

THE CHURCH AND THE HOLOCAUST

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"The withdrawal of the Church from history has created that specifically Christian and ecclesiastical irresponsibility towards the world, the Jew, the other person, even the Christian himself, considered as a human being--which was the ultimate cause of past catastrophes and may be the cause of a final catastrophe in the future." (Friedrich Heer, GOD'S FIRST LOVE, p. 406)

Emil Fackenheim once remarked that it was immoral to search for "meaning" in the Holocaust. I can deeply identify with his point of view, yet perhaps never as deeply as can one of Jewish birth. Nonetheless the Holocaust is a fact of history and we who live in its shadow must try to grasp what took place and why in spite of the hideousness of the event.

The Holocaust has recently developed into a central theme in Jewish thought. Scholars such as Eugene Borowitz and Irving Greenberg have singled out the Holocaust and its correlative theme, the rebirth of the modern state of Israel, as the focal points of contemporary Jewish consciousness, even in the diaspora. This approach to the Holocaust is an important and necessary one. But perhaps it takes the sensitivity of Jewish birthright to express the significance of the experience in this respect.

In these few pages I would like to put forth a few ideas on the lessons of the Holocaust with respect to Christian theology. The recently translated work by Professor Friedrich Heer of the University of Vienna entitled GOD'S FIRST LOVE (from which the opening quotation has been drawn) takes up a line of thought very similar to my own. Dr. Heer tries to place the phenomenon of anti-Semitism (which is the book's chief concern) in a larger context. In so doing he intends to destroy the illusion held by some Christians that anti-Semitism hit its peak in Nazi Germany and has been on the downswing ever since. His point is that anti-Semitism has been the historical manifestation of a much deeper cancer in Christianity. The disregard of the fate of the Jewish people throughout history, and especially between 1918 and 1945, can only be understood in his mind as part of a general disregard of man and the world. And he attributes this disregard primarily to the dominance in Christian theology of the "Augustinian principle" which views the world "sub ratione peccati," and which ultimately leads to a sense of fatalism and despair about the world. This fatalistic tendency in Christianity is still a danger today,

according to Herr, just as much as it was in the period of the incubation of Nazism and in the years from 1933-45. In fact he says quite bluntly that today millions of Christians share the responsibility for preparing the suicide both of the church and of mankind in a new holocaust which will be brought about by nuclear warfare as the church stands by once again in idle silence. The only way to reverse this centuries-long pattern in Christianity is to abandon the Augustinian principle and replace it with a return to the Hebrew Bible's roots of Christ's own piety and to even older roots, to the original faith in which Man felt himself to be both God's creature and his responsible partner.

This recovery of the responsibility tradition is in many ways the single most important contribution the Jewish-Christian dialogue can and must make to Christian self-understanding. While eradicating the so-called "theology of the curse" and repenting for the sufferings it has inflicted upon the Jewish people must be a central concern of the new encounter between Jews and Christians, the ultimate implication of the thesis put forward by Dr. Heer, with which I concur, is that in the final analysis such eradication and repentance will not get to the root of the problem. He would insist, and I would agree, that the loss of the Jewish spirit of covenantal responsibility and the subsequent impregnation of Augustinian theology into the church was far more responsible for the tragic fate of the Jews than the theology of the curse itself. This is a serious conclusion because we who live in an era in which the theology of the curse is dying or has died in mainline theological circles have little grounds for relaxation. For the possibility of a new wave of anti-Semitism or a holocaust of mankind as such still exists so long as men do not take seriously their responsibility for the world and the power their dignity as co-creators has given them. And essential to a development of such responsibility among Christians is an understanding of the Jewish sense of man's role in the world. In this regard the church is faced with an urgent challenge both on the level of theology and the level of polity.

If I were to add something to Dr. Heer's analysis it would be that contemporary man is no doubt freer than biblical man to sense the power his designation as co-creator has given him. Richard Rubenstein has emphasized this point in *AFTER AUSCHWITZ*. While disagreeing with Rubenstein on many counts, I am convinced he has correctly interpreted the Holocaust as a manifestation of what can happen when man senses his tremendous power and has no adequate theology with which to direct its use. Christian theology, insofar as it has been dominated by Augustinianism, has not proven of value in this regard. It was Nietzsche, according to Rubenstein, who among the moderns first grasped the tremendous creative power of man and tried to spell out its implications. Dr. Heer also points to Nietzsche's contribution in this respect: "Could not Nietzsche's cry, 'Remain faithful to the earth,' be interpreted as the cry of protest of a misunderstood and mistreated world, and be echoed in its truest sense by the Christian?"

Our study of the Holocaust should lead then to the realization that Christian theology must say something to contemporary man's discovery of his tremendous creative powers. The recent history of man makes it obvious that without some guidance this power will be transformed into the destructive force we have seen exposed in all its ugliness in the Holocaust. But to offer such guidance the church will first of all have to recapture its Jewish roots and the Jewish spirit of "worldliness." As a final point of speculation, perhaps we

might learn something here from the Israelis who are frequently accused of chutzpah. Have the Israelis for whom the experience of Auschwitz is still very much a reality not reaffirmed in an un verbalized way the traditional Jewish spirit of man's responsibility for his destiny coupled with a sense of the freedom of modern man, a freedom which tells modern man that he must build up the city of man through the intelligent use of his creative powers and a traditional theology that tells him that the city he is building is integrally connected with the final kingdom of God and that this creative activity is taking place in concert with the creative activity of God.