

THE HOLOCAUST AS A METAPHOR FOR EVIL: RESPONSIBILITY AND THE CHURCH

It has been argued that the Holocaust, the Nazis' destruction of nearly six million Jews, has no analogies and therefore should not be used as a metaphor. The claim is not based on numbers. The Nazis murdered many more Russians than Jews, and the estimated number of non-Jewish civilians killed during the Second World War is nine million.¹ The case for uniqueness is made on the basis of Nazi ideology. Nazi racist doctrine viewed the Slavs as members of an inferior Aryan race, to be murdered selectively, their leadership and culture destroyed. They would be allowed to live only in such numbers as to provide slave labor for the German colonists who would inhabit the former Slavic lands. Obviously those colonists would not need twenty-six million Polish slaves, let alone the millions of other conquered Slavic peoples. The same racialist theory applied to Romanies (Gypsies).

In contrast to this selective genocide, Nazi ideology required that Jews be totally, physically annihilated. Jews were viewed not merely as an inferior race but an antirace, a biological threat to Aryan existence, like vermin and bacilli. This unprecedented Nazi death warrant for every person born a Jew has no analogies. Nevertheless, non-Jewish civilian victims of the Nazis have been described as the "Other Holocaust" or the "Forgotten Holocaust." Pro-life advocates speak of abortion as the "American Holocaust." Historians of Europe's seventeenth-century witch burnings speak of the "Women's Holocaust," and the slave trade has been described as the "African-American Holocaust."

The Holocaust has become an archetypal symbol not simply for evil but the kind of "macroevil" (D. Dietrich) that transcends description. Auschwitz functions as a *holy* place in the biblical sense of *kadosh*, capable of evoking shuddering and awe.² For Arthur Cohen expressions like "radical evil" or "absolute evil" do

¹Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 6. Soviet losses are estimated at some 20 million lives, among them seven million civilians, of whom 1.5 million were Jewish. Poland ranks second with war losses of three million Poles and three million Polish Jews. See Lucy Davidowicz, "Thinking about the Six Million: Facts, Figures, Perspectives," in Roth and Berenbaum, *Holocaust*, 53.

²Any doubt about the matter was dispelled by the so-called Auschwitz Convent

not provoke the kind of critical thinking the Holocaust demands. He describes it with Rudolf Otto's classic *tremendum*, depicting it as an unparalleled abyss, an unprecedented interruption of history, Western culture, and our thinking about evil. The Holocaust has become a perfected figuration of the demonic.³ Auschwitz is in the process of replacing the cross as the primal metaphor of choice for human inhumanity. That bears implications for theology, given the charges made regarding the Church's complicity in that evil.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE CHURCH

With the so-called "silence" of Pope Pius XII serving as a symbol, the Church has been accused of acquiescing to the Holocaust. During the war Pius refused to issue any explicit denunciations against Nazi war crimes, despite detailed information about the mass murder of Jews and numerous appeals that he speak out against it. He gave and encouraged humanitarian aid, but his public statements were limited to vague appeals against the oppression of unnamed racial and religious groups. Critics have accused him of succumbing to anti-Semitic pressures or giving supreme priority to opposing the Soviet Union.

As read by Jewish historian Michael Marrus, the evidence refutes these accusations. Vatican documents reveal anything but indifference to the fate of Jews, let alone hostility toward them. The evidence suggests a resolute commitment to limit the global conflict where possible and above all to protect the influence and standing of the Church as an independent voice.⁴ Neither the Church nor world Jewry was institutionally or psychologically prepared to deal with the unprecedented emergency that was the Holocaust. Once the machinery for the so-called "Final Solution" was put into operation, events moved so rapidly that both Christian and Jewish leadership were caught off guard.⁵

There is a widespread sense among scholars that Pope Pius XII had an exaggerated faith in the efficacy of mediative diplomacy. On this count, if Pius XII refused to denounce atrocities against Jews, he had earlier acted similarly with respect to the Catholic Poles. The deliberate systematic destruction of Europe's Jews did not begin until June of 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Before that time, the terror was directed primarily against the

Controversy. See Ronald Modras, "Jews and Poles: Remembering at a Cemetery," *Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy*, ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (New York: Praeger, 1991) 53-61.

³Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 6-7, 32-33, 48.

⁴Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987) 179-83.

⁵See Henry R. Huttenbach, "Genocide and the Churches," *Genocide Forum* (January 1995) 1-2.

Poles, including priests. Despite appeals from Polish bishops, Pius XII refused to denounce the atrocities.⁶

Recent documentation demonstrates that during the course of the war Pius XII and his administration undertook important initiatives on behalf of all Jews, not merely Jewish converts to Christianity. "Simplistic claims about papal silence at this time are grossly overstated," John Pawlikowski concludes.⁷ One can legitimately discuss the adequacy of Pius XII's approach, his unwillingness to criticize the Nazis by name or to single out the Jews by name as victims, but this is different from silence let alone indifference. Pawlikowski suggests that we strike the word "silence" from all conversations about institutional Catholicism during the Holocaust.

But more at issue than the personality of a pope is the relationship of Christian anti-Semitism to the Holocaust. Fifty years ago, Protestant historian James Parkes drew an unbroken line from the New Testament to the death camps and indicted the Church as "ultimately responsible" for the Holocaust.⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether drew a similarly direct line in *Faith and Fratricide*, where she called anti-Semitism the "left hand of Christology."⁹ Unbroken lines and left hands are only some of the metaphors used to describe the relationship between Christianity and the Holocaust. Authors also speak of approaches, roots, and preparing the ground. The traditional Catholic attitude toward Jews was an ambivalent mix of toleration and antipathy because of an ambiguous metaphor.

Catholic tradition viewed Jews as marked with the sign of Cain, a symbol that, as much as anything, preserved them from genocide. Cain was not to be killed (Gen 4:15). The Church officially allowed Jews to practice their religion, a toleration not granted to pagans or heretics. In the normative opinion of St. Augustine, Jews were destined like Cain to wander the earth without a homeland but allowed to reside in Christian lands as witnesses to the truth of Christianity. Thus medieval Church law called for ghettos and the wearing of yellow badges, legal and moral precedents for much of the Nazi racial legislation against Jews; but the same legislation forbade violence against Jews, forced conversion and disruptions of their worship services.¹⁰

⁶Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982) 147. See Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation, 1939-1944* (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1986).

⁷John Pawlikowski, "The Vatican and the Holocaust: Unresolved Issues," *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*, ed. Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 297.

⁸James Parkes, *Antisemitism* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1963) 60; Eugene Fisher, "The Holocaust and Christian Responsibility," *America* (14 February 1981) 119.

⁹Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

¹⁰Fisher, "The Holocaust and Christian Responsibility," 120.

There was no attempt at annihilating Jews in the Middle Ages when the Church had the power to enforce its beliefs. Yosef Yerushalmi concludes that Christian anti-Semitism helped "create the climate" and mentality in which genocide, once conceived, could be achieved with little or no opposition. But even if one grants that Christian teaching was a necessary cause leading to the Holocaust, it surely was not a sufficient one.¹¹ In the complex of conditions which led to the Holocaust, the breakup of Christendom and secularity were a *sine qua non*. The Holocaust was the work of an anti-Christian secularist state, not of the medieval Christian world order; it became possible only with the breakdown of that order. In other words, there is a discontinuity between the Christian anti-Judaism and the Nazi racism that made the Holocaust possible, a discontinuity that is left unremarked and undetected when both are subsumed under the same word "anti-Semitism."

ON DEFINING ANTI-SEMITISM

Before the Holocaust, "anti-Semitism" had a more ambiguous, less pejorative meaning than it has now, comparable to the word "anti-Zionism" today. Its very lack of clarity helped win it wide circulation.¹² Medievalist Gavin Langmuir redefines anti-Semitism as not simply hostility against Jews but a "chimerical" hostility aroused by irrational thinking. Simply defining it as "ethnic prejudice" fails to capture the unique evil of Nazi anti-Semitism. Defining anti-Semitism as irrational hostility distinguishes it from the "normal" or "realistic" prejudice common to all ingroups in their attitude toward outgroups who do not share their values and who compete with them for scarce goods.¹³ Langmuir refuses to hyphenate *antisemitism* because today there is no such thing as "Semitism." In interwar Catholic circles, however, "Semitism" was tantamount by virtue of synecdoche to the word "liberalism," a concept that is ambiguous but not meaningless. Any study of modern Catholic anti-Semitism and the Holocaust must take as its context the Church's long struggle against political liberalism.¹⁴

When a 1928 Vatican decree condemned anti-Semitism as hatred while suppressing a philosemitic organization called *Amici Israel, La Civiltà Cattolica* explained that the Vatican's action was directed at both anti-Semitism and "Semitism," the "social predominance" in all areas of modern life accorded to Jews by liberalism. *Amici Israel* "always defended and excused Jews" while

¹¹Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Response to Rosemary Ruether," in Eva Fleischner, ed. *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: KTAV, 1977) 103.

¹²Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Anti-Semitism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1986) 94, 113.

¹³Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 311-52, at 328-29.

¹⁴See Ronald Modras, *The Catholic Church and Anti-Semitism: Poland, 1933-1939* (Chur: Harwood, 1994).

ignoring their "undeniable alliance with Freemasons" and other societies subversive of Christian culture.¹⁵ In condemning the Friends of Israel, the Holy See was charting a middle road between extremes, with "Semitism" being "an extreme no less dangerous" than anti-Semitism.

The idea of a Masonic-Jewish alliance to subvert Christian culture has been largely neglected even by writers on Christian-Jewish relations and the Holocaust. It originated in mid-nineteenth-century Germany but first flourished in France, where Jews had a high profile in the Masonic movement. There the point of contention between Catholic traditionalists and liberal republicans was no less than defining what it meant to be French. Freemasons and Jews were regarded as the natural enemies of a Catholic France.¹⁶ In interwar Poland, the classic land of refuge for Jews, the issue was the same. The Church's struggle against political liberalism was central to its efforts to preserve a "Catholic Poland." Poland's three million Jews had begun putting aside their segregated religious orthodoxy and appropriating Polish culture as their own. Clearly a Polish culture Jews could call their own would have to be secular.

Anti-Semitism defined as hatred was in no way acceptable to Catholic doctrine. But if it was defined as a synonym for antiliberalism and antiseccularism, anti-Semitism was regarded by many leading Catholics as a political stance at once justified and legitimate. In the (1930) *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Gustav Gundlach denounced racist anti-Semitism as unchristian because it contradicted love of neighbor. But "political anti-Semitism" was permitted, so long as it used morally admissible means to counteract the "exaggerated and harmful influence" of Jews over the economy, politics, science, and the arts.¹⁷ Obviously Gundlach was referring here to the assimilated Jews who were contributing to the secularization of Europe's formerly Christian culture.

CONCLUSIONS

As inferences from the foregoing, I would offer the following theses.

(1) The Holocaust, while singular in some aspects, allows of comparisons. Despite appeals to the contrary, it is and will continue to be a metaphor for other examples of macroevil.

(2) There is no question that Christian anti-Semitism contributed to the climate that made the Holocaust possible. It was one of a complex of conditions, but not itself a sufficient cause. Nor can one empirically demonstrate the claim that it was the most important condition for the Holocaust.

¹⁵*La Civiltà Cattolica* 2 (1928) 335-44.

¹⁶See Oscar L. Arnal, *Ambivalent Alliance: The Catholic Church and the Action Française, 1899-1939* (Pittsburgh PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985) 33.

¹⁷Gustav Gundlach, "Antisemitismus," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd rev. ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1930-1938) 1:504-505.

(3) There was a vast qualitative distinction between the Church's "political," what Gavin Langmuir calls "realistic," prejudice against Jews and Nazi racist anti-Semitism. Assimilated Jews had every reason to promote liberal governments and secular culture in formerly Christian states; Catholic leadership had an obvious self-interest in opposing them. Their mutually exclusive interests led Catholics to regard Jews and Freemasons as "enemies of the Church." That the feeling was mutual does not excuse the fact that the Church's leadership was shortsighted and mistaken in its blanket opposition to liberalism.

(4) That Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate*) repudiated the tradition of blaming Jews for the death of Jesus and of seeing Jews as rejected was of incalculable import. But the Council's declaration on religious liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*) was just as revolutionary and important for Catholic-Jewish relations. The Vatican has yet to develop the implications of that teaching for itself and its role in modern pluralistic society. But the new climate of respect, dialogue, and cooperation between Catholics and Jews would have been inconceivable without what we in the United States call Jeffersonian democracy, what traditionalist European Catholics once called Jewish or Masonic democracy.

(5) There are unresolved disputes involved in questions like the civil rights of sexual minorities in this country, the integration of Muslim minorities into European society, the proper role of women in the Church and workplace. Given the experience of this century, the Church's leadership may not responsibly allow itself to contribute to a climate that promotes or even appears to excuse violence against a perceived threat by an outgroup. Awareness that the Church contributed, even if indirectly and unwittingly, to the Holocaust has rightly led individual Church leaders to express sorrow for the Church's failures with respect to its historic attitude toward Jews and Judaism. My own query is, who are the supposed "enemies of the Church" today? In Catholic tradition, true contrition must always be joined to a firm purpose of amendment.

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