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Thinking About The Unthinkable— A Christian Reflects on the Holocaust

by The Rev. Canon Jervis S. Zimmerman

The Holocaust is surely one of the worst chapters in human history. There have been other genocidal conflicts in our own time: the murder of one and one-half million Armenians by the Turks during the first World War; Stalin's blood purges, deportations to the gulags and enforced collectivization of farms in the Ukraine which together cost as many as ten million lives. In our own day in Rwanda hundreds of thousands of lives have been taken by intertribal slaughter. But the Holocaust is unique: a major world power massively focussing its great resources on the single-minded purpose of murdering every Jewish man, woman and child within its grasp. With chilling efficiency the Nazi bureaucracy utilized modern technology to murder in a few short years about six million Jews, which represented about two-thirds of all the Jews in Europe. For many of the victims their fate was unbelievable until the reality of the gas chambers confronted them. For all civilized persons the Holocaust is an unthinkable event.

To any person of religious faith—Jew or Christian alike—the Holocaust raises deeply disturbing questions about the nature of human evil and depravity, the suffering of innocent victims and the rarity of courage in the bystanders. Where was God during the Holocaust? How can one believe in a God who would allow the Holocaust to happen?

But for Christians the Holocaust is profoundly disturbing in other ways. Virtually all of those persons who betrayed Jews to the Nazis and those who then murdered the Jews were baptized Christians. The notorious Nuremberg laws of 1935 which deprived Jews in Germany of basic civil rights were patterned on the earlier canons of the church against Jews. And what was the role of the Christian churches in fostering anti-Semitism despite a century of enlightenment in Germany? I believe the anti-Judaism of the Christian scriptures and liturgy is a necessary though not sufficient cause of the Holocaust. For all these reasons Christians must seriously consider the painful import of the Holocaust on our religious faith and practice. It is a major task to which many theologians, biblical exegetes and church leaders have devoted significant thought since the end of World War II. Nevertheless, it is a task which is far finished half a century after the Holocaust came to an end.

The first fact with which the Holocaust confronts us is the grim reality of human evil. Christopher Browning, a historian at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington has, through careful research, reconstructed the story of one German Reserve Police Battalion which took part in the murder of Jews in Poland. It is entitled *Ordinary Men* because Browning

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stresses that this police battalion was comprised, not of sadists and psychopaths, but of "ordinary men", and not just "ordinary Germans", but "ordinary men". The implication is that what these men did in the point-blank shooting of thousands of unarmed Jews trapped in Polish villages might be done by any other group of men, given the right circumstances.

The first pre-condition to their actions was the Nazi propaganda which dehumanized Jews. In the Nazi's eyes the Jews were not human beings, but vermin, bacteria unfit to live on the earth! The second factor was peer pressure. When one's fellow soldiers are assigned an unpleasant task most soldiers are reluctant to hang back or refuse to help. It is worth noting that when the battalion was sent into its first "action" against Jews in a Polish village, no soldier was forced to participate. Those who refused were not punished or disciplined. But even those who initially refused in due time took part in the round-up of Jews with dogs and clubs. When the soldiers returned to their barracks after their first slaughter of Jews, their boots spattered with Jewish blood, some of them were physically sick. The battalion was issued extra rounds of alcohol to bolster their spirits. Eventually, when the death camps were operational the battalion only had to herd the Jews into cattle cars, a task which they found more congenial than the direct killing of Jews in the villages. But either way, the task of making the country "Judenrein" (that is "clean the Jews" not merely "free the Jews") proceeded relentlessly.

When we read these chilling accounts we are reminded again (if such were necessary) of the incredible depths of cruelty to which "ordinary

men" can sink. It is what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil."

But we also encounter stirring accounts of heroism when we study the Holocaust, the heroism of those brave persons who rescued Jews and sheltered them, usually at peril to

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their own lives. The story of Oskar Schindler has been vividly told, first by Thomas Keneally in his book, *Schindler's List* and more recently in Steven Spielberg's brilliant film version of the book. By guile and bribery Schindler saved 1,200 Jews who worked in his factory. He also managed to save a much larger number of Jewish women by getting them out of Auschwitz and placed in textile factories in Moravia. At Yad Vashem in Israel the stories of those "righteous Gentiles" who helped Jews escape the Holocaust are recorded. *The Path of the Righteous* by Mordecai Paldiel tells many of the stories which have been documented and authenticated at Yad Vashem. Most of these rescuers were men and women of religious faith. Their stories are inspiring. But why were there so few of them? And why, beginning with the Pope, did so few religious leaders speak out against the Nazi's persecution of the Jews? We know that the Nazis were ruthless in stamping out dissent and that many clergy who criticized the regime were

sent to the concentration camps, Dachau in particular. But if church leaders had been more courageous in opposing the persecution of the Jews, especially early on, the story of the Holocaust might have a different ending. Surely there is a message here to religious leaders to be brave in exposing evil and more courageous in condemning injustice and cruelty.

A second great moral question with which the Holocaust confronts us is the problem of unmerited suffering. This is a question as old as the book of *Job*. Humanity has always suffered from natural disasters—hurricanes, typhoons, tidal waves, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions. Though we have gained some skill in predicting such events, they still happen and we continue to suffer from them. Through history millions of persons have died from plagues and infectious diseases. It is estimated that in Europe during the Middle Ages one-third of the population died of plague. Thanks be to God, most of these devastating diseases have yielded to advances in medicine. But the suffering deliberately inflicted on one group of people by other human beings through war and political persecution continues to haunt us. And these catastrophes, theoretically at least, are preventable. They are brought about by human greed, covetousness, the lust for power, enormously inflated selfishness, gross disregard for the environment and for the rights and well-being of animals and people.

When innocent children die of a preventable or treatable disease this is a challenge to us to take appropriate steps in research and treatment to insure that such deaths do not recur. Inevitably our efforts at

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prevention and cure of disease are imperfect, and some innocent persons will still die, just as thousands are now dying of AIDS until its cause and treatment are discovered.

But when human sin is the underlying cause, then the innocent as well as the guilty suffer together until we recognize the error of our ways and amend them. Nazism was based on many grievous and blatant falsehoods—the teaching of the superiority of the nordic “races”, the supremacy of the state over individual conscience and over the church, the right of Germany to dominate and control Europe, to

that seems to be an inescapable, though tragic fact of life.

Looming above and beyond these questions which the Holocaust raises is the question, “Where was God during the Holocaust? How could God allow such a horrible thing to happen?” Theologians have tried to answer this question whenever they have been confronted by a major catastrophe resulting in wholesale human suffering and death. Did God “hide God’s face” from the grim reality of the Holocaust as Psalm 27: 9 suggests? Were the Jews in the Death camps “forsaken, cast off by God”?

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cite just three. The German people tacitly or openly gave their consent to these and many other false views. In consequence countless lives were lost—civilian as well as military. And an even greater number of innocent persons were murdered in the death factories—Jews, gypsies, homosexuals. God apparently was unwilling to halt this process until it had taken its fearful toll. But ultimately, as persons of faith, we believe that truth does prevail over error and justice is victorious over injustice and evil. But in the meantime the innocent suffer together with the guilty. Hopefully we are slowly, painfully acquiring the wisdom not to repeat these mistakes and to recognize these false ideologies. As George Santayana has said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it!” In the meantime the innocent suffer and

Was the Holocaust God’s punishment of the Jews for their sins? If so, how can we continue to believe in a God so vindictive that God would allow the death of little children because of the (presumed) sins of their elders? Richard Rubenstein speaks to those Jews (and Christians also) who pose this question. Rubenstein writes, “the question of God’s existence is forever debatable; God’s objective assistance can be analyzed and judged. After the Holocaust, in which six million innocent Jews were killed, could Jews pray to such a God? And, one may add, could Christians also pray to such a God? Many have answered, “No!”

Elie Wiesel challenges those theologians who claim that God is dead. Wiesel said, “Those who came out with the so-called God is dead theology, not one of them had been

in Auschwitz. Replying to Rubenstein Wiesel added (referring to those he knew in Auschwitz):

And in spite of all, there were these men who remained human and who remained Jewish and went on praying to God. And here I will tell you, Dick (Rubenstein, that is) that you don’t understand *them* when you say it is more difficult to live today in a world without God. No! If you want difficulties, choose to live with God.”

As a Christian who believes that God is *not* dead, I believe that God was present and suffering with every Jewish child, woman and man who perished in the Nazi gas chambers; that God was present with each starving person working in the Nazi slave labor camps; that God was present with each gypsy, homosexual, Jehovah’s Witness or Pole who suffered unspeakable torments in the Holocaust. If God did not intervene to prevent the suffering and death of God’s only Son on the cross, neither would God intervene in the Holocaust. And as the heart of God suffered with Jesus on the cross, so did God suffer with each Holocaust victim and so does God continue to suffer wherever and whenever human beings torture and murder other human beings.

The remaining issues arising from the Holocaust which I will discuss confront Christians alone. The first has to do with God’s covenant with God’s people. Conservative Christians and radical fundamentalists assert that the new covenant sealed in Jesus’ blood on the cross supersedes the old covenant sealed by Moses on Mt. Sinai. Some of these Christians go so far as to claim that God did not hear the prayers of the Jews in

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the death camps because they had refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. They attach special importance to the text, "No one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14: 6) and use this passage to assert the exclusive claims of Christians to salvation over all other world religions.

The Rev. Bailey Smith on the eve of his election as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1980

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declared, "My friend God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." Tragically, he is not alone in his view. His position resembles that of Roman Catholics who assert that "outside the Church there is no salvation."

Although they may not expressly say that the new covenant supersedes the old one, liberal Christians have nevertheless often lent credence to that notion. The very titles used for the two major parts of the Bible—Old Testament and New Testament—can be a put-down of the former in favor of the latter. That is which is new is usually preferred over that which is old and the new is assumed to have taken the place of the old. Such supercessionist views, whether implied or expressly stated, St. Paul clearly refutes. "I ask them," Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (11: 1a) "has God

rejected his people? By no means;" God's covenant with the people Israel is an everlasting covenant. Nowhere does Jesus say that he has come to abolish that covenant.

Rather, the covenant which God made with Israel has, in Jesus, been expanded to include all nations, Gentiles as well as Jews. God's covenant with the Jews is not for their sole benefit but for the salvation of all humanity. The mission of God's Israel is to be a "light to the nations." (Luke 2: 29) Karl Barth summarizes the relation between the two covenants in this way, "They (the Jews) have the promise of God; and if we Christians from among the Gentiles have it too, then it is only as those chosen with them, as guests in their house, as new wood grafted onto their old tree."

Coupled with the attempt to deny that God's covenant with the Jews is still valid is an effort to de-emphasize Jesus' Jewishness. In popular religious calendar art and countless stained glass church windows Jesus is depicted as a fair-skinned Anglo-Saxon. The 1979 revision of the Book of Common Prayer changed the name of the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ to the Feast of the Holy Name, thereby altering Anglican usage which had gone back continuously to the first English Prayer Book of 1549. One cannot help but wonder about the reason for this change. Is it one more attempt to de-emphasize the fact that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew? If so, this contributes to the subtle anti-Semitism which the church, often unwittingly, fosters.

When the Nazis adopted the notorious Nuremberg laws in 1935 they patterned them directly on canons which the Catholic Church had

adopted centuries before against the Jews. The wearing of a badge, enforced residence in ghettos, elimination of civil rights, restriction of occupations in which Jews could engage—all these had been imposed on Jews by the Catholic Church. In the Roman Papal states the Jewish ghetto was not finally abolished until 1870, with the reunification of Italy. This is the long shameful history of institutionalized Christian discrimination against Jews which the Nazis resurrected in 1935.

Another factor which helped make possible the Holocaust is the anti-Judaism of the Christian scriptures themselves. Sunday by Sunday devout Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, have listened to the reading of the sacred scriptures, many of which repeatedly place Jews in the worst possible light. Frequently sermons underscore the theme that it is the Jews who fail to understand Jesus. In both scriptures and sermon it is the Jews who are stereotyped as spiritually blind, legalistic, narrow-minded, cunning, cleverly trying to plot against Jesus and to trip him with trick questions. Granted that in the Gospels these negative images of Jews describe the Jews of Jesus' day. But inevitably person who hear them now association the biblical picture of

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Jews in our own day. Jews, depicted as the villains in Jesus' time, continue to occupy that role in the minds of many Christians today. There is no

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question that the anti-Judaism of the Christian scriptures is a necessary, though not a sufficient cause leading to the Holocaust.

Scripture scholars have carefully examined the relations between the first Christians and the Palestinian Jewish community of the first century. The earliest Christians, of course, were virtually all Jews, circumcised into the covenant community as infants and observant of the Torah as adults. The tension began to develop when Gentiles became followers of Jesus. Did they also have to be circumcised? Did they have to observe the Jewish food and ritual laws? Peter and the others at the first Jerusalem council decided that Gentiles did not. With that momentous decision, the rift between Jews and Christians began. Tensions mounted. Increasingly, Gentile Christians resisted the Judaizers, as did St. Paul. Eventually the Gentile followers of Jesus who did not observe *halakhic* requirements were put out of the synagogue, and the rift became permanent. Tragically, the animosity which early Christians felt towards observant Jews who were not followers of Christ was expressed in the biblical writings. And this anti-Jewish polemic became frozen into the continuing posture of Christians towards Jews. The result has been nineteen centuries of bitter persecution of Jews by Christians reaching its terrible climax in the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, nationalistic Jews in Palestine in the first century were under increasing pressure from the Roman authorities. The judgment of Caiaphas the high priest (John 11: 50) that it was better for one man to die than that the whole nation should perish is reasonable and sensible. It conveys the animosity of the Jewish

religious and political leaders towards Jesus. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had to be cautious not to arouse the Roman authorities. Crucifixion was not the Jewish punishment for blasphemy (of which Jesus was accused by the Jewish leaders.) Stoning was the Jewish punishment for that. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment which only the Roman authorities could impose. Thousands of Jews in Palestine were crucified on the orders of Pontius Pilate. It is very likely that Jesus was crucified not just *under* Pontius Pilate, but *by* Pontius Pilate. The early church, itself fearful of per-

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secution by the Roman government, muted this in the language of the creeds. As the early Christians began to be persecuted by the Roman government the Gospel writers described Pontius Pilate in more positive terms than his ruthless actions deserved. At the same time as the threat from Jewish authorities declined, particularly after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C. E., those who wrote the Gospels could more easily depict the Jewish leaders in more negative terms than they may actually have merited.

The charge of deicide, which Christians have levied against Jews for

two millennia is grossly inaccurate and unjust. Some Jewish leaders plotted to bring about Jesus' death. But most of the Jewish people in Palestine respected Jesus and heard him gladly. It is highly unlikely that any crowd ever shouted such a mouthful as "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27: 25.) A few people may have said that, but not a crowd.

Because of the many anti-Jewish statements in the Christian scriptures, exegetes and Bible scholars must clearly give the historical background to such statements in commentaries and notes in study Bibles. Preachers also must take great care in preaching on these passages so that it is clear that the situation to which these verses spoke in the first century C. E. certainly does not obtain today. It is imperative that we repudiate in every way possible the anti-Judaism which pervades so much of the Greek testament. We must take even greater care in preaching on the Passion of Jesus not to demonize the Jews. The Sunday of the Passion is one of the three great days of the Christian year when churches are likely to be at their fullest so that preaching on that day has considerable impact on the laity. The Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the (U.S.) National Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared excellent guidelines on the presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic preaching. These guidelines were published in 1988 under the title *God's Mercy Endures Forever*. I hope that other Christian churches would publish similar guidelines.

In the Episcopal Church we can lengthen appointed readings in the lectionary but we cannot shorten them. Nor can we omit offending or objectionable verses. But we can and

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should prepare careful introductory comments which can help to explain their historical context and which can re-interpret offending texts. I also seriously question the dramatic reading of the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday with the congregation shouting the words of the crowd. It can contribute to anti-Judaism which should be repugnant to thoughtful Christians.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith reports a decline in public incidents of anti-Semitism. If so, that is cause for rejoicing. It is no

doubt due in part to vigorous legislation punishing anti-Semitic actions. It may also be attributed to the fact that more and more Jews are being assimilated into the secular American culture and thus are becoming unrecognizable as Jews. Also, fewer and fewer Christians are attending churches regularly where they hear the Scriptures read with their frequent anti-Jewish polemic. Neither explanation can be cause for rejoicing among people of religious faith.

To think about the Holocaust is to contemplate one of the worst

catastrophes in human history. We must never forget the six million Jewish children and women and men who were murdered by the Nazis. As Christians we must do all in our power to banish from our worship and our thoughts whatever might make a repetition of the Holocaust possible in our day. Having done this, we must acknowledge the prejudice in our own hearts against Jews and humbly beg their forgiveness for our lack of charity and for the untold suffering which it has brought upon them.