

## POST-HOLOCAUST JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES OF HISTORY

To reflect theologically in this last half of the twentieth-century on providence, one cannot ignore the implications of the Holocaust. The systematic state-sponsored murder of six million Jews and five million other, non-Jewish victims by the Nazis calls into question many of the assumptions once facilely made by both Jews and Christians about God acting in human history. The idea that such massive evil somehow fits into a divine plan has been called obscene. The Holocaust requires us to rethink some of our most traditional theological categories.

John C. Merkle, Associate Professor at the College of Saint Benedict, Saint Joseph, MN, brought to bear upon this task the thinking of one who has been called the greatest Jewish theologian of this century, Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his paper, "Redemption: Human and Divine," Merkle cited Heschel's provocative description of faith as the beginning of compassion for God. Classical theism, as derived from Aristotle and assimilated into Jewish tradition by Maimonides and Christian tradition by Thomas Aquinas, finds such a description of faith absurd. For classical theism God is by definition perfect being, pure actuality, admitting no potentiality and hence no change, free of need or suffering. According to this definition of perfection, however, the God of biblical faith is not perfect. The God of the Scriptures is affected by human beings, loves them with pathos, and grieves or rejoices as they either reject or accept divine love, frustrate or fulfill the divine plan. God, for Heschel, can suffer and change. This does not mean that God thereby becomes more perfect. Mutability is not imperfection any more than immutability is perfection. Perfection for the Bible is not pure actuality but the moral perfection that makes God to be God, namely, pure, unconditional universal love. God is not responsible for evil like that perpetrated at Auschwitz or anywhere else. Evil results from defiance of God's will. For the world's redemption, God requires human cooperation. As Heschel puts it, "God is waiting for us to redeem the world." Even for Christians who accept Jesus as Redeemer, Merkle noted, we need not think of redemption as the work of Jesus alone. The gospel, like the Torah, calls for human participation in the work of redemption. Heschel held that "the Messiah is in us." He lamented that Christians had become "less and less messianic," by focusing on otherworldly personal salvation instead of the universal redemption that Jesus the Jew preached as the reign of God. Divine omnipotence means not infinite control but an unending love that has created us free and requires us to be partners in redemption. God was not responsible for the Holocaust. If God was absent from Auschwitz, it is because God was expelled. We return God to the world and serve as vehicles of redemption, when we do acts of justice and compassion. Heschel's theology rejects any indictment of God for human failures but also undermines the naive belief that all things will necessarily turn out for the best.

Harry James Cargas, Professor of literature and language at Webster University, Saint Louis, Missouri, delivered a paper entitled "Process Theology and the Suffering of God." If the Holocaust raises a host of disturbing questions, we can take comfort from the mystics who tell us that, while answers change in the course of history, good questions are eternal. Cargas formulates his particular expression of the eternal questions under the influence of Alfred North Whitehead and Raimundo Panikkar. To be actual is to be in process. All is related to all in interdependence. God relates to the world not by controlling but persuading, loving and therefore risking, not knowing how things will turn out. God is responsive to our needs, affected by our actions. "But then there was Auschwitz," Cargas repeated throughout all this like a litany. Jews ask, Where was God at Auschwitz? Cargas asks, Where was Jesus? He cited Elie Wiesel to the effect that the Holocaust did not mark the end of Judaism but of Christianity. "Every killer of Jews during the Holocaust was a baptized Christian; it takes a lot of these proclaimed followers of Jesus to murder over 5¼ million Jews. And probably 500 million other Christians stood by as onlookers." If Socrates urged us to know ourselves, the poet Pindar urged, "Become what you are." But this requires knowing who we are and what our role is in the universe, both as individuals and communities. Moreover, it requires knowing what is meant by the universe and by humankind in it. We know of Jewish intellectuals at Auschwitz who put God on trial for abandoning the Jewish people. They found God guilty and then adjourned to pray. There is something worth pondering in this story not only for a glimpse into the meaning of God but for the meaning of human history.

The discussion following the presentations began with a criticism of a Catholicism that for too long was concerned only with Catholics and of a Neo-Thomism not adequate to conceptualize, let alone answer the the questions raised by the Holocaust. Similarly, it was pointed out that too often we presume to know too much about God. We have too little a sense that we necessarily project an image of God from our own limited experience. Atheists oppose not God but our theism. Reflecting on the Holocaust, we can come by another means to the same awareness reached by feminist thinkers reflecting on the nature of hierarchical, patriarchal societies; we ordinarily fear the excesses of freedom, such as those exemplified by the French Revolution, but the excesses of order gave us the death camps.

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