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## Christianity and the Holocaust

Christianity was born around the time when the Jewish people lost their independence, lost their Holy Temple, lost their holy city, and began their two-thousand-year history known as the *galut*, the exile, the dispersion of the Jewish people around the world, mainly in Christian and Muslim lands. As Christianity became Europe's dominant religion and would eventually become the dominant religion of the world, Judaism shrank in numbers and lived on the margins of its host countries. There were brief periods during which Judaism was respected and was able to contribute to the common welfare and even to produce some of history's leading minds, but for the most part Jews led a precarious existence which was given a comic twist in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which the rabbi of the village of Anatevka in czarist Russia is asked what is the blessing for the czar, to which he responds: "May God bless and keep the czar—far away from us."

The Holocaust was the culmination of centuries of Jewish existence in a Christian world. As we saw in the first part of the book, the Holocaust was a perfect storm in which the Christian world on all sides of the conflict known as World War II assumed different roles by either perpetrating the annihilation of the Jews or standing by and letting it happen. In either capacity, the Christian world committed history's gravest crime, a crime not only against the Jewish people but also against itself. For during the Holocaust the Christian world lost its soul, and now—decades later—it is yet to find it. It is no wonder that adherence to the institutions of Christian faith in Europe is at an all-time low.

Historical anti-Semitism fostered by Christianity for nearly two millennia made the Holocaust possible. It gave the Nazis and their collaborators throughout Europe a spiritual license to kill Jews with impunity, and it gave the world's Christian democracies a justification not to hasten to the rescue of those who were "different." To this day, there are more than a few people in the world who consider themselves "good Christians" yet are sorry that Hitler "did not finish the job." Over the years, I have heard those words spoken, and seen them in print, in different parts of the Christian world.

But this is not where the story begins and ends. The Holocaust refuses to recede into the past and be consigned to the dustbin of history. In about two decades from now we will observe the centennial of the Nazis' rise to power, and whether you are a Jew or a Gentile you feel as though it only happened yesterday. New generations have now been born since those evil times, but the old questions are still being asked by both Jew and Gentile, only with greater intensity. The world can never go back to "business as usual" when it comes to religious belief. One can pretend the Holocaust never happened, as those known as "Holocaust deniers" do, but ignoring reality does not change it in any way, it only diminishes those who deny it.

Christian scholars and theologians around the world have begun to ask the hard questions. There has been much soul-searching, and it seems that this process will continue for years to come. Most important, the prevalent view today among those Christian thinkers across the entire spectrum of Christianity who, so to speak, look to recover the soul of their faith, is that the time has come for a major overhauling of the Christian faith so that it may be able to confront the realities of the post-Holocaust world and become the force for good it was meant to be.

This process began in the Catholic Church in 1962 under the auspices of Pope John XXIII with the Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican II, which addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. This Council, which lasted until 1965, marked a historical turning point in the annals of the Catholic Church. Among other things, as a clear result of the Holocaust, during which time Pope John XXIII did a great deal to rescue Jews, it redefined the attitude of the Church toward Jews. The Council stated,

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; *still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.* Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy

Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, *the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.*<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that the Church changed overnight and all its followers became tolerant towards and accepting of Jews and their faith. As is well known, the Catholic Church, the most powerful Christian religious body in the world, is beset today by many problems, and since Vatican II there has been much going forward and backward on many issues. One such issue is the canonization of Pope Pius XII, who is denounced by Holocaust scholars as one who failed to speak out against Nazi atrocities. Pope Benedict XVI moved him closer to canonization in 2010, eliciting much protest from Jewish groups. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the Catholic Church has finally taken a stand against anti-Semitism and against all the ills that plagued the Church for centuries in its dealing with the Jews. Most important, in *Nostra Aetate* the Vatican finally recognized the validity of the covenant between God and Israel, alongside the validity of God's new covenant with the Church.

One writer who has chronicled the history of the Church's attitudes towards the Jews since its inception is the former Catholic priest James Carroll, author of the celebrated book *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. Carroll's honesty and passion are remarkable indeed. One seldom comes across someone who is devoted to his own faith yet is not afraid to be critical of it where it deserves criticism. In praising Pope John XXIII for his accomplishments, Carroll quotes the great theologian Hans Küng as saying, "What he achieved for the Catholic Church was unforgettable too. In five years he renewed the Catholic Church more than his predecessors had in five hundred years . . . Only with John did the Middle Ages come to an end in the Catholic Church."<sup>2</sup>

The following two paragraphs from Carroll's book deserve to be quoted at length, remarkable as they are:

1. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, sec. 4, paras. 6–7 (italics added), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html/).

2. Küng, *Reforming the Church Today*, 66–67; quoted in Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, 550.

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The examination of conscience for which John XXIII had called required more than was possible at the time, probably even more than he envisaged . . . to eliminate the contempt of Jews that lives not only in the hearts of prejudiced Christians but in the heart of “the Church as such” requires fundamental changes in the way history has been written, theology has been taught, and Scripture has been interpreted. Indeed, in this context, the very character of Scripture as sacred text becomes an issue . . . So, yes, the reforming impulse of Vatican II fell far short of what was needed, and yes, in the years since, the authorities of the Church have done their best to dampen any return of that impulse within Catholicism. How, given this history could it have been otherwise?

But the reforming impulse refuses to die, even in the Church, because the event that set it moving has only continued to grow in force in the conscience of the West. This is what it means that, at the most basic level, Pope John XXIII was responding to the Holocaust. The Final Solution refused to remain adjudicated in institutions everywhere. In Bayer, Swiss banks, the Louvre, owners of apartments in the Eighth Arrondissement, the Ford Motor Company, the U.S. Treasury Department, and the *New York Times* are made to confront their relationship to this unfinished business of the twentieth century, so with the Catholic Church . . . As a Catholic I have been raised with the intuition that such moral reckoning is essential to the life of conscience, whether the individual’s or the community’s. I now understand better than I did before that Church history is itself the record of such moral reckoning, if accomplished in fits and starts.<sup>3</sup>

Carroll goes on to draw the following conclusion:

The time has come for a gathering of those invested in the future of the Church, which, as is clear by now, means a gathering more broadly defined than any in Church history. Centrally Catholic, it will also include Jews and Protestants, people of other faiths and of no faith, clergy and laity, and, emphatically, women. The time has come for the convening of Vatican Council III.<sup>4</sup>

In the concluding section of *Constantine’s Sword*, Carroll discusses the need for the Catholic Church to fully come to terms with Jews and others by thoroughly revising the traditional Catholic understanding of the message of the Christian Savior as an inclusive rather than an exclusive message.

3. *Ibid.*, 554–55.

4. *Ibid.*, 558.

According to his understanding of the current state of the Church, the Church is still evolving and looking to perfect itself, rather than to lay claim to perfection and completion. Carroll's concern for the Church is not limited to the historical problem of the rejection and vilification of the Jews, but encompasses all aspects of the Church, including issues such as celibacy and contraception. In other words, he is looking for a thorough revision of the old ways to allow the modern world to finally find fulfillment in the Church.

It has been my experience over the years in working with Catholic priests and scholars, especially in the United States, that there is a great deal of goodwill and openness on their part as they reach out to Jewish clergy and scholars like myself in a sincere attempt to build bridges and enter a new era of mutual respect and understanding, not merely because of self-interest, but because of the realization that after Auschwitz they need to make a common cause with Jews and others if religion is to become a force for good in this world. In this respect, we have progressed by light-years since the time of my grandparents in Poland when the local rabbi and the local priest had absolutely nothing to do with each other, and we all know what eventually happened. I personally welcome this new reality, and it gives me hope as I will attempt to explain in greater detail when I will draw my own conclusions about the role of faith in finding a meaning in the Holocaust.

Here are some examples of Catholic scholars speaking about the impact of the Holocaust on their religious thinking. The first is that of Harry James Cargas, author of *Shadows of Auschwitz: A Christian Response to the Holocaust*:

To call myself a Roman Catholic is to describe my spiritual development incompletely. It is more honest for me to say at this time in my life that I am a post-Auschwitz Christian in the wider context of Western Christianity. The Holocaust event requires my response precisely as a Christian. *The Holocaust is, in my judgment, the greatest tragedy for Christians since the crucifixion.* In the first instance, Jesus died; in the latter, Christianity may be said to have died. In the case of Christ, the Christian believes in resurrection. Will there be, can there be, a resurrection for Christianity? That is the question that haunts me . . . Can one be a Christian today, given the death camps that, in major part, were conceived, built, and operated by a people who called themselves Christians?

. . . Jesus should be recognized as a link between Jews and Christians . . . Too often Jesus has been offered as a stumbling

block between Christians and Jews, as a rationale for mutual exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

Another example is quoted by Michael McGarry, author of *Christology after the Holocaust*, from a joint report sponsored by the National Council of Churches and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops:

The Church of Christ is rooted in the life of the People of Israel. We Christians look upon Abraham as our spiritual ancestor and father of our faith . . . The ministry of Jesus and the life of the early Christian community were thoroughly rooted in the Judaism of their day, particularly in the teaching of the Pharisees. The Christian church is still sustained by the living faith of the patriarchs and the prophets, kings and priests, scribes and rabbis, and the people whom God chose for his own. Christ is the link . . . enabling Gentiles to be numbered among Abraham's 'offspring' and therefore fellow-heirs with the Jews according to God's promise.<sup>6</sup>

Yet another example is the words of David Tracy, author of "Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Catholic View":

In a real sense, this [reexamining the gospel] has begun to occur powerfully among Christian theologians . . . who have begun to recognize the profoundly Jewish character of Christianity itself. The Christian God is none other than the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our Christ is none other than Jesus the Jew of Nazareth. Our sacred texts are none other than the Hebrew Scriptures, which also serve as our Old Testament, and the apostolic writings—the apostolic writings of the early Jewish Christians, which we call the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

Gregory Baum, the noted Canadian Catholic theologian of German origins, writes in "Rethinking the Church's Mission after Auschwitz":

After Auschwitz the Christian churches no longer wish to convert the Jews. While they may not be sure of the theological grounds that dispense them from this mission, the churches have become aware that asking the Jews to become Christians is a spiritual way of blotting them out of existence and thus only enforcing the effects of the Holocaust . . . *for after Auschwitz*

5. Cargas, *Shadows of Auschwitz*, 160–61 (italics added).

6. Quoted from "Statement to Our Fellow Christians," in McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz*, 57–58.

7. Tracy, "Religious Values after the Holocaust," 95.

*and the participation of the nations, it is the world that is in need of conversion.* The major churches have come to repudiate mission to the Jews, even if they have not justified this by adequate doctrinal explanations. We have here a case, frequently found in church history, where a practical decision on the part of the churches, in response to a significant event, precedes dogmatic reflection and in fact becomes the guide to future doctrinal development. Moved by a sense of shame over the doctrinal formulations that negates Jewish existence, the churches have come to recognize Judaism as an authentic religion before God, with independent value and meaning, not as a stage on the way to Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Here Baum speaks not only for the Catholic Church but for all of Christianity. His words are reinforced by Paul Tillich, the great German theologian of the twentieth century, who says in an interview with Albert Friedlander: “this [converting the Jews] is something that I cannot accept. I have never tried to convert Jews; we have a common task, and synagogue and church must work together.”<sup>9</sup>

All the above statements point to a sea change in the post-Holocaust Catholic Church. As Carroll and others have emphasized, this process is far from completed. Much still needs to be done, especially at the lay level. But what should become clear is that the Catholic Church has embarked on an irreversible course that can only go forward. Jews had to pay a horrible price, but a new era has dawned on Catholic-Jewish relations.

The Catholic Church is not the only institution in the Christian world that has been grappling with the Holocaust and has done something about it. Voices are being heard from all corners of the Christian world, and they all have a similar tone—they are overwhelmed by the *tremendum* of the Holocaust, and they are looking for an answer.

The noted Christian theologian Paul Van Buren, who became well known in the '60s with the “death of God” movement, writes:

For Christians there is a revealed relationship between God and His creatures more nearly in line with Jewish Halachic faithfulness than with our idea that all that happens does so solely by God's action. If we are to continue to speak of “by grace alone,” then we shall need to allow for the fact that, by the grace of Creation, the grace of Sinai and the grace of Jesus Christ—all and each unfinished events—God has really turned over into

8. Baum, “Rethinking the Church's Mission after Auschwitz,” 113 (italics added).

9. In Friedlander, *Out of the Whirlwind*, 520.

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our hands the Way into the future which He has promised. We can move ahead in hope, but it will be a hope that calls us to cast our efforts into God's plan for the world. Redemption has been promised. The creation shall be completed. *But this is something that will not happen apart from the efforts of God's people and God's Gentile church.*<sup>10</sup>

In this passage van Buren points out to something I would like to examine in greater detail when I begin to draw my own conclusions about the role of faith in finding a meaning in the Holocaust.

The Uruguayan liberation theologian Julio de Santa Ana, writes in "The Holocaust and Liberation":

The theology of the Holocaust should be replaced by a theology of solidarity, through which the Jewish people would give a full expression to their universal vocation. The emphasis should be on the expression of faith, and not on its exclusivity. This practice of solidarity begins with those who are closest. The other, the Palestinian, calls for recognition, dialogue, life with open relationships. This is what is written in the *Torah*. More than a Jewish liberation theology, it is a challenge to the Jewish people to develop a profound practice of liberation. Solidarity, beginning with the Palestinians, will be indelible proof that bitterness has been overcome. And, let us not forget, the Holocaust was a horrifying expression of bitterness—something that should never be repeated, not even by the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

Here again there are some points I would like to come back to later.

The Catholic German theologian Johann Baptist Metz writes in this book *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*:

The question whether there will be a reformation and a radical conversion in the relations between Christians and Jews will ultimately be decided, at least in Germany, by the attitudes we Christians adopt toward Auschwitz and the value it really has for ourselves. Will we actually allow it 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 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.

10. Van Buren, *Discerning the Way*, 180–81 (italics added).

11. Santa Ana, "The Holocaust and Liberation," 44–45.



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.* This, in my eyes, is the root of Jewish-Christian ecumenism . . . To confront Auschwitz is in no way to comprehend it. Anyone wishing to comprehend in this area will have comprehended nothing.<sup>12</sup>

As I mentioned before, Irving Greenberg, a modern Orthodox rabbi and a noted Holocaust scholar, did much to clarify the issues that emerged from the Holocaust for both Christians and Jews. In “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” Greenberg universalizes the experience of the Holocaust to include all people. He says,

We also face the urgent call to eliminate every stereotype discrimination that reduces—and denies—this image in the other. It was the ability to distinguish some people as human and others as not that enabled the Nazis to segregate and then destroy the “subhumans” (Jews, Gypsies, Slavs). The ability to differentiate the foreign Jews from the French-born Jews paved the way for the deportation first of foreign-born, then of native, French Jews. This differentiation stilled conscience, stilled the church, stilled even some French Jews. The indivisibility of human dignity and equality becomes an essential bulwark against the repetition of another Holocaust. It is the command rising out of Auschwitz.<sup>13</sup>

Why is it so important to bring Christianity into the conversation of what is a patently Jewish topic, namely, the Holocaust?

As a political system, National Socialism, or Nazism, thank goodness, is dead. In the world today there are still neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and latent Nazis, many of them hiding in the shadows and waiting for an opportunity to reemerge. But Christianity, with all its problems, and with all due respect to Nietzsche, is far from dead. The same is true of Judaism and also of God. And certainly Islam and Buddhism and the other religions of Asia, are far from dead. Even now when at long last the Jews have their own sovereign state, Jewish life, like it or not, continues to be linked in every possible way to Christian nations and Christian people who run the gamut from nominally Christian to devout Christian. Most Jews know very little about Christianity, and the little they know is often inaccurate and distorted. The reverse is equally true—the ignorance is mutual. And

12. Metz, *Emergent Church*, 18 (italics added).

13. Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” 44.

ignorance, as should be clear by now, is at the heart of all human conflict. Considering the fact that we Jews continue to be a tiny minority in a vast Christian world, it should be clear to every thinking Jew that Jews have a much greater interest in building bridges of understanding and trust with Christians than they do with us. The typical Jewish attitude towards the Christian world, which is part traditional and part post-Auschwitz, is that of an aggrieved party vis-à-vis an aggressor. In reading the foregoing views of several Christian scholars, it is quite clear that nearly all of them accept this prevailing Jewish attitude and try to work with it as best they can. But therein lies the problem. It is my contention that it is not in the best interest of the Jewish people to continue to play the role of victims and let Christians and others do all the heavy lifting. The time has come for us Jews to reach out to Christians and to members of other faiths and cultures and to find a common language that will enable us to take our rightful place in the family of nations as an important player in the process that has already been started by the Catholic Church and by the other churches in seeking new ways of working in harmony towards mutual goals that will enable humanity to move on to a better place.

### GOD REDEFINED

The time has come for religion—all religion—with its new language of faith, to redefine God. Quite obviously, to many Christians, their Savior stands for “them and us.” To many Jews, the God of Israel stands for “them and us.” And to many Muslims, Allah stands for “them and us.” This is what is known in religious parlance as triumphalism. This attitude does not allow for any progress in intercultural and interfaith relations, and does not build bridges for the future. Words like *heretic* or *infidel* have no place in the new language of faith. Man is not the judge of another man’s faith or belief. All the major religions profess to be living by the Golden Rule, which proclaims “love others as you love yourself.” This is the only rule that allows God to enter the human sphere, and if one would rather not believe in God, then this is the only rule that offers human existence the possibility of peace and understanding.

I agree with those Jewish and Christian religious thinkers like Greenberg and Santa Ana and others who maintain that in our search for an answer to Auschwitz and in our search for faith after Auschwitz we have no choice but to become universalists rather than sectarian. Christians believe that what happened to Jesus affects the entire human race. Jews believe that the God of Israel is the God of the universe. And Muslims believe the same

about Allah. What this really means is that no matter what our particular path to God or to the possibility of God happens to be, we all believe in the same universal truth or in the possibility thereof, and therefore we are all responsible for one another, and the time has come for all of us to realize that life is not about “them and us”; it is about one small planet inhabited by one small species facing universal problems that cry out for solutions that can only be achieved by global human cooperation and goodwill.

The conflict among the faiths can no longer be ignored. It requires all parties to dedicate time and resources to build badly needed bridges across the abyss of ignorance and prejudice, and to stop the bloodshed everywhere on the planet.

SAMPLE