

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE HOLOCAUST

J. Coert Rylaarsdam:

How can we account for the Holocaust? What does it mean for the Christian? What does it tell him about his faith? What are its lessons?

For light on these questions Professor Littell turned to the story of the "church struggle" in Nazi Germany. This struggle erupted when a minority movement in the Evangelical Church of Germany, the "confessing church," challenged the applicability of the Nuremberg racial laws within the religious establishment. The movement rediscovered and took its stand on the evangelical word that in Christ God is no respecter of persons and that, as a consequence, within the Church authority and freedom proceed solely from the Word of God. Within the church, it said, Christians whom the state considered ethnically Jewish remained equals in vocation, life, and work. Their disfranchisement as Germans could not affect their status as Christians, not even if this involved that of parish clergy or theologians who, administratively speaking, were state functionaries.

The confessing movement took a daring, either-or stand. It was a minority movement. The Evangelical Church as a whole made its accommodations to the decrees. Even such a traditionally "confessional" Faculty as Erlangen backed the government. The immediate, practical results of the confessing group's stand were not nearly so important as its substantial and symbolic significance. As Littell puts it, they recovered for Christianity that indispensable "Jewish component" of a transcendent particularity which is the true basis for its universalism and without which it ceases to be Christian. That is, again citing Littell, they broke with "culture religion." They insisted on the Christian basis for universalism, and rejected the German one.

For Littell the Holocaust stands as a perpetual and terrible warning to Christians to beware of culture religion. It forbids Christians to tolerate the demeaning use of their faith and its emotion-laden cultic legacy in the service of an autonomous national faith with its own independent center, vision, and program. In Germany the Holocaust was the bitter fruit of that form of apostasy. The mark of transcendent particularity, common to Jew and Christian, offends all autonomous human movements. In the Christian gentile it is only a spiritual mark; he can escape its price by simply ceasing to witness to it. But in the Jew the mark is natural as well as supernatural, and the payment of the price for the offense is inescapable, even though he may lack the gifts of faith and grace. (As Arthur A. Cohen has pointed out, being a "spiritual Semite," rather than a son of Abraham according to the flesh, can be a very cheap thing; and it often is.) In movements of culture religion Christians remove the offensive mark of transcendent particularity and so avoid the wrath it evokes.

Littell says that the Holocaust must be seen as an involuntary martyrdom for Christ by Jews who were, in effect, the surrogates for millions of apostate Christians. I accept what he says, especially if he will grant that this involuntary and surrogate martyrdom which transposes the Holocaust into the Christian perspective is, in the case of the hosts of faithful among the victims, only incidental to and a corollary of their voluntary and faithful obedience as Jews who were given grace to sanctify the NAME.

Littell's interpretation of the meaning of the Holocaust is profound and true. Christians ignore it at their peril. But we must ask whether we have yet come to the heart of the matter. The Holocaust is a monument to Christian apostasy. Does it also tell us something about Christian faith and orthodoxy? What does it tell us about the relation between the racial anti-Semitism of German nationalism and the theological anti-Semitism of nearly two millennia of Christian tradition? Does the Holocaust only warn us against the perils of culture religion? Or does it also challenge us to re-examine critically the triumphalism of the New Testament and of the Tradition vis à vis the Jew?

The interest of the confessing church in the Third Reich's handling of the Jew was exceedingly limited. It was seriously exercised only about his status in the Church, as a baptized Christian. Christianity had always taught that the "final solution" of the "Jewish problem" was conversion. Even such a deep-dyed Anti-Semite as the German court preacher Stoecker had propounded the view that in his baptism a Jew not only became a Christian but a German as well! But the consistent racism of Hitler's regime had closed that narrow exit into the favor of God and man. That and that alone, really, frustrated the confessing movement. It took precious little interest in Jews who were not Christian; and with respect to those who were, it did not feel free to intervene with the state in respect to their civil rights but only about their status in the church, difficult as it was to separate those two. This is the way the matter was put by a revered and martyred member of the movement:

History is made not by the church but by the state; but of course only the church which bears witness to the coming of God in history knows what history, and therefore what the state is. And precisely because of this knowledge, it alone testifies to the penetration of history by God and lets the state continue to make history. Without doubt the Jewish question is one of the historical problems our state must deal with, and without doubt the state is justified in adopting new methods here.... The true church of Christ will never intervene in the state in such a way as to criticise its history-making actions, from the standpoint of some humanitarian ideal.... Thus even today in the Jewish question it can not address the state directly, and demand of it some action of a different nature.

D. Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 122f.

These statements sought to clarify the position of the confessing movement after Hitler had assumed rule. All the church asks for is freedom to live under God alone, in its own house. Barthian theology has fortified traditional teachings about state and church so that there is no bridge between the spokesmen for human values ("some humanitarian ideal") and the spokesmen for Christ. The former may, if they choose, seek to alter the new decrees of the state affecting Jews;

but they are put on notice not to expect aid from even the confessing church! One is reminded of Niemöller's statement about the fatal peril of waiting too long!

If that had been all it would have been bad enough. But it wasn't, for the Christian can never simply treat Israel like any other social or religious unit in the human scene; its status is always sui generis. So also in the newly launched confessing movement in the church in Hitler's Reich. Bonhoeffer is moved to continue:

Now the measures of the state towards Judaism (sic!) in addition stand in a quite special context for the church. The Church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the 'chosen people,' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering.... But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final homecoming of Israel to its God. And this homecoming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ. 'When the time comes that this people humbles itself and penitently departs from the sins of its fathers to which it has clung with fearful stubbornness to this day....' The conversion of Israel, that is to be the end of the people's period of suffering. From here the Christian church sees the history of the people of Israel with trembling as God's own, free, fearful way with his people, because God is not yet finished with it. Each new attempt to solve 'the Jewish problem' comes to nothing...nevertheless such attempts must be made. The consciousness on the part of the church of the curse that bears down upon this people raises it far above any cheap moralising; instead, as it looks at the rejected people, it humbly recognizes itself as a church continually unfaithful to its Lord and looks full of hope to those of the people of Israel who have come home, to those who have come to believe in the one true God in Christ, and knows itself bound to them in brotherhood. (ibid., 226f.)

Here we have an epitome of nineteen centuries of Christian teaching, "the teaching of contempt": the curse of corporate guilt that can only be lifted by "repentance" and conversion; the galut as a sign of rejection and an invitation to persecution; and the sufferings of the persecuted as an ever-renewed confirmation of the curse. Need a Christian really have a bad conscience about the disfranchisement of the Jew? about Kristalnacht? or even about Auschwitz? After all, "attempts must be made." The obviously deep sincerity is matched by an unwitting arrogance. Hitler did not really have to develop a case against the Jews; together with all people in Christian lands, he was weaned on one. The techniques of degradation and annihilation were remembered and improved upon. There was an Emancipation to be reversed, the return to a status quo ante. All he really had to do was close the single escape hatch--conversion--and replace the cross with a swastika. The Holocaust is not only a bitter fruit of apostate culture religion; it is also the end product of the arrogant and idolatrous pretensions of a Christian insecurity that equated conditioned insights and transient theological notions with the mystery of the ways of the living God.

The curse has now been tentatively and partially repealed, at least by Vatican II. As Rabbi Henry Siegman has remarked, "What was called for was an act of contrition; what occurred was an act of charity." Even so, prospecting for new beginning has become possible, for the first time in nineteen hundred years.

To stimulate the reconstruction in Christian self-understanding that the Holocaust demands we itemize some questions and areas of inquiry:

- 1) As noted, the Christian can never leave the Jew alone. Every Christian self-definition inevitably also includes a definition of the Jew, as a corollary. The reverse is not the case; anti-Semitism is a Christian problem! Hitherto all definitions of the Jew in this story of Christian self-definition have been negative; in the divine economy, as Christians plot it, the Jew is at best a supernumerary, usually something worse. Does the substance of Christian faith demand that this inescapable definition of the Jew remain negative? Can Christians credit the ongoing validity of the mission of Judaism? Can they define it?
- 2) Professor Littell has drawn our attention to a "Jewish component" in Christianity. We have spoken of this as the element of "transcendent particularity." Unfortunately, this common component has been the source of the most profound division between the two faiths, thanks to the objective referent. Must this antithesis remain unreconcilable?
- 3) How shall Christians deal with the anti-Semitism of the New Testament? What is their answer to Dagobert Runes and his expurgated edition of the Fourth Gospel? Can we capitalize on the growing awareness of the historical and cultural conditionedness of all the contents of the Bible? Can we begin to read the New Testament as the literature of a Jewish sect in process of separating itself from the parent body, and therefore inescapably "partisan"? Do the new ways of reading the polemical literature of the Reformation offer us direction in this?
- 4) Can Christians become honest about the considerations that move them to reject traditional dogmatic definitions of the Jew and Judaism? Can they admit that their sense of humanity and human values is outraged by these Christian traditions and the results they have produced? Do they have the courage and freedom to bear witness to the salutary results of the impact of secular social and cultural criticism upon the received legacies of Christian tradition? Can they acknowledge in this instance, as they have begun to do in other areas, that what eventually turn out to be "Christian values" often begin their life and career in circles far removed from the church proper and not infrequently have a difficult and tedious time getting inside?