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ELECTION, CHRISTIAN APOSTASY AND THE HOLOCAUST

George Lindbeck:

Theologically, and perhaps empirically also, the first thing to say about the Holocaust is that it was an onslaught by apostates from one part of God's elect people (viz., the church) against another part (viz., Israel). For those who take election and its communal character seriously, the fact that the Nazis were ex-Christians and post-Christians cannot be separated from their uniquely vicious anti-Semitism. They came from people who had been chosen and called, even though this call had been heard only feebly or pervertedly, to be holy and priestly witnesses to God's Messiah. They hated the elective stamp which was upon them and the God who had placed it there, and in an effort to destroy all memory of both, they turned against those who were most obviously the elect of Jahweh, the Jews. The rage of the apostate was at the heart of the Holocaust.

The second point has to do with the Christian anti-Semitism which paralyzed the churches in the face of the Nazi horror and, indeed, contributed to it. There was, so I would argue, nothing natural about it. It was not the normal outgrowth of mutually exclusive Christian claims and Jewish counter-claims, but was rather the product of Christian unfaithfulness and corruption. To be sure, it is essential to the church's identity to believe that because it knows Jesus as the Messiah, its witness can be (though scandalously often is not) fuller and clearer than that of Israel, but this does not mean that the latter's call to testify has been abrogated nor that a specifically Jewish witness is no longer needed. God's promises have not been revoked and, as Paul also points out, the gentile's forgetfulness that they are not the "natural branches" is mortally dangerous. History has proved this more vividly and terribly than Paul could have imagined. Long centuries of hellenization, Constantinian triumphalism and the spiritualization and privatization of eschatological hopes desperately weakened and distorted the church's Jewish foundations. (This is not to deny that there were also good and necessary aspects to these developments.) It largely forgot its role of covenanted pilgrim people witnessing as suffering servant to God's rule and Kingdom. It lost its sense of brotherhood with Israel. It came to resent and suppress the Jewish part of its soul (and of its Lord), and projected this resentment on the Jews. In short, the special animus characterizing Christian anti-Semitism is also the product of apostasy, even if hidden and partial rather than open and total.

This way of looking at the Holocaust makes it more comprehensible, but also more absurd. On the one hand, it provides an explanation for why human beings here surpassed themselves in evil-doing. Apostasy is worse than paganism, rejection of the true God worse than idolatry, the corruption of the best, the worst. On the other hand, from this perspective, six million Jews died by mistake. They were victims of the self-hatred of a post-Christian culture eager to extirpate its roots, they were stand-ins for what the church should have and would have suffered if it had only been more faithful to its calling, they were unwilling and unknowing surrogates for Christ. And the horror is that there is nothing intrinsically redemptive (much less justly retributive) about any of these roles. At most it underlines the grim moral that God and men take terrible risks, not only for themselves but for others, when they enter into the covenant. The ones who paid in this case were often quite unaware of why it was that they were dying.

One possible response to this analysis is that it demonstrates the perniciousness of covenantal-heilsgeschichtliche convictions. Perhaps some individuals can bear them, but not communities. They place an inhuman burden on the collective psyche, precipitating uniquely vicious reactions against an impossibly exalted calling. This is similar to Rabbi Rubenstein's objection, and before him, in a more individualistic form, to Nietzsche's.

Perhaps the decisive rebuttal, to echo Fackenheim, is that the repudiation of covenant and election would be to do Hitler's work for him. It would be the end of both Judaism and Christianity, for their communal identities are in the long run both factually and logically inseparable from belief in their election as Messianic witnesses.

I agree, then, that the Holocaust has no "meaning" in the sense of telling us something about God's justice, or redemptive power or providential guidance. If we learn anything from it, it is that human beings--that we--are capable of evil more vicious and absurd than we had before imagined. Beyond this there is only the leap of faith, the hope against hope, that God can make even the wrath of men to praise him. This, I take it, is the theological basis of Fackenheim's refusal to do Hitler's work for him.

The Christian content of this refusal is, to be sure, not identical to the Jewish. It calls for "re-judaizing" Christianity, for actualizing the nature of the church as the serving, suffering pilgrim people which, in solidarity with Israel, is the sign and sacrament of the Messiah who not only has come, but also is to come. The Christian works and prays that next time, if there is a next time, the church will be Christian enough to bear the brunt of the satanic onslaught.

But we must also ask what, from this Christian perspective, is the faithful way for Jews to carry out the great refusal. It would be convenient if we could simply say that it is for Jews to answer this question for themselves, but unfortunately that is impossible. We cannot avoid evaluating the answers which others give to their own problems, approving or disapproving, supporting or not supporting them. More specifically, can we agree with Heschel's and Fackenheim's argument that saying "no" to Hitler necessarily involves support

for return to the land and for the Israeli state because these are essential to Jewish survival in the modern world?

A Christian may certainly share this view, but only if he does not make it into an article of faith, a religiously based conviction. The premise that land and state are hence forth required for survival is an empirical and necessarily fallible judgment. Personally I think that the weight of the evidence favors it, but the finality of the revelation in Jesus Christ excludes the possibility of giving quasi-revelatory force (a la Fackenheim?) to this or any other assessment of our historical situation.

Holocaust or no holocaust, I do not see how Christians can go farther than these four points: (1) God wills the continuance of Judaism--even non-Christian Judaism--until the end of this period between the times. (2) Jewish efforts to return to the land are legitimate, and indeed essential, for they are part of a proper response to God's promises at least until such time as Christ is seen as the fulfillment of these promises. (3) There is therefore every reason for the Christian to rejoice when these attempts succeed (to the extent, well understood, that this occurs in ethically and religiously acceptable ways). (4) Lastly, and climactically, the Christian can and should hope that such a re-established Israel would become by God's grace an efficacious Messianic sign helping to prepare mankind for the coming Kingdom. (We cannot even exclude the possibility that, given the gravity of Christian unfaithfulness, it might become a better sign in some respects than the church, although this would be a tragedy to be regretted rather than a consummation devoutly to be hoped.)

Note well, however, that these last two points refer simply to possibilities. There are no New Testament grounds whatsoever for either affirming or denying that they will be actualized. From its perspective, so it seems to me, there is no basis in this period between the times for anticipating either return or no return, nor for expecting an Israeli state to be either better or worse than, e.g., a Maccabean kingdom. The still future dimension of the fulfillment of the promises to Israel of which the New Testament speaks is not in history as we know it but is part of the eschatological consummation, and this dimension, however "realistic" and "unspiritualized" it may be, is certainly beyond our present powers of empirical representation.

In conclusion then, to end on a political note, this theological analysis leaves room for widely different evaluations of the present return and of the nation-state which it has produced. What is now happening in Palestine might become a blessing among nations, but the reverse is also true. Der Spiegel's report on the 1967 war began: "The Israelis have conquered the Sinai peninsula and the entire Federal Republic. With a single exemplary display of tough soldierly skill...they have entered into the hearts of the people in whose name once all Jews were to have been exterminated" (quoted by Robert Alter, "Israel and the Intellectuals," Commentary, October, 1967). If Israel ever comes really to deserve such admiration (and this possibility cannot be dismissed a priori), Hitler's work will have been done no less effectively, though in a diametrically adverse way, than if the Arabs swamp the Holy Land.