

Ethics After Auschwitz

Franklin H. Littell

Ten years ago, in an address to an audience of German students, Peter Lotar, author of *Das Bild des Menschen*, raised the question of how the years of the Third Reich's power and crimes shall be dealt with.

How can we build the future when we are not finished with the past? How can we avoid the old mistakes when we don't even recognize them yet? We have a choice: do we intend to freeze fast in self-deception? or do we intend to carry through the cleaning up of ourselves and thereby grant ourselves and our children a full, new life?

At first glance this would seem another simple, if somewhat blunt, demand that a people mend its ways. We remind ourselves that ten years ago the *Bundesrepublik*, years after the *Deutsche Wunder* was the talk of the world, was still trying to come to terms with the sources and nature of its "old mistakes." This dimension of the statement was not unimportant for a society which, especially among youth and students, was beginning to live through many of the ideological and practical crises of the encounter with sectarian Marxism. The Baader-Meinhof gang and its activities still waited in the wings, but already the universities and *Gymnasien* were beginning to experience the conflicts many in England and the USA had worked their way through in 1936-40, years when Germany had cut itself off from the chief intellectual currents and mainstream of historical events. To this day—and this is one of the high prices the Germans are paying for the "lost weekend" of 1933-45—the struggle with issues raised by "United Front" theories and sectarian Maoist, Stalinist, Fidelist, Trotskyite, and other groups has not been resolved among German

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youth and students. To a person coming from the West much of the intense political conflict of the left-wing youth and student organizations in Germany seems like a memory of a bad black-and-white movie suffered through forty or thirty-five years ago. The anti-Semitism of the German "New Left" dredges up vivid memories for those who have not undergone a lobotomy of the memory circuits, memories of the *Hitlerjugend* (H.J.) and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM).

But the substantial question raised by Lotar (author of one of the best morality plays of this generation, a play based on encounters with conspirators rounded up after the July 20, 1944, attempts on Hitler's life) has to do with the meaning of life itself: "How can we build the future when we are not finished with the past?" We must attend to that question if our decisions in the present and actions for the future are to be as critically enlightened as possible. Contempt for history and ecstatic embrace of the present sensational moment distort many of the communities—including academic communities—in which we live. We must therefore make a covenant, both personal and professional: We will study those times. We will remember.

In America the first academic seminar on the Holocaust was taught by Marie Syrkin at Brandeis University in 1957. The first academic seminar on the Church Struggle was my graduate seminar at Emory University in 1959. The first scholars' conference that brought together students of the experience of the two communities, Jewish and Christian, under the assault of Nazism was our International Scholars' Conference at Wayne State University in Detroit in 1970. I mention these facts partly because a conference was held in New York City in 1974 that claimed to be the first interfaith conference on the Holocaust, and the record should be kept straight. More important, however, we should be aware that we are no longer working, as individuals or as a group, in an unoccupied hall in

which the echoes of our own voices reverberate against the walls and empty seats. A recent survey turned up some three hundred institutions holding occasional courses, classes, seminars, and research programs on the Holocaust and related phenomena.

Related phenomena"—there the theoretical issue is raised. How shall we understand "related phenomena"? Are the Holocaust and the Church Struggle so related, or are we in truth trying to harness two separate and distinct sets of phenomena, as has been suggested. A letter from Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer editor and biographer, is reassuring on this score. Bethge states that the study of the Church Struggle cannot today be carried forward except in the context of the Church's relation to "the Jewish question" and its resolution in the Holocaust. Robert McAfee Brown has noted that the difficulty of relating the two fields of study today is related to "that very failure, namely, that during the Nazi period the connection between the church struggle and the murder of the Jews was not clearly perceived." That is precisely the point: Any further consideration of the Church Struggle, neglected as it still is in most seminaries and by most church publishing houses, would simply result in a spirit of triumphalism were it not yoked unbreakably to the experience of the Jews in the Holocaust.

The two events were not symmetrical. This must be said forthrightly and be strongly maintained against all peddlers of "cheap grace" (for example, A.C. Forrest, who has attempted to use the martyrs of the Church Struggle to absolve Christendom of its guilt of commission and omission during the Holocaust). There were six million Jewish victims and, at most, twelve thousand who perished as Christian resisters in the Nazi concentration camps. Eberhard Bethge recently stirred considerable controversy by pointing out that even the Confessing Church, the backbone of such resistance as the German Protestants offered, lost over 1,200 activists during the military campaign against Russian "Bolshevism," and less than fifty as clear-cut opponents of the Hitler regime. At Barmen (May, 1934) the resisters made no mention of the Jewish issue, and even in the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (October, 1945)—when the opening of the Death Camps had already informed the world of the enormity of the Holocaust—there is no mention of the crime against the Jewish people. After years of work on the Church Struggle, and with all admiration and affection for those courageous persons in the Christian minority—some of whom I have been privileged to count as friends—who did not apostatize with most of the *Kulturchristen*, I have been forced to the conclusion that the "Alpine event" (Bialik's term) was the Holocaust; the Church Struggle was a footnote to it. I speak of Christian history, and not just something that happened to the Jewish people. As Gerd Korman put it, quoting Elie Wiesel, in his *Hunter and Hunted*:

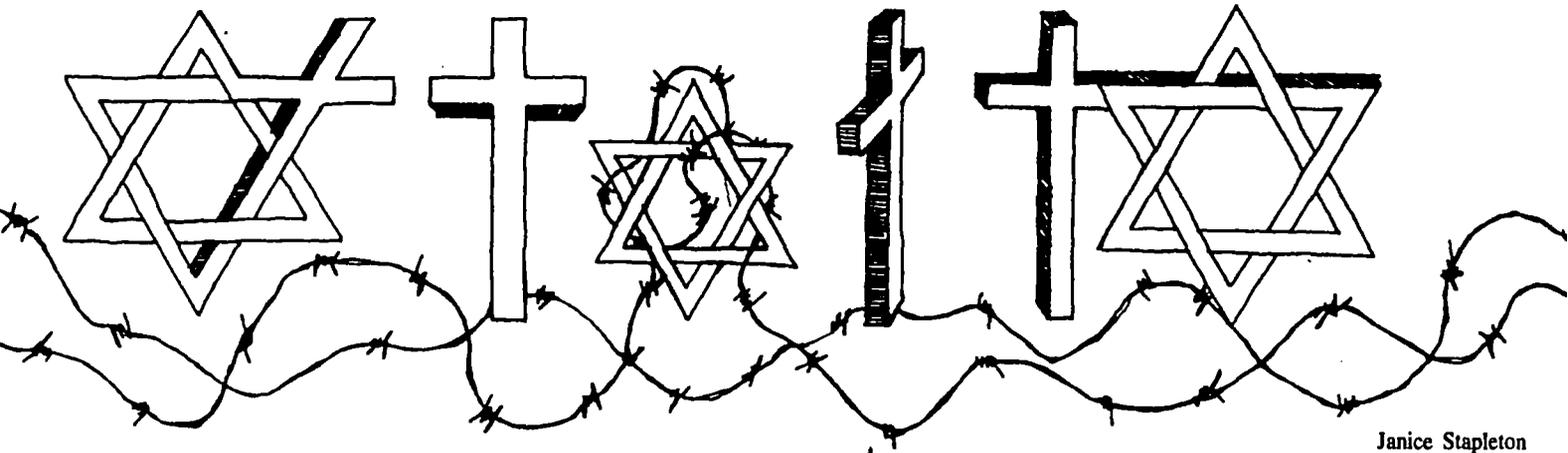
"Today we know that all roads and all words lead to the Holocaust. What it was we may never know; but we must proclaim, at least, that it was, that it is."

We come to the matter of telling the story, of why the event must be remembered, and why it must be told to coming generations. Of this idiom, the story, men like Elie Wiesel and Abba Kovner are masters, but academics too have a part in storytelling. Unless we remember with understanding, unless we are brought to direct encounter with our present, our scholarly research is mere "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

As we study in a mood of moral earnestness, as well as with intellectual discipline, what we find hits us at many levels and in many ways. A German Catholic resister, Joseph Ernst Füst Fugger von Glött, tells the story of one of his own experiences. Before 1933, before the Nazi accession to power, he visited a friend in Italy. His friend complained bitterly of the corruption and of Mussolini's brutal, fascist government. Whereupon Fugger responded, "Why do you put up with it?" and commented that such a thing could never happen in Germany. Relating the story years later Fugger commented that he had yet to learn what Germany was capable of.

I agree with those who warn against facile analogies in the study of history, and I agree too that USA 1975 is not Germany 1933. But there are other ways of breaking the morale of a people besides a lost war, inflation, depression, massive unemployment, and a solitary burden of war guilt. One of those "other" ways might very well be a lost war, inflation, depression, massive unemployment, and a painful, never successfully suppressed sense of guilt. In time of crisis a great deal depends upon the basic loyalty and integrity of those who exercise the stewardship of power and decision-making. Here too we have had our own American experiences.

Of course analogies are easy, and in this case they may confuse rather than inform. The Holocaust—Nazism's supreme achievement—was unique. In a technical sense the Holocaust was but one major event in the twentieth century, the Century of Genocide. If we speak only of "genocide," what of the fate of the Kurds today? From what we know of the fascist clique that runs Iraq, the current reports of genocide are quite credible. It would be easy to subsume the whole matter of the destruction of European Jewry under the rubric "genocide," particularly since the term "genocide" as well as the Genocide Convention of 1948 arose out of the Holocaust. For example, how shall we handle this year's sixtieth anniversary of the Armenian massacres? Armenians maintain, not without ample evidence, that the "first Holocaust" of the twentieth century was experienced by the Armenians. In its dying throes the Holy Muslim Empire deliberately slaughtered over half of the inhabitants of Armenia, the most ancient Christian nation in the



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world. Michael Arlen, Jr., has pointed out in his survey of that tragic episode published in the *New Yorker* in February, 1975, that the genocidal policy of Enver Pasha was made possible by modern technology. The telegraph enabled wholesale murder to be launched simultaneously throughout the Ottoman Empire. The telegraph also made it possible for lying reports to be issued to the outside world, in several languages, denying the facts. To the telegraph, the Nazis added the misuse of radio. Now we have TV.

But the method of analogy, like generalizations and abstractions about "man's inhumanity to man," is morally unacceptable. Scientifically there are analogues; morally, the generalization is false. Jacob Katz refers to the Holocaust as a "novum"; Uriel Tal, after a review of its antecedents, calls it "unique"; Roy Eckardt calls the Holocaust "uniquely unique." The point is that sociological or historical analysis may lead to the conclusion that the Holocaust was simply the most appalling activity of a genocidal era, and morally such a generalization is obscene. As Wolfgang Gerlach puts it in an unpublished dissertation on the subject, to treat the Holocaust as one manifestation of a general problem misses the main point:

...It would be to argue in lively fashion something like a husband who has difficulties with the spouse entrusted to him and now wishes to claim that he is experiencing "the problem of women"—since his wife is a woman. He has obviously not noticed that at the point when he married this one woman the question which arose for him was the problem of marriage. Thus the relationship of the peoples of the world, to the Jews is something quite different, for example, from the relationship of white Americans to the Negroes.

The Holocaust may be a "plumb line" held for comparative purposes against other cases of mass murder. It may not be bracketed finally with them.

We are brought back forcibly to the original point: The Holocaust compels each of us, and especially those with membership in the Christian church, to ask where he was and where he is in relationship to the Holocaust. Six million Jews were murdered efficiently and scientifically by baptized Christians in the heart of Christendom. This is an event comparable in holy history to the Exodus, Sinai, Golgotha, the profanation of the Temple by Titus, the

fall of Rome, the fall of Constantinople. To treat it as merely another vivid illustration of the effects of race prejudice, anti-Semitism, or neopaganism ("secularism"?) is both banal and spiritually blind.

The closest thing to "the Holocaust," at least so long as Israel can keep standing off the Muslim crusade of the Arab League, was what happened in 1894 and 1915 to the Armenians under the Turks. But even the sixtieth anniversary of the Armenian massacres does not entitle us Christians to flee again into generalizations and abstractions. There are, to be sure, certain important parallels between what Christendom in decline did and allowed to be done to European Jews and what the "Holy Muslim Empire" in collapse did to over half of the oldest Christian nation in the world. The inability of a unitary Islam to deal rationally and fairly with a "foreign body" in its midst is not unlike the inability of a unitary Christendom to cope with the rational claims of modern pluralism. But the problem of a militant, nationalistic Islam is not our first concern here. We must set our own house (Christendom) in order, and hope for the emergence of Muslim scholars capable of analytical and self-critical study of ideological massacres and crusades. Martin Buber, speaking as a Jew, commented in the early years of Nazism that "the significant fact that this hour is a test of Christianity is not our concern; what concerns us is that this hour is an ordeal by fire for Jewry."

Our immediate problem is not Islam, but Christendom, although Israel is a "crisis of faith" for both Muslims and Christians of traditional type. Speaking as a Christian historian and theologian, I find my problem precisely in the fact that in the time of temptation and testing most Christians apostatized and went over to the Adversary. My immediate political problem may be the ruin of the U.N. and its tributaries by the reckless politics of the Communist and Arab League alliance and their bloc voting; my theological problem is closer to home. There was only one other period of church history with a comparable measure of mass apostasy, and that was the period when, in the eighth and ninth centuries, millions of Christians in North Africa and Asia Minor (the heartland of Christendom) went over to a militant and colonialist Islam. Some Christians were martyred; more dug in and wintered through; most of the baptized apostatized and accepted Islam as the final revelation and Mohammed as the last of the prophets.

The easy way to deal with the rise of Nazism and the enthusiastic response it for years evoked from baptized Christians is to interpret what happened as a return to the Age of Persecution. In this vein apologists now describe Nazism as "neopaganism," refer to the sufferings of the churches under Roman Emperors Nero, Valerian, Decius, and Diocletian, and paint a picture in which European Jewry suffered terribly, to be sure, but the Christian churches also bore repression and persecution. That was not the way the great majority of churchmen saw it at the time, and it is no act of good faith to try now to discern a pattern of apologetic excuse along those lines. Most of the baptized, including most top leadership in the churches, enthusiastically supported Hitler's self-portrayal as an enemy of "atheistic Communism"; most of them made no protest against terrorism, sadism, and mass murder.

On November 8, 1938, according to a conservative report, 191 synagogues were burned, 76 more were fully destroyed, 815 Jewish businesses were destroyed, 7,500 businessmen plundered, and 171 houses were burned. On July 17, 1939, Bishop Otto Melle of the German Methodist Episcopal Church told a group of visiting American Methodists: "Hitler is God's man for Germany." It is a hard thing, if needful, for a Methodist to have a memory! The first problem of twentieth-century Christianity is not persecution but wholesale apostasy. Until we face that truth neither our Christian education (or reeducation!) nor our periodization of history (including eschatology) will be sound.

The typical faces of this age of Christianity are the lawless policeman, the disloyal general, the corrupted scientists, the sadistic surgeons—apocalyptic types produced by a Christian community that has lost its rudder and has no life and authority as a counterculture. When the salt lost its savor in Germany, the fate of the Jews was sealed. In a sound Christian profession after Auschwitz it will be acknowledged that the vast majority of the martyrs for the true Lord of History in the twentieth century were Jews.

Already in 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented that on the Jewish question many of the keenest minds among the church people had "lost their heads and their whole Bible." The practical question for the churches is how to find their way back to the center, and it will take something vastly more powerful than "civil religion," "natural epiphanies," and other fads

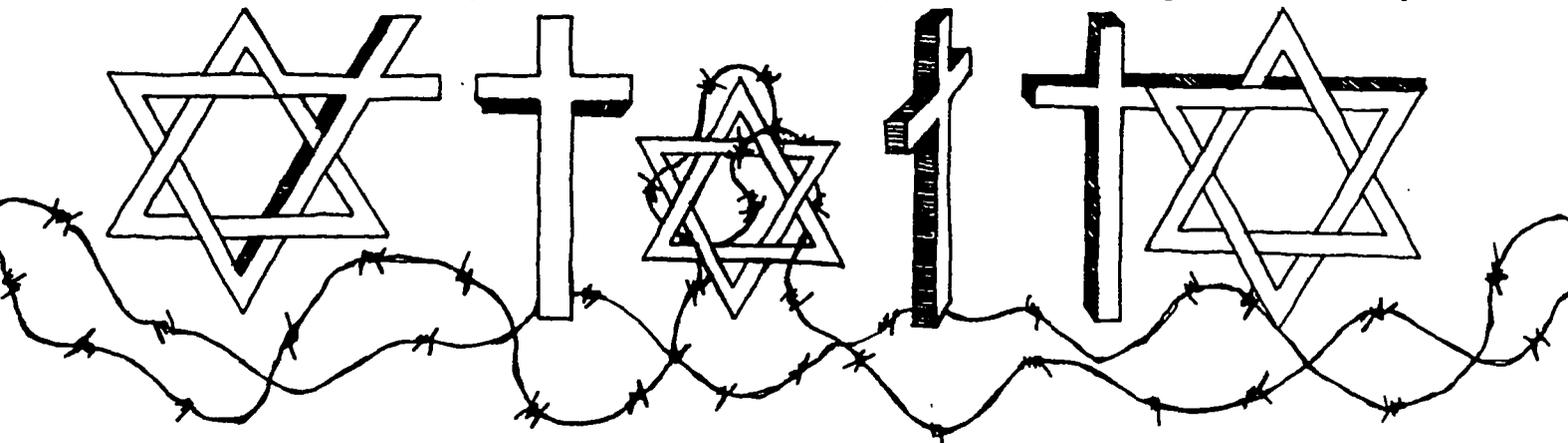
and fancies to accomplish that earthmoving job. It is a task for heavy equipment, as it were, and so far most of our efforts have been confined to isolated individuals of good will, working with shovels and buckets.

Reflecting upon the horror of the Holocaust and meditating upon the benefits of the Church Struggle, one is inclined to start with the pledge that it must not happen again. From that decent and humanitarian concern we move back to the old stance: that the little minority of Jews needs the Christians, in order that the gentile world may stay its hand from innocent blood. But this is the wrong *blik*, however well meant; it leaves the Christians in a position of strength, with the Jews dependent upon their good will and definition of terms. Actually, religious and cultural vitality is far stronger in the Jewish community today than among the Christians. The truth is far more basic; the Christians need the Jewish people, not only needed them in the past for the foundations of the faith, but need continuing interaction with the Jewish people for the sake of authenticity today. It may be that Jewish self-definition requires no distinction between "Christians" and "gentiles"; Christian self-definition cannot be achieved without continuing reference to the Jewish people. Whenever a Christian self-definition has been attempted without that reference, as in some other ethnic and cultural setting apart from the Jewish, Christians have slipped into heresy and from heresy into great wickedness. Today, after the worst rebellion and denial of God in our entire history, we Christians desperately need to go up to Jerusalem again.

Just as it is dangerous for Christians to seek severance from the essential Jewishness of Christianity, so even the study of the Church Struggle ought never to be pressed without major attention to the Holocaust and its meanings.

Although we salute and praise cooperation between Jews and Christians, also in study of the Holocaust and the Church Struggle, we cannot get away from the truth that our relationships to the event are vastly different. Even the tones of voice that are options for us may differ.

A Jewish scholar, particularly one who is himself a survivor, has the moral right to pursue studies of the Holocaust in the mood and style of clinical objectivity. (Whether or not clinical reportage is a useful form of communication is a technical question not here at issue.) Like Emmanuel Ringelblum, assembling the



documents for his chronicle of the last days of the Warsaw Ghetto, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, a Jewish scholar may be as "clinical" and "objective" as he or she pleases, for his or her own life has been pledged to give a bona fide. Not all Jews would agree. Dr. J. Presser, when he had finished his great work, *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*, concluded: "...one thing has become clear to me while writing this work: no single Jew who has lived through that period can think dispassionately about the events here recorded." But a Jew has the right, I would maintain, to try to do so if he wishes.

I question whether a Christian has the moral right to adopt that stance, just as I question that the various familiar rubrics of generalization and abstraction have offered ways of telling the truth about what happened. The Christian scholar may not forget Søren Kierkegaard's story of the professor who was driven above all by a quest for "objectivity." If he could have observed the crucifixion of Jesus he would have asked, if possible, to have it repeated so that he could be sure to give as accurate and detailed a description of the event as humanly feasible. We who are professing Christians may not deal with the crucifixion of European Jewry in such a way. The Holocaust is a river of fire that flows across our whole history, both communal and individual, and it compels us either to keep silent or to begin anew with totally fresh categories of thought and ways of acting. To continue with Kierkegaard, a Christian auditing is needed—and the auditor is himself a condemned man.

Do you now know that there comes a midnight hour when all must unmask?

Do you suppose that life will forever suffer itself to be treated as a joke?

Do you suppose that one can slip out a little before the midnight hour?

That life is a joke is the testimony of the twelve major denominational publishing houses studied by Gerald Strober over a ten-year period, 1961-71, in his book, *Portrait of the Elder Brother: Jews and Judaism in Protestant Teaching Material*. The story of the Holocaust, the most important event in recent Christian history, is simply suppressed. Henry Friedlander, in his major study of college and university textbooks, published in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, 1933-1945*, showed that the major textbooks in modern European or twentieth-century German history also, and again almost without exception, suppress the subject. Professor Friedlander, from his position, was able to expose the lack of proportion, the neglect of scientific attention to evidence, the failure of true balance and objectivity revealed by such suppression. A scholar who is also a Christian, however, must ask whether many of these writers of textbooks are simply gentiles who share the embarrassment and averted gaze of perpetrators and spectators, or whether some are Christians who cannot yet bring themselves

to deal with an event that challenges the credibility of Christianity as has nothing else in two thousand years.

Study of the Church Struggle and Holocaust must be built around two foci: (1) a commitment to the most strict canons of research, analysis, and writing that the various academic disciplines of the modern university can mount; (2) a commitment to let the stories of our recent history play upon our minds and consciences to the improvement of our moral earnestness and actions. In advancing such study, ours is not a solely antiquarian and antiseptic interest, one more of the games academics play. Nor do we meet as concerned persons to moralize with sweeping analogies, or even to pass resolutions, comparing what has happened since 1969 in America to what happened during the last days of the Weimar Republic. But we would be blind indeed who, remembering the subversion and destruction of Weimar, did not shudder to reflect upon contemporary revelations of illegal and disloyal activities by, for example, the FBI, the CIA, the Attorney General, and the former President of the United States. They took oaths to uphold the Constitution "against all enemies, foreign and domestic," and they broke their oaths. To some this may be at the level of "stealing chickens," as one columnist recently put it. But to the less frivolous it is an ominous development.

We have the right as concerned citizens, which was our condition before any of us ever consciously associated with the university or the church (or synagogue), to nourish the hope that our work will help to bring the era of genocide to an end. But we must first let the documents and the stories speak fully to us before we assume we have the data fixed in time and space.

Consider a story that sets a seal of moral responsibility upon our study of the Holocaust. In the last days of World War II Rabbi Samuel Rose, eighty-nine, of Denver, Colorado, received word that his son, Major General Maurice Rose, had been killed in Germany. Rabbi Rose sat down heavily, grasping his cane, and said: "It is well that since this had to be, it happened in the week of Passover. As Jehovah said, 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you.' He spoke not only to the Jews but to all peoples—to the gentiles, to Americans, to Germans, to all peoples. And so, may Jehovah accept this sacrifice, and see the blood and pass over all peoples for their sins, at this Passover time, for my son's sake."

In the name of the Isaacs for whom no rams were caught in the thicket, in memory of the six million for whom the waters refused to part, in respect for the few thousand Christian martyrs who gave some of us here a right to speak, if not too loudly, about the past, let us dedicate ourselves to clear thinking and responsible research, but above all let us dedicate ourselves to this covenant: We will remember, the story will be heard, we will tell it to our children and children's children.