the Vatican presentation of the document, Rosen of the American Jewish Committee praised the text for describing the Torah as “the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God” and advancing the recommendations made by *Nostra aetate*.

Rosen highlighted several of those recommendations in his own words: “to appreciate and respect Jewish self-understanding,” he said, and to acknowledge “the integrity of Jewish reading of the Bible that is different from the Christian one.”

Rosen, however, criticized the authors of the Vatican document for failing to “appreciate the centrality that the land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish people.”

David Brickner, executive director of Jews for Jesus, denounced the Vatican document in a statement on the mission agency’s website: “How can the Vatican ignore the fact that the Great Commission of Jesus Christ mandates that his followers are to bring the gospel to all people? Are they merely pandering to some leaders in the Jewish community who applaud being off the radar for evangelization by Catholics?” —Religion News Service; added source

*This article was edited on December 22, 2015.*