

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING: JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

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SINCE VATICAN II the ecumenical dialogue between Christians and Jews has intensified to new levels. Though not without difficulties and stumbling blocks, we can easily say that at no time during the two thousand years of our common era have Jewish-Christian relations been so strong. In fact the dialogue has moved beyond the initial rudimentary and, of necessity, exploratory stages to become recognized institutionally. Commissions and agencies abound and even in the significant perennial issue of the recognition of the State of Israel, and highly charged events such as the recent Waldheim affair, the movement continues unabated.¹

At this juncture, however, the limitations of such a dialogue are also coming into view, at least at the institutional level. The Jewish and Christian communities are called to service in the world and it is both possible and desirable that they engage in joint action and understanding toward this. The distinctiveness of each community can be explored and the agenda items of each respected and discussed while sensitivity and the search for common understandings prevail. Yet the faith life of each community is observed from the distance and affirmed as presented by leaders representing the now institutionalized dialogue. A status quo feeling pervades and the dynamic movements within the Jewish and Christian community are under-represented, if represented at all. In fact we are beginning to see the collaboration of institutional leaders on the issue of dissent within each other's community. Though most often simply dismissed, dissent is also defined as a misguided or destructive force within the community necessitating control. The

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most significant issue in this regard for the Jewish community is criticism toward Israeli expansionism and militarism; for the Christian community it is the emerging theologies of liberation. In short, as in any institutional framework, a breakthrough point tends invariably over time to dull its initial radicality and purpose in its very institutionalization. Or better said, possibilities which are not necessarily part of its initial impetus but which emerge within the process of dialogue are denied a forum as inappropriate.²

A coalition of messianic trust

The possibility of dialogue is simply stated in the negative, though it is ever complex in its positive articulation: are we as Jews and Christians locked in a dialogue with institutional leaders whose definitions of fidelity are increasingly irrelevant to the social and religious crises we face? I think here of the beautiful and dramatic moment when the Pope visited the synagogue in Rome, referring to Jews as Christians' elder brothers in faith. Yet how did this celebration address the hundreds of million outside of the synagogue who daily hunger and thirst? And the visits of Jewish delegations to the Vatican, who argue, among other things, that Latin American liberation theology is anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic. How do these visits encourage the struggle of the poor for human rights and justice? The positive articulation in the form of a question is as follows: is it possible that by responding to the urgency of our time we can explore the deepest levels of fidelity available to Jews and Christians and thus recognize our commonality in an embrace which goes beyond dialogue? This embrace could only occur if and when our common history is taken seriously and the present struggles in the world are taken as the centre of our faith commitments.³

This I think is the central theme of Johann Baptist Metz's attempt, as a German Catholic theologian, to create a bond of solidarity between Jews and Christians after the Holocaust. His essay 'Christians and Jews after Auschwitz' is worth contemplating in this regard. He begins with the question:

Will we actually allow Auschwitz to be the end point, the disruption which it really was, the catastrophe of our history, out of which we can find a way only through a radical change of direction achieved via new standards of action? Or will we see it only as a monstrous accident within this history but not affecting history's course?⁴

Metz answers his own question by asserting that the future of Christianity is dependent on an affirmative answer to the first question: a radical change of direction is demanded. However, this cannot be accomplished through abstract reflection on dogma or even on the complicity of the Church; it cannot be accomplished by personal Christian reflection or even institutional action alone. The change can only occur by embracing the suffering and the heirs of that suffering. Metz writes: 'We Christians can never again go back behind Auschwitz: to go beyond Auschwitz, if we see clearly, is impossible for us of ourselves. It is possible only together with the victims of Auschwitz'.⁵

According to Metz, Christians are from now on 'assigned to the victims of Auschwitz—assigned, in fact, in an alliance belonging to the very heart of saving history . . .'.⁶ Thus Metz considers blasphemous attempts at Christian theology and language about meaning when they are initiated outside the Holocaust or try in some way to transcend it. Meaning, especially divine meaning, can be invoked only to the extent that such meaning was not abandoned in Auschwitz itself. This is why Metz responds to the question, is it possible for a Christian to pray after Auschwitz, in the affirmative: 'We can pray after Auschwitz because people prayed *in* Auschwitz'.⁷

Metz's understanding of history is dynamic, as a calling forth of memory and as a movement into the future. The alliance Metz projects within saving history, that is within the particularity of being Jewish and Christian but also somehow affecting both together at the deepest level, is a call to the common task of resistance which will include new suffering. This saving history alliance would, in the first instance, mean the radical end of every persecution of Jews by Christians, surely an understandable goal of dialogue. But again, Metz moves beyond dialogue. If any persecution were to take place in the future, it could only be a persecution together, of Jews *and* Christians—'as it was in the beginning'.⁸ The reason for this common persecution in the beginning—the refusal to recognize the Roman Emperor as God which called into question the foundations of Rome's political religion and thus branded Christians and Jews as atheists—is a call to political activity in the contemporary world. Still more, however, is the vision of embrace which arises from this analysis. Metz cautiously suggests that Jews and Christians could arrive one day at a '*coalition of Messianic trust . . . in opposition to the*

apotheosis of banality and hatred presented in our world'.⁹ Thus the memory of suffering is a call beyond dialogue to an embrace which lies at the very root of our struggle to be faithful in a world of injustice and oppression.

Metz calls Christians to carry the victims of their history with them into the future. Put more strongly, there is no future for Christianity unless the victims of Christian history are heard in the present. But can the victims of Christian history embrace their oppressors? Can the victims of Christian history, in this case the Jews and here specifically in its contemporary manifestation the Holocaust, enter this coalition of messianic trust by choice, open to the transformations which lie before it, including the possibility of persecution? Is the call of Auschwitz the same for Jews as it is for Christians? And if we know that only a minority of Christians have embarked on the road that Metz so hauntingly outlines, can we expect more than a minority of Jews to see such a road as possible after Auschwitz? And what does it mean if a minority of Jews and Christians affirm this coalition of messianic trust—not in theological abstraction but in political action which may lead to suffering?

The Holocaust as a call to solidarity

The reflections of Holocaust theologians, especially those of Irving Greenberg, are important here. Greenberg perceives the Jewish Holocaust both as an indictment of modernity, because of modernity's false universalism and the evil perpetuated under its reign, and as a critique of the Jewish and Christian religions, because they contributed to powerlessness and hatred. Both modernity and religions have not only contributed to the Holocaust; they have essentially passed over its challenge in silence. The message of the victims—to halt the carnage and to re-evaluate the dynamics of social and religious life—has fallen on deaf ears.¹⁰

The recovery of the story and the meaning of Holocaust, then, is essential to the redirection of modern life. However, this redirection can occur only if the brokenness is acknowledged. For the past two centuries our allegiance has been transferred from the 'Lord of History and Revelation' to the 'Lord of Science and Humanism', but the experience of the death camps asks whether this new Lord is worthy of ultimate loyalty. 'The victims ask that we not jump to a conclusion that retrospectively makes the covenant they lived an illusion and their death a gigantic travesty.'¹¹ At

the same time, nothing in the record of secular culture justifies its claim to authority, especially insofar as it provided the setting for mass death. According to Greenberg, the victims ask us above anything else 'not to allow the creation of another matrix of values that might sustain another attempt at genocide'.¹² The experience of the past and the possibility of the future urge resistance to the absolutization of the secular.¹³

To refuse to absolutize the secular does not, however, allow an escape into the religious sphere. After Auschwitz, we can speak only of 'moment faiths', instances when a vision of redemption is present, interspersed with the 'flames and smoke of burning children', where faith is absent. Greenberg describes these 'moment faiths' as the end of the easy dichotomy of atheist/theist and of the unquestioned equation of faith with doctrine.¹⁴ After the Holocaust, the difference between the skeptic and the believer is frequency of faith, not certitude of position. The rejection of the unbeliever by the believer is literally the denial or attempted suppression of what is within oneself. To live with moment faiths is to live with pluralism and without the superficial certainties that empty religion of its complexity and often make it a source of distrust for the other.¹⁵

The dialectic of faith is illustrated in contemporary Jewish experience by the establishment of the State of Israel; and Israel, like the Holocaust, takes on an aspect of a formative experience as well. 'The whole Jewish people is caught between immersion in nihilism and immersion in redemption', Greenberg suggests, and fidelity in the present means to remain within the dialectic of Auschwitz (the experience of nothingness) and Jerusalem (the political empowerment of a suffering community).¹⁶ If the experience of Auschwitz symbolizes alienation from God and from hope, the experience of Jerusalem symbolizes the presence of God and the continuation of the people. Burning children speak of the absence of all human and divine value; the survival of Holocaust victims in Israel speaks of the reclamation of human dignity and value. 'If Treblinka makes human hope an illusion, then the Western Wall asserts that human dreams are more real than force and facts. Israel's faith in the God of History demands that an unprecedented event of destruction be matched by an unprecedented act of redemption, and this has happened.'¹⁷

It is Greenberg's understanding that the victims of history are now called to refuse victimhood as meaning fidelity to the dead,

although he adds the proviso that to remember suffering propels the community to refuse to create other victims.

The Holocaust cannot be used for triumphalism. Its moral challenge must also be applied to Jews. Those Jews who feel no guilt for the Holocaust are also tempted to moral apathy. Religious Jews who use the Holocaust to morally impugn every other religious group but their own are the ones who are tempted thereby into indifference at the Holocaust of others (cf. the general policy of the American Orthodox rabbinate on United States Vietnam policy). Those Israelis who place as much distance as possible between the weak, passive Diaspora victims and the 'mighty Sabras' are tempted to use Israeli strength indiscriminately (i.e., beyond what is absolutely inescapable for self-defence and survival), which is to risk turning other people into victims of the Jews. Neither faith nor morality can function without serious twisting of perspective, even to the point of becoming demonic, unless they are illuminated by the fires of Auschwitz and Treblinka.¹⁸

As we can see, within Greenberg's theological perspective the dialectic of Holocaust and political empowerment is crucial: the first expressed in Auschwitz, symbol of nothingness; the latter in Jerusalem, portent of redemption. But Greenberg's dialectic is broader and more nuanced, for the experience of the death camps is a critique of false religion and of theological language as well as of political and technological developments within the modern secular world. It enjoins us to do acts of loving kindness and to refuse that matrix of values and institutions that support genocide. Israel, as a manifestation of political empowerment, is a symbol of fidelity to those who perished. The counterpoint is the possibility that Israeli values and power may undermine that very sign Israel seeks to be to the Jewish community and the world. If for Greenberg the dialectic of Holocaust and political empowerment is the foundation of the struggle to be faithful, both poles of the dialectic are shadowed by the haunting possibility of betrayal.¹⁹

Thus for Metz and Greenberg the victims of Auschwitz journey into the present as a critique of ideology and as a call to refuse unjust power, especially when it portends dislocation and death. After Auschwitz, a coalition of messianic trust is possible only if it is tried in the flames of the burning children, then *and* now. Even so, faith in the present involves the mix of presence and absence

and the embrace of believers is extended to the agnostic and the atheist, which also follows us to embrace that part of our Jewish and Christian self which remains in the fires of Auschwitz. The case of suffering for Christians and Jews, then, is less a confirmed faith than the command of a renewed solidarity. Yet the cries of burning children are passed over as too difficult or unworthy of our consideration. A coalition of messianic trust is in a similar position to the victims it carries with it: on the periphery, troublesome, in exile.²⁰

The difficulty of the coalition of messianic trust grows each day because the number of victims continues to increase. The Jewish Holocaust is carried with us, to be sure, but it is also our present and future. This is the theme of Holocaust theologian Richard Rubenstein in his books, *The cunning of history: mass death and the American future* and *The age of triage: fear and hope in an overcrowded world*. For Rubenstein the experience of the Jewish Holocaust is paradigmatic for the twentieth century as a whole. A hoped-for century of progress has at its close defined itself in terms of mass dislocation and mass death. The century of progress has become a century of triage and holocaust.²¹ In light of this Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian of liberation, states the theological question this way:

It needs to be realized, however, that for us Latin Americans the question is not precisely 'How are we to do theology after Auschwitz?' The reason is that in Latin America we are still experiencing every day the violation of human rights, murder, and the torture that we find so blameworthy in the Jewish holocaust of World War II. Our task here is to find the words with which to talk about God in the midst of the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply 'disappear' or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of peoples who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind, and the corpse-filled common graves of *Ayacucho*. What we must deal with is not the past but, unfortunately, a cruel present and a dark tunnel with no apparent end.²²

Latin Americans ask: 'How are we to do theology *while Ayacucho lasts?* How are we to speak of the God of life when cruel murder on a massive scale goes on in "the corner of the dead?"'²³

It is with the Christian theologians of liberation that the challenge of Jewish victims to the Christian community is joined, for now the victims of history, many of them Christian, call out to the Jewish people to transform the memory of suffering into a creative, energetic solidarity. This is difficult on several levels, first because a former oppressor is now also a teacher; secondly, the issue of solidarity presents a critique of Jewish affluence and power in North America and Israel. For some economic and political policies supported by the Jewish establishment in North America and the annexationist and military policies promulgated by the State of Israel cause suffering in ways that we seek to deny. The coalition of messianic trust then takes on a different hue because the recently empowered are too often oppressing others today. Though we could use many examples, including Israeli policies towards South Africa and Central America, the recent Palestinian uprisings in the West Bank and Gaza are closer to home. To paraphrase Metz, the challenge of the Jewish community might be presented as following: 'We Jews can never again go back behind empowerment: to go beyond empowerment, if we see clearly, is impossible for us of ourselves. It is possible only with the victims of our empowerment'.²⁴

The broader tradition of faith and struggle

Thus for Jews and Christians, the central questions facing us come into focus. How are we to be faithful in light of the Jewish Holocaust while *Ayacucho* continues? How are we contributing to the corner of the dead? How can we move beyond complicity into a solidarity which is confessional, transformative and actively engaged in the pursuit of justice? As in any movement toward those who are suffering, it is at the same moment a movement toward the deepest themes of the Jewish and Christian tradition: ethics, the prophetic and the refusal of idolatry.

Could it be that at this critical juncture in history, Jews and Christians need each other in order to be faithful? So often we have seen each other as enemy, as challenging one another's authenticity, as in competition to define the meaning of history and salvation. But suppose now after this long and difficult history, with its chapters of oppression and empowerment, we begin to see ourselves as travelling together on a common journey. We begin to recognize a broader tradition of faith and struggle which celebrates the particularity of each community as it broadens into a

solidarity which is respectful and generous. We see that our particularity, when shared with the larger world, is a gift that portends transformation in a world in need of transformation. But how can we transform the world unless we believe that in the struggle for justice our own lives and community will be transformed as well?

For many who struggle for justice this is exactly our experience: a transformation of our lives and our understanding of fidelity. We feel ourselves to be in a deeper way Jewish and Christian, though our larger communities often have difficulty recognizing us as such. At the same time we become closer to one another, almost as if there was no longer a dividing point. We move toward an embrace.

Every embrace is a place of danger and hope, for in embrace lies the possibility of a commitment which moves beyond dogma and doctrine, often beyond words. In a sense every embrace is a heresy, breaking through the conventional and the superficial. A new strength emerges out of this union, propelling us toward a future which we ourselves shape.

In a century of mass dislocation and death, within Holocaust and *Ayacucho*, to embrace each other is to embrace the cries of those who have perished and those destined to perish today. It is to embrace a solidarity filled with loneliness and death, a solitude hardly imagined by those who went before us.

Yet perhaps this is how it was, truly in the beginning, long before the Temple, the Romans and Jesus—before Judaism and Christianity—when diverse tribes gathered in Egypt and Canaan to struggle for their liberation. They left behind the Gods of their oppressors and accepted the challenge of a different God, one who promised to be with them in the struggle and in their project to build a society built upon equality and justice. That God has long been domesticated and dogmatized, one might say abandoned, by the very ones who claim to be heirs to that struggle. Similarly, we cannot go back to that God as if our history had not occurred; neither can we go ahead alone. Still it was in the struggle that this God of liberation appeared and the struggles of our day bear testimony to a similar God. Could the struggles of our day bring us together as our foremothers and forefathers were to create a people whose fidelity is defined by the quest for justice?

The creation of a people is hardly easy; it comes within a point of historical crisis where hard choices need to be made. No doubt,

in the beginning, as we are today, the people were faced with moment faiths and the difficulty of creating a coalition of messianic trust. They had creeds and ideologies before them which they rejected in order to become free; they were the original atheists, that is those who refused to believe in political affiliations and Gods who served their oppressors. We are called today to the God of liberation who, in our struggle, calls us to the embrace which is our sign of hope, as it was in the beginning.

NOTES

¹ This essay is intended to explore the aspect of dialogue from the perspective of the struggle for liberation rather than the more institutionalized aspects of the dialogue which are important though ultimately limited.

² For discussion of issue of dissent in ecumenical relations see Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish theology of liberation* (Maryknoll, NY, 1987), pp 73-76.

³ On the question of fidelity as it applies to Jews and Christians see Marc H. Ellis, *Faithfulness in an age of Holocaust* (Warwick, NY, 1986).

⁴ Metz, Johann Baptist: *The emergent Church: the future of Christianity in a postbourgeois world*, trans. Peter Mann (NY, 1981), p 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Greenberg, Irving: 'Cloud of smoke, pillar of fire: Judaism, Christianity and modernity after the Holocaust', in *Auschwitz: beginning of a new era?* ed. Eva Fleischner (NY, 1977), pp 9-19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 28, 29. Greenberg continues: 'Modernity fostered the excessive rationalism and utilitarian relations which created the need for and susceptibility to totalitarian mass movements and the surrender of moral judgement. The secular city sustained the emphasis on value-free sciences and objectivity, which created unparalleled power but weakened its moral limits . . . In the light of Auschwitz, secular twentieth century civilization is not worthy of this transfer of our ultimate loyalty' (28).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 22.

¹⁹ By the 1980s Greenberg begins to follow the path he warns against by emphasizing empowerment over critique. See Irving Greenberg, 'On the third era in Jewish history: power and politics', *Perspectives* (NY, 1980). For my analysis of this shift see Ellis, *Jewish theology*, pp 26-39.

²⁰ Perhaps this renewed solidarity will be found in the common 'night' of suffering. See Ellis, *Liberation*, pp 75-84.

²¹ Richard Rubenstein is an important, controversial and relatively neglected thinker. Though his political conclusions are in need of critique, Rubenstein's analysis of the dark

side of the 'revolution of rationality' and of the Judeo-Christian tradition demand our attention. See Richard Rubenstein, *The cunning of history: mass death and the American future* (NY, 1975) and *The age of triage: fear and hope in an overcrowded world* (Boston, 1983).

²² Gutierrez, Gustavo: *On Job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent*, trans Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY, 1987), p 102.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 101, 102.

²⁴ For analysis of Israeli involvement in South Africa see Jane Hunter, *Undercutting sanctions: Israel, the U.S. and South Africa* (Washington, DC, 1986). For analysis of Israeli involvement in Central America see her *No simple proxy: Israel in Central America* (Washington, DC, 1987).