

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING  
OF THE HOLOCAUST

Robert T. Handy:

*Do frame  
of sin as  
deology* The European Jewish Catastrophe under the Nazis, one of the most monstrous events in human history, illustrates with a terrifying clarity the proneness of humans to sin. Every facet of behavior that Christian theology has observed for centuries as providing evidence of man's sinfulness studs the grisly record of the Holocaust, from the way the individual's search for security and comfort betrays him into callous indifference all the way to the corporate transmission of evil in which millions of men and their institutions are swept into a demonic enginery of destruction. Tragically, the very pointing to the giant-esque sins of others can make one's own involvement in personal and social sin seem less (perhaps a reason why Christians of many theological perspectives have emphasized the doctrine of sin). The story of the Holocaust, taken seriously, does not permit that, for though the actual involvement of many in the patterns of that evil was relatively small in itself, it looms large in retrospect because of the terror and magnitude of the outcome. When examined unequivocally, the Holocaust brings before a Christian the fact that he cannot finally escape some involvement, for the anti-Judaism that has marked the Christian past (and which lingers on) played a role in preparing the context in which the Catastrophe took place. Recognition of that involvement brings responsibility to try to see that it does not happen again.

The Holocaust also provides empirical evidence for a doctrine of human freedom. The Eternal Father as revealed in the biblical materials and through Jesus Christ would not will the brutal murder of six million of his creatures. Those who bear responsibility, directly and indirectly, for the Catastrophe were misusing their freedom in a most vicious way in a program of human extermination. The freedom that God grants to his creatures is a real freedom, a terrible freedom--the freedom to turn from the Creator, to deny him, to disobey him, to take lives of other men. We humans must take our freedom with the utmost seriousness, for its misuse has had and can have unthinkable consequences. The outcomes of our mistakes and willful misuse of our freedom can be tragically real; our sinfulness can bring death and destruction on a giant scale to the innocent. The excessive individualism and political naiveté of much of western Christianity (especially of Protestantism in America) is thrown into serious question by what has happened. We can rejoice in our freedom, but only if we take it with very genuine seriousness.

Christian churches and peoples, if they take the Holocaust seriously, must surely admit that anti-Judaism and antisemitism have played significant roles in Christian history, and that we share responsibility for the Holocaust. These patterns of prejudice must now be rooted out of Christian theology and ecclesiology. The consequences of those twisted patterns of thought and action have been set before us in a terrible way in the Holocaust. That there are

passages in the New Testament that are anti-Jewish must not only be admitted, but must be fully and carefully interpreted whenever they are read and studied, with the use of scholarly and critical tools and in the light of our most sensitive moral insights. Whenever it is encountered, the anti-Judaism of some of the church Fathers needs to be recognized and understood for what it is. How the Christian churches fell into temptation and sin in their encounter with Jews in the days when they were the dominant party in western civilization needs to be made critically clear to the faithful today. Contemporary liturgies, hymns, catechisms and instructional materials need to be scrutinized and purged of anti-Jewish references; it should have been done before by those of us who remember that Jesus was a Jew who directed us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but since the Holocaust we are doubly without excuse if we do not do it.

The continuation of the Jewish people after the Catastrophe continues the mystery of Jewish survival through the centuries. Though the Christian confidently assumes that the Church has been called to perform a special task in the world, he need not draw as a corollary what has so often been assumed--that there is no special calling for the Jewish people also. Insights into the meaning of God's covenant with his people continue to come in a distinctive way from Jews; Jewish criticism of the shortcomings of Christian churches can help us to realize more fully the truth of our own tradition. Without being anything but true to our own Christian heritage, we can rejoice in the continuation of Judaism, and seek to help and to be helped in open mutuality and sharing. The ghastly event of the Holocaust can never be undone, but from it we can understand more fully the human situation with its terrible freedom and dangers, and also be forced to think more profoundly and sensitively about the relationship of Christian and Jewish traditions.

These reflections have been focused primarily on the Holocaust and not on the church struggle against Nazism. My own faith that God has not abandoned the Church is strengthened by that story, though it is one with many varied and uneven chapters. There were those who by God's grace saw quite early the true state of affairs under the Nazi rule and who did not bargain away their positions until there was an opportunity for a "clear and decisive" stand--an opportunity which never came. The mystery of the church struggle is not that a few stood firm, I think, but that so many gave in so easily. It is all too easy to identify with the heroic stand of others from a safe distance in space and time; the story of the church struggle must never be separated from the story of compromise and apostasy. In imagination we identify with the resistance; might not many of us be with the compromisers and apostates? What happened there and then can, mutatis mutandis, happen here and now; we need to pray for guidance and grace in the hour of trial.

Depends on  
how Xn  
"heritage"  
is understood.