

Report

The Holocaust As a Question

David Glanz

Any large public event in New York City is bound to attract some unstable types. But almost no other subject would be as likely to do so as a public forum on the Holocaust. And on June 3 through 6 a symposium entitled "Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era" was held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. There were moments when one felt the symposium had become a public Rorschach Test: fundamentalist Christians, crackpots of all flavors, Jews for Jesus, slightly manic civil libertarians struggling to get their message across, sweet little old English ladies quoting the Prophets, and, of course, survivors of the camps—all turned up. Members of the radical National Committee of Labor Caucuses disrupted Elie Wiesel's lecture and seized the microphone on several other occasions. In part the turnout may have been due to an incredible ad run in the *Village Voice*, telling people:

Take a vacation, call in sick or quit—but show up at The Cathedral of St. John the Divine as over 40 brilliant people from around the world, authors of almost 100 books wrestle with Auschwitz, the act that showed man has no limits. Explore the mind and guts of mankind. . . . Take 4 days and gain a lifetime education.

Organized by a group of Christian and Jewish scholars and theologians, the conference was an effort to come together, publicly, to explore the meaning of the Nazi destruction of European Jewry and its implications for contemporary life, secular as well as religious. In the course of the program a number of the participants expressed their misgivings about the seemingly unproblematic character of the symposium's title, which had initially been conceived of as a question rather than as an assumption. Ironically, however, it was the title's missing question mark that shaped most deeply the mood and tenor of the gathering as a whole.

What are the lessons of the Holocaust for the modern world? In what sense must it be seen as what Rabbi Irving Greenberg, the keynote speaker, termed the central "orienting-experience" of the twentieth century for Jews and Gentiles alike? What

is the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and Jews in a post-Holocaust age? How are we to understand the issues Auschwitz raises regarding the moral use of power?

It was to begin to approach such complex and disturbing questions that a small, informal, ecumenical committee originally conceived of the symposium. The initial vision of the conference was one of a public discussion which would offer an opportunity to "surface" the work of an "invisible college" of thinkers, working out of different traditions, who have tried to grapple seriously with the Holocaust as a new "orienting-experience," to reexamine and reconceptualize such issues as the Christian mission, the new romanticism, the State of Israel, the history of Christian theology and the demonization of the Jews, and a variety of other topics.

The symposium consisted of ten plenary sessions and workshops, involving more than twenty speakers, held over a three-day period. Like any event so massive in numbers and extensive in scope, the conference assumed a sort of internal life of its own and was for all—participants and audience—a decidedly mixed bag. Part of the unevenness was a function of the conflict between the publicist goal of the meeting, expressed by the Very Reverend James Parks Morton of the Cathedral, "to get the Holocaust into the mind of an entire generation," and the desire to understand the Holocaust's significance as "the deepest meaning of our century gone wrong." More fundamentally, the variable character of the symposium derived from the degree of seriousness with which those presenting papers and those offering critiques took the implicit question of the title.

The first lecture, by Rabbi Greenberg, who teaches at the City College of New York, did confront the Holocaust with an ultimate moral seriousness. Dense, difficult to follow, disorganized at times, Greenberg's address nevertheless was shot through with luminous insights into the implications of the Holocaust. With the Holocaust a limit was broken, a control is gone, and its repetition is therefore more likely. Thus the event constitutes a radical counter-testimony to the common Jewish and Christian belief in the absolute value of human life and its future redemption. After Auschwitz, Greenberg asserted, the secular-religious as well as the theist-atheist dichotomies must be abandoned. Rather, the modern world permits only dialectical "moment faiths" of belief without certainty. While he is aware of the danger of an easy humanism, Greenberg insists that after the concentration camps the genuine test of faith consists of actions which maintain the indivisibility of human dignity.

For Greenberg the Holocaust, as an "orienting-experience," makes demands of both Christianity and Judaism. The orienting-experiences of the Exodus or of Easter are not obliterated for either faith com-

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munity, he argued, but we must distinguish between these earlier moments and the Holocaust. Christianity must reexamine to what extent the teaching of contempt and, even more fundamentally, the Gospels themselves contributed to the foundation of anti-Semitism that made Auschwitz possible. At the same time, he sees a need to incorporate a reenactment of the Holocaust in the round of Jewish ritual life, as a continual reminder of its essential lessons.

Central to Greenberg's understanding of the Holocaust is the lesson it teaches about power and the need for its redistribution. The ethical imperative of the Holocaust is, for him, that everyone should possess enough power to maintain his dignity without being dependent on another. But he is also concerned with the responsibilities of power and sees the need of Israel to link ultimate ends and proximate means in a new synthesis.

What theological models are possible after Auschwitz for the Jewish People? Greenberg finds Job's answer insufficient. The "suffering servant," who both testifies to God's existence and serves as an advance warning system to the demonic within the modern world, also seems inadequate in his passive role. It is in the stance of the author of the third Lamentation and some of Elie Wiesel's work that Greenberg perceives the elements of a model. We cannot pray in our anger at God in this period of silence, yet human persistence itself emerges as a form of testimony.

The character of the theological critique of Greenberg's paper by Professor Alan Davies of the University of Toronto was startling to those familiar with his earlier work on the need for Christian self-examination in light of the Holocaust. Essentially, Davies denied the significance of the Holocaust as a new orienting-experience for Christianity, by means of an argument almost medieval in its premises. On a human level the destruction of European Jewry can be explained in terms of the evil character of its author, Hitler; while viewed on a religious level, Davies contended, Christianity is transhistorical. It does not see history as open to God's presence in the way Judaism does, and hence need not insist on the religious centrality of Providence. The crucifixion is a transhistorical event, ruling out further orienting-experiences, and thus in the Christian paradigm history is redeemed outside itself. "Judaism opted for history, while Christianity bought heaven, at the price of earth." Davies believes none of this exempts him from the need to take the Holocaust and Israel, as well as the question of Christian responsibility for the failure of moral conscience, with "profound moral seriousness." But this position does lead him to define the paramount problem in a more limited degree than Greenberg, as one of finding a way to reconstruct Christianity, purged of its historical flaws.

In his paper on "Christian Mission in Crisis" Father Gregory Baum seemed

to have accepted a larger measure of Greenberg's position than Davies's. For Baum the Holocaust leads to a reevaluation of the Christian Church's relationship to Judaism and the Christian mission in the world, one which he sees beginning to be manifest on the institutional level in efforts to 'purify texts and liturgy and reinterpret New Testament texts "to deliver them from anti-Jewish bias." Moreover, this new perception of Judaism views it as a living religion, not simply as a precursor to Christianity, or a cursed and fallen rival. For Baum Christianity's historical relationship to imperialism, particularly in the Third World, necessitates a reformulation of the concept of Christian mission along these lines as well. In this context Christianity is then seen as being gifted with a witness which has a particular universal meaning, but is part of a plurality of religions, whose aim is to cooperate with non-Christian religions and peoples in the recognition of the forces of evil and work against dehumanization. Baum even celebrates what he perceives of as Christianity's new legitimation of religious pluralism because he hopes it will foster change and enable the Church to realize itself more fully; "to be involved in any religious responsibility is to be involved with renewal and revitalization."

Baum's co-panelists, Professors Arne Siraala and Johannes Hockendijk, also took Greenberg's admonitions to heart in different ways. Siraala presented an unsparingly critical view of Luther's anti-Semitic writings and their subsequent impact on Lutheran attitudes and thought. Hockendijk tried to sketch out how the various stages of the Church's relationship to the Jews were almost inevitably structured to reinforce the anti-Jewish bias in the Church's conception of its mission.

A similar but distinctive tack was taken by Professor Rosemary Ruether in her historical analysis of the demonization of the Jews in early Christian theology. She concludes that Christian anti-Semitism is not accidental, not sociologically intelligible as the remnants of pre-Christian, pagan anti-Jewish attitudes, but rather that anti-Semitism developed as the "left hand" of Christology. At issue initially were two fundamentally opposed notions of messiah, and in the polemics following the Jewish community's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, the Church fathers did not stop with the guilt of the Jewish leaders, but extended the onus to the entire people. In the revised Christian perspective, based on a systematic misinterpretation of the prophetic works, Jewish history was split down the middle into two peoples: one the potential church, the other a reprobate people who killed their prophets and now their God. Ruether then traced the history of the institutionalization of theologically grounded anti-Semitism up to the modern era, where she sees modern anti-Semitism as both a

continuation and transformation of classic Christian doctrine. Professor Ruether believes a fundamental reconceptualization of Christology is essential to rescue Christianity from its messianic triumphalism and permit it to recognize the covenantal validity of Judaism as the "true Israel."

Her respondents in the symposium were a study in contrasts. In a sermon, almost pontifical fashion, after a brief slap at what he deemed the historiographical inadequacies of the paper, Father Walter Burghardt focused on the crucial question of whether orthodox Christology is necessarily anti-Jewish in character. By way of answering the question, Burghardt offered a series of eight personal affirmations as a believing Catholic. Among them were: Jews have a true covenant and are not rejected by God after Jesus; the Jews are not guilty for Jesus' death and bear no collective responsibility; that with Jesus God's promises reached "a certain turning"; and that the covenant was then universalized to incorporate Gentiles in the Chosen People.

The direction of Professor Yosef Yerushalmi's critique was more oblique. His key question was why the Christian Church refrained from destroying the Jews and the Germans did not. Noting that he possessed a dimmer view of human nature, Yerushalmi sought to turn Ruether's question on its head by focusing on what it was within Christianity that prevented the wholesale slaughter of Jews which occurred in Nazi Germany. Following a rapid overview of the history of Christian protection of Jewish rights, he stressed the novel, distinctive character of modern, secular anti-Semitism. Yet one felt this point somehow avoided the more difficult question of responsibility for the attitudes that made the Holocaust possible. Yerushalmi argued that for Professor Ruether, the problem of the Jews is part of the larger problem of the Church. But he neither welcomes collective *mea culpas* nor believes Christian reformist movements have necessarily been good for the Jews historically. Christian theology is an internal matter, he contended, and is not his immediate concern. What is of the moment, he stated in impassioned terms, is that "My people are in grave peril for its life and it cannot wait until you have written a new *Summa Theologiae*."

"The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Liturgies, Catechetics and Preaching, and Judaism" was discussed by Father John Pawlikowski. He reported that while the three key negative charges against Jewry—deicide, dispersion, and degeneracy—have begun to disappear from Christian texts, the two central events of modern Jewish history, the Holocaust and the State of Israel, still remain absent from the Christian curriculum. Beyond the needs for new materials, however, he stressed the need to restrain teachers and clergy in order to advance the practical work of reshaping the Christian view of Jews and Judaism.

A number of other talks and papers were given in the course of the symposium. Alfred Kazin delivered a moving and powerful meditation entitled "The Heart of the World Is Jewish." Professor Michael Ryan contrasted the "protean consciousness" of the counterculture's new romanticism to the covenantal consciousness of biblical faith. He suggested the latter was more adequate than the former in confronting the task of the "de-development" and material salvation of the modern world. Elie Wiesel spoke on "Art and Culture After the Holocaust" and "told tales" from the writings of children, which he feels represent the truest accounts of the Holocaust. Professor David Bakan delivered a paper on psychopathology and anti-Semitism, linking Jewish particularism to the Nazis' racist ideology in a way that appalled many in the audience. Emil Fackenheim read from an extended essay on theological reflections on the State of Israel, which developed more fully many of the ideas present in his earlier writings. Professor Shlomo Avineri and Paul Jacobs engaged in a scathing exchange of views on whether secular leftist thought has or has not always contained an implicitly anti-Jewish bias. And finally, an attempt to discuss black-Jewish relations fizzled when the participants directed their comments in completely divergent directions.

The flaws in the symposium on "Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era" were several. The intellectual overkill of three days of discussion almost numbed members of the audience who attended all the sessions. At least some of the speakers apparently either misunderstood the goal of the conference or simply chose to use it as an occasion to grind private axes. Unfortunately, none of the participants represented either Islamic or Eastern faith communities, which might have provided a useful counterbalance to the Christian and Jewish perspectives. Substantially, while Christianity and the political Left were criticized for anti-Jewish biases that helped form the groundwork for the Holocaust, little or no mention was made of the breakdown of capitalism into fascism or the bankruptcy of Western political liberalism in the face of the Nazis. It may be that this was to be expected at a gathering of religious thinkers, but it seems to be a dangerous omission in this particular case.

On the credit side, the symposium achieved two of its basic aims. The *New York Times* picked up the story and ran articles on the meeting for several days, even publishing an editorial on the need to remember the Holocaust. The publicity about the Holocaust generated by the conference was one of the founding committee's goals. More significantly, the symposium may help focus and legitimate broader theological attention on questions forced upon us by the Holocaust.