

Theological Trends

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AFTER
THE HOLOCAUST

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Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the little faces of children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith for ever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those mountains which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams into dust.¹

THESE WORDS FROM ELIE WIESEL will, I hope, be instantly recognized.² They capture the experience of the victims of the most appalling ideology in a century of godless ideologies. The Jewish writer Arthur Cohen calls the Holocaust a *Tremendum*, an ultimate experience.³ For Christian theology the *Shoah*⁴ represents the most serious challenge to its fundamental doctrine of a loving and caring God.

But other serious questionings of Christianity arise from the *Shoah*. There is the obscene fact that the ideology of the 'Final Solution' was produced within a culture that had been Christian for fifteen centuries. Because of this the whole Western Church is under judgement.⁵ Two elements of this condemnation come to mind at once. There is the churches' share in creating and sustaining anti-Semitic feelings throughout Europe. We shall say more about this. But the *Shoah* also revealed the acquiescence of western Christianity in a culture of death and destruction. Not enough attention has been given to the ease with which Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike, assented to the ideology of Nazism. Many of them apparently believed its teaching and practices were merely extensions of Christian civilization. The massive support of both Protestant and Catholic Churches for Hitler puts into question the theory that most ordinary Germans were compelled by the brutality of Nazism to do things repellent to their Christian sensibilities. The *Tremendum* demands of Christians that they reflect on their relationship to western culture. We take these matters in turn.

The Church and anti-Semitism

The Roman Catholic Church's first rejection of anti-Semitism appeared in *Nostra aetate* in 1965:

The church repudiates all persecutions against any person. Moreover mindful of her patrimony with the Jews, and motivated by the Gospel's spiritual love, she deplors the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source.⁶

This is fine as far as it goes but the expression 'from any source' hardly suggests the reality that Christian theology and practice were the leading causes of twentieth-century anti-Semitism. No one has made the case against Christianity more clearly than the French scholar and survivor of the Holocaust, Jules Isaac.⁷ Isaac outlines the 'teaching of contempt' under seven headings: 1) Judaism had become ossified upon the coming of Christ; 2) the Jews were a sensual people incapable of spiritual insight; 3) they were the chief persecutors of Jesus, whom they failed to recognize as the Messiah; 4) they have consequently become a reprobate people, rejected and degraded by God; 5) they are a deicide people; 6) they have been justly expelled from the Holy Land, and are justly doomed to wander the world; 7) they are 'a synagogue of Satan'. As Isaac noted, these teachings were coherent and continuous with the New Testament record and were repeated each year in the Holy Week liturgies and, especially, in passion plays like the one at Oberammergau.⁸

As soon as the Church came to power in the Constantinian era anti-Semitic practices became part of everyday life.⁹ Jews were unable to own land, marry with Christians, obtain citizenship, gain university degrees. At the time of the Crusades massacres and forced suicides took place throughout Europe.¹⁰ The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw expulsions of the Jews from England, France, Portugal and Spain, as well as the imposition of ghettos, forcible conversions, and the Inquisition. The Reformation did not help: the works of Martin Luther are replete with anti-Jewish feeling.¹¹ Small wonder it is that Hitler, a baptized Catholic, could say that he was only completing the churches' task.¹²

Fundamental to anti-Semitism are the two concepts of supersession and replacement. From the beginning the Christian Church spoke of itself as the new Israel, the people of the New Covenant, which both supersedes and replaces the old Israel. Despite Paul's teaching that the covenants of God are never abrogated (Rom 11:29) and that therefore the divine covenant with Israel remains in force (Rom 9:4), the Gentile church came to assert that it alone was God's people. For all its achievements *Nostra aetate* remains convinced that 'even if the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God . . . the Church is the New People of God'.

Complicity in western society's destructive tendencies

Two scholars of the Holocaust have urged us to look more deeply at the cultural significance of the Holocaust.

The first set of insights comes from John Pawlikowski, Catholic ethicist at the University of Chicago. He interprets the *Shoah* as the product of 'a new

awareness of human possibility'.¹³ The destruction of the Jews is 'an assertion of human autonomy and freedom'. In 'Hitlerian salvation history' it was conceived that human society could, by modern technology, be freed of Jews (as well as from the pollutions of all other 'inadequates'). While Pawlikowski agrees that Christian anti-Semitism was the 'indispensable seedbed' for Nazism, he is adamant that Nazi philosophy was utterly anti-Christian. It had loosened itself entirely from the historical 'God-idea' with all its attendant notions of moral responsibility, redemption, sin and revelation. Rather than seeing the 'Final Solution' as an act of pagan insanity, Pawlikowski suggests that we should look at it as the culmination of the modern development of bureaucratic efficiency and scientific know-how. Modelled on industrial plants, the execution centres 'processed their victims with a conveyor belt efficiency', and, we may add, equally unfeelingly. Himmler was supported by highly skilled medical scientists and technologists. As the doctor-killer in Rolf Hochhuth's play, *The deputy*, said, 'We are the Dominicans of the technological age'.

For Rabbi Richard Rubenstein the *Shoah* represents a 'breakthrough' in human history. The Holocaust must be seen '*as the expression of some of the most profound tendencies of Western civilization*'.¹⁴ Rubenstein believes that western secularization manifested itself supremely in the search for autonomy and human perfectibility and Nazism was the apotheosis of that. Then there is the European urge to exploit the earth's resources, with biblical roots in Genesis 1:26-27. The injunctions to 'subdue . . . have dominion . . . replenish . . . multiply . . .' had led, long before the *Shoah*, to planned extermination of native peoples in Africa, Australia and the Americas. The idea of expendable human beings was deeply implanted in the western mind. Thirdly, there was slavery, the idea of another human person being no more than 'an animated tool'. Practised by Greeks and Romans (and hardly challenged by the New Testament) it persisted into the nineteenth century. This Rubenstein calls 'total domination'. The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century produced the related phenomenon of 'wage slavery'. Child and female labour, workhouses, industrial slums, formed part of the prelude to the death camps. The Nazi project simply took these western tendencies to their extreme yet logical conclusion.

As a result, Nazism overcame a 'hitherto unbreachable moral and political barrier' in the history of western civilization. Like Pawlikowski, Rubenstein highlights the involvement of bureaucrats and the technologists in the systematic exploitation and extermination of the Jewish people. The Holocaust has now put 'the systematic, bureaucratically administered extermination of millions of citizens or subject peoples' on the map for all time as one of the temptations of government. As the world population explodes we may expect to see more bureaucratically initiated genocides. Besides its unspeakable cruelty, Auschwitz represents a new and terrifying stage in history. Christians need to ponder whether the Holocaust merely serves as an eternal warning or whether it is the first station on the road to the extermination of all peoples and

the suicide of humanity. Three sets of issues face Christian theology as a result. How do we speak of God now? How do we rid ourselves of anti-Semitism? And how do we respond to the unique evil of the *Tremendum*?

Speaking of God after the Holocaust

Night is the most challenging of all the fictional representations of the death-camps and one incident described by Wiesel has profoundly influenced Christian theology.

Wiesel writes:

Three victims were to be hanged, but unusually, one was only a young boy. As the inmates looked on, someone asked 'Where is God? Where is He? Now?' When the chairs were kicked away, the child was left hanging, his weight unable to make his neck break.

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Then he heard the same man asking 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice from within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging on this gallows . . .'¹⁵

Among the first Christian theologians to use this heart-breaking image was Jürgen Moltmann, whose book *The crucified God* sets new frontiers for discussing the nature of God. He declares:

God is in Auschwitz and Auschwitz is in the crucified God – this is the basis for a real hope which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can overcome death.¹⁶

These words represent the demise of the doctrine of impassibility, that God is above suffering. The teachings of 'classical theism' that God is 'without body, parts and passions', and therefore unaffected by the changes and chances of this fleeting world, are no longer tenable after the death camps.

In its place some Christian theologians have turned to forms of panentheism, which tries to understand God as 'in this world' and 'influenced by this world', profoundly affected by this world. Others have found help in the post-Holocaust rediscovery of those aspects of Jewish theology which speak of the involvement of God in the sufferings of Israel. God's suffering presence is symbolized as the *Shekinah*. Thus the *Shekinah* is said to weep in the ruined Temple in the form of a weeping woman. This is also a strand within biblical teaching. The 'angel of God's presence' suffered with the Israelites in the wilderness: 'In all their afflictions God was afflicted and the angel of his presence saved them' (Isai 63:9).

Panentheism finds a major expression in process theology which rejects 'classical theism' and often warmly embraces the vulnerability themes of Jewish theology. Thus American process theologian David Ray Griffin speaks in *Evil revisited* of a vision of God as a 'persuasive-empathetic power' instead of as the all-seeing Judge and the unmoved Mover. He writes that a Christian community which believed that divine reality is 'persuasive-compassionate love' would not be brought up to expect the good always to prosper and the wicked always to suffer. They would not expect miraculous divine interventions to prevent either private tragedies or events of mass destruction caused by natural or human agents.

They would understand in their deepest sensibilities that the world is composed of plurality of powers, and could not have been otherwise, and that the world is therefore a dangerous place. They would understand from the depth of their being, from which a basic emotional stance toward life is formed, that if theirs was to be a world at all, it had to be such a world, in which fairness could not be guaranteed.¹⁷

But they would expect that God would be with them in the midst of whatever befell them because 'there is suffering in the heart of God'.

Dealing with anti-Semitism

We return to the root cause of anti-Semitism, namely Christian supersessionism. Here we move into difficult waters, because many post-Holocaust theologians have argued that traditional christological doctrines, including those of the cross and resurrection, must be rethought. In her seminal work *Faith and fratricide* Rosemary Radford Ruether has demonstrated that supersessionism is a direct result of a high Christology.¹⁸ High Christology implies a 'false reifying of the eschatological in history'. Instead of meaning being determined by the future, all truth had been revealed by the resurrection. The Messiah had come, had been crucified and was risen, but the Jews had not believed. The significance of Judaism now was that it had no significance: it had no further part to play in the purposes of God. From the Protestant side Roy Eckardt has lamented the baleful effect of the resurrection on theology, for by it Jesus was announced to be the Messiah and history was really over. All Christians had to do now was to wait for the final victory. 'The historical-theological legitimization of Christian supersessionism and triumphalism over the Jews', he writes, 'is a product of the continuously and contemporaneously asserted truth that in Jesus Christ the eschatological domain has entered into human history in definitive salvational form.'¹⁹ This is summed up by the words 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me' put into the mouth of Jesus (Jn 14:6).²⁰ Because it offered an alternative exegesis of Scripture and persisted in claiming that it was the true way to God, Judaism proved itself an enemy of God. There was no room for those who denied that Jesus is the Messiah. All this inevitably forms the basis of the

'teaching of contempt'. In Ruether's words, 'Anti-semitism is the left hand of Christology'.

Eckardt has insisted, therefore, on the moral necessity for Christians to review their Christology. The results of such teaching led to the Holocaust: hence it must be ended. In any case the (for many) newly discovered richness of Jewish religious life requires that we stop speaking as though Judaism were either abrogated or accursed. Judaism is a true faith, which is still blessed and affirmed by God. Moreover there are many other paths and ways which produce saints and scholars, teachers and prophets. In today's urgent search for an adequate theology of religions, the Christian relationship to Judaism is central and determinative. If we fail to get our understanding of Israel in the purposes of God right, we shall fail to get right our relationship with all other religious traditions.²¹

In the light of these challenges three ways forward have been pioneered. The first way has stemmed from trying to understand Jesus in his Jewish context. This has meant for some theologians a revision of their understanding of his Messiahship. Related to this has been an affirmation that the covenant with Israel is still in force. Some theologians have spoken of a double covenant, with Israel and with the Church.

Jesus since the Holocaust

Since 1945 Christian scholarship has become profoundly aware of the Jewishness of Jesus. Partly this is the result of a new encounter with Jewish scholars who have studied Jesus in his Palestinian context (C. Montefiore, I. Abrahams, J. Klausner, D. Flusser, G. Vermes, to name but a few); partly it is because of Christians themselves rediscovering first-century Judaism (e.g. W. D. Davies, K. Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, J. D. Crossan). Some emerging conclusions from the ferment of Jesus-scholarship have particular value for Jewish-Christian relations. First, Jesus was a Jewish teacher whose primary values were justice, mercy and truth in interpersonal relationships. He looked for the establishment of the reign of God, and taught his disciples to pray for it constantly (Mt 6:9ff, Lk 11:2ff). Thus 'The Lord's Prayer' is phrase by phrase based on the *Kaddish*, the Mourner's Prayer, i.e., its concerns are utterly Jewish. But then the kingdom did not come as expected. As far as the life of the world was concerned, it went on very much as before. We may not therefore speak of 'realized eschatology' (the kingdom has come) but must talk in a more restrained fashion of 'proleptic eschatology'. We do not live in the 'age of the Messiah', but have to look for signs of the kingdom amid our present confusions. Consequently the strategy of trying to prove the Messiahship of Jesus to Jews no longer applies, and indeed masks what is meant by 'Christ' in gentile theology. Third, the suggestion that Jesus rose from the dead to repudiate his people makes no sense at all in this context. Rather, the resurrection is to be seen, in the words of the Dutch theologian Coos Schoneveld, as 'the vindication of Jesus as a Jew, as person who was faithful to the Torah, who participated in Jewish martyrdom for the sanctification of God's Name'.²²

Single or double covenant

Schoneveld and many others interpret the covenant as 'single' and everlasting: i.e., the Church's privilege lies in its being 'grafted' into the 'richness of Israel' (Rom 11:17), into the Abrahamic covenant. So Karl Barth has written that, 'The Gentile Christian community of every age and of every land is a guest in the House of Israel. It assumes the election and calling of Israel. It lives in fellowship with the King of Israel.'²³ (Interestingly he adds, 'How then can we try to hold missions to Israel?') Making sense of Jesus' 'new covenant' in this context is not easy. The Swedish theologian Goran Larsson has suggested that all biblical covenants have as their presupposition the one decisive covenant made with Noah (Gen 9). Because this was made with all humanity, it is foundational to the covenant made with Abraham (Gen 12:3). Larsson argues that 'The new covenant in Christ is one fulfilment of the previous covenants which still abide their final fulfilment'.²⁴ History has not yet come to an end; the Christian Church shares in the same hope as Israel and looks for the same fulfilment. For its part, the double covenant theory envisions Israel and the Church walking together into God's future, but as equal partners, one with a covenant based upon Sinai and the other based on the covenant with Noah. Judaism does not need to be perfected by Christianity: rather Christianity needs dialogue with Israel to maintain its integrity. Therefore we should cease speaking of the Church as the 'people of God' as though it were the *only* people of God. We may note the title of a recently published book which has just emerged from Jewish-Christian dialogue in Asia: *People of God, peoples of God*.²⁵ There may be many covenants, many peoples.

Post-Holocaust humanity

We return to the other lessons of the Holocaust. Pawlikowski has urged the representation in liturgy of the 'vulnerability of God' because he has given so much power into the hands of human beings, making us, as it were, 'co-creators'.²⁶ Our worship and our spirituality have to acknowledge that the God 'whom we used to invoke in the liturgy to intervene and correct the ills of the world himself died in the ashes of the Holocaust'. Auschwitz has taught us, he says, that 'God will not, perhaps even cannot' effect the full redemption of his world 'unless human beings assume their appointed role of co-creators'. To be sure a proper humility is part of this, as well as the recognition that human power is not self-generated. Nevertheless Pawlikowski is urging a new doctrine of the human being, neither autonomous nor secular, and liturgy and spirituality must prepare us for a Christian return to history, to responsible action. In view of Rubenstein's terrifying analysis this may be too late. Nevertheless the Christian Church has been invited to discern the real issues that concern humankind in a post-Holocaust world. But unlike the days before the *Shoah* we have Jewish partners to help us in this task. I close therefore with two moments from Jewish-Christian dialogue, one a quotation, the other a story. The words come from Rabbi Irving Greenberg:

Judaism and Christianity do not merely tell of God's love for humanity. They stand or fall on their fundamental claim, that the human being is of ultimate and absolute value. The Holocaust is the most radical counter testimony to both Judaism and Christianity. No statement theological or otherwise should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.²⁷

The story comes from Hugo Gryn, late rabbi of the West London Synagogue and survivor of Theresienstadt. Asked once did he ever wonder in the camp where God was, he replied, 'No, we wondered where were the human beings'.

In memoriam: Rabbi Hugo Gryn (1930–1996) child of Theresienstadt, leader of the Interfaith Movement

NOTES

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, 1969), p 44.

² I can only hope for this recognition. A quick glance at contemporary works on Christian worship and spirituality suggests that Wiesel's challenge is unheard. One scholar who does recognize that the liturgy is permanently affected by the technology of the death camps is Susan J. White. See her important study *Christian worship and technological change* (Nashville, 1994). She writes: 'Can we now confess and intercede before a God who seems not to have heard the cries of the Jews in the death camps? Do we want absolution from a God whom we have found guilty of indifference? Can we use the psalms which speak of the intervention of God in situations of injustice? Can we declare in the Lord's Supper that this is a God who has the power to save? Can we in short, pray in the same way to the God of classical theism, the God of power, wisdom, might, and mercy, as a post-Auschwitz community of faith?' (pp 114–115).

³ In *The Tremendum: a theological interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: 1981).

⁴ *Shoah* is the preferred term for the Holocaust. There have been other holocausts.

⁵ Note the precise use of 'western' here: it does not include the churches of Asia and Africa.

⁶ This was seventeen years after the WCC, which condemned anti-Semitism as a 'sin against God and man' in 1948.

⁷ See Jules Isaac, *The teaching of contempt: Christian roots of anti-Semitism* (New York, 1964).

⁸ Note the subtitle of Saul S. Friedman's *The Oberammergau passion play: a lance against civilization* (Carbondale IL, 1984).

⁹ The fullest account is Raul Hilberg, *The destruction of the European Jews* (New York, 1979).

¹⁰ See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The crucified Jew* (London, 1993), pp 38–50.

¹¹ Few theological writings are as distasteful as Luther's 1543 tirade, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (Of the Jews and their lies).

¹² Himmler was clear about 'The Final Solution' as the fulfilment of Christian duty: 'By and large . . . we can say that we have performed this task in love of our people, and we have suffered no damage from it, in our inner self, in our soul or in our character', quoted Cohn-Sherbok, *op. cit.*, p 209.

¹³ See also his valuable book *Christ in the light of Jewish-Christian dialogue* (New York, 1982). The present insights come from 'Worship after the Holocaust' in *Worship* vol 58 (July 1984), pp 315–329.

¹⁴ *The cunning of history: the Holocaust and the American future* (San Francisco, 1975), p 2, emphasizes this.

¹⁵ *Night*, pp 75–76.

¹⁶ *The crucified God: the cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology* (London, 1974), p 278.

¹⁷ *Evil revisited* (Albany NY, 1991), p 172.

¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and fratricide: the theological roots of anti-semitism* (New York, 1972).

¹⁹ A. Roy Eckardt, *Jews and Christians: the contemporary meeting* (Bloomington, 1986), p 83.

²⁰ These cannot be Jesus' own words; cf K. Cracknell, *Towards a new relationship: Christians and people of other faith* (Epworth, 1986), pp 74–76.

²¹ Cf Cracknell, *ibid.*, pp 154–155.

²² Quoted by Eckardt, *op. cit.*, p 85.

²³ *Church dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1962), vol 4/3, p 877.

²⁴ In *Current Dialogue* no 25 (December 1993), p 46.

²⁵ Edited by Hans Ucko (Geneva, 1996).

²⁶ In 'Worship after the Holocaust'.

²⁷ In E. Fleischner (ed), *Auschwitz: beginning of a new era?* (New York, 1977), p 34.