The Holocaust: Does It Have Significance for Ethics Today

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**A discussion of the implications of the Shoah for basic questions of personal and political ethics, including an overview of recent scholarly work on the subject.   **

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The academic study of ethics, in light of the experience of the Holocaust, has seen rapid development in the last decade. In addition to research into ethical decision making during the Holocaust itself in such volumes as Rab Bennett"s *Under the Shadow of the Swastika: The Moral Dilemmas of Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler"s Europe,* more general reflections on the significance of the Holocaust for contemporary ethics have come to the fore from Jewish and Christian scholars alike. There have also been those such as Herbert Hirsch who have questioned whether we can learn anything from the Holocaust in terms of the moral challenges facing us today given the *sui generis* nature of that event as well as the immense complexity of modern society.

Among the scholars who have made significant contributions to the discussion of ethics in light of the Holocaust, the following names stand out: Peter J. Haas, Didier Pollefeyt, David H. Jones, David Blumenthal, Stanley Hauerwas, Michael Morgan, John Roth and Michael Berenbaum. There has also existed a small group of scholars that have met on a regular basis to pursue the issue since June 1996. Their reflections have been brought together in the volume *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses* edited by John Roth. The 2000 “Remembering for the Future” Conference held at Oxford University had ethics as one of its three thematic tracks. The papers delivered in the ethics track have been published as volume two of a three volume publication of papers from that conference. I myself have contributed to this discussion over the years, most particularly in the recent volumes which I have co-edited: *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Christian and Jewish Perspectives* and *Good and Evil After Auschwitz: Ethical Implications for Today.*

The various scholars engaged in ethical reflection after the Holocaust work in a number of diverse frameworks. Michael Morgan raises the most fundamental question. Do historical events such as the Holocaust have any impact on our understanding of theology and ethics? Morgan, following the line of Emil Fackenheim, thinks they do. Thus for Morgan, as for Fackenheim, the Holocaust has altered ethical understanding today, particularly in terms of the nature of human responsibility.

In *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic,* and in subsequent writings,

Peter Haas has asked the question why the Nazis failed to recognize evil as evil and, as a consequence, why they created what appeared to many as a scientifically valid ethic. "The problem," he says, "is a moral system that is thought out and elaborated along "scientific" lines, that is through the application of a strict logic, hardens such facts into universal givens." This results, according to Haas, in a loss of any sense of the difference between murder and killing. "Morality" becomes much more a matter of acting in a way that "fits" the pre-established system. For Haas, the scientific system removes from human consciousness any sense of personal responsibility for human action: "I then lose sight of my own moral agency, of my own power to create not only the acts through my observation of them, but also to create the text that gives the act its moral value. I at that moment stop being a moral agent and become instead a passive actor in someone else"s drama" (Haas, 2000, 116). Haas goes on to say that ultimately what went awry with what Haas terms "the Nazi ethic" was that it pre-defined morality for people under its sway. It proclaimed not only what was right and what was wrong from a scientific perspective and therefore unquestionable, but also what actions fell into each category. "The result was," Haas insists, "that people did atrocious things because they took them to be morally mandated. The Nazi morality pre-defined what was acceptable to such an extent, and in such an authoritative, scientific way, that many people, especially intellectuals, simply fell into line. The living relationship between the human as moral agent on the one hand, and the moral act on the other was lost" (Haas, 2000, 116). He concludes by affirming the need to maintain a moral foundation for ethics today that is rooted in the dynamics of human relationship, cooperation, openness to the other and compassion for the other.

Didier Pollefeyt takes issue with Haas on several points, including whether we can speak of a "Nazi ethic." He prefers to present Nazism as having "perverted" authentic morality. But he does in the end recognize the systematic nature of the Nazi approach to human acts. For him, it is better to view Nazism as espousing a "totalitarian ethic." But, just as Haas, Pollefeyt emphasizes that such an ethic generates "moral sameness" by removing any personal sense of responsibility from the response framework. He agrees with Haas that the Nazi ideologues created a closed ethic in which any response that did not fit into the preconceived pattern was eliminated. Such an ethic, Pollefeyt also underlines, eliminates any sense of mercy and compassion. It removes God as a moral barometer of any sort. Instead "God" is used to legitimate the closed and murderous social order.

For Pollefeyt Nazism became a politics without a true ethical framework. It had no room for alterity and demanded the eradication of anything that was not in conformity with "the system." "As such," he argues, "Nazism was an idolatrous effort that radicalized itself and eliminated everything that did not conform ... This is for us the primary lesson of the Nazi genocide, but also of other forms of racism and discrimination, such as nationalism, sexism or religious fundamentalism." (Pollefeyt, 2000, 133)

In my judgment both Haas and Pollefeyt have uncovered a crucial dimension of Nazism that remains critical for understanding the moral challenge before us today. In highlighting the importance of the Nazi framework for human response, whether one decides to call it an ethic or not, they have both shown that a central characteristic of modernity (and one might argue post-modernity as well) is the determination of morality by political and cultural structures. Nazism was the first modem political system to "program" human societal responses in a systematic fashion. Historian Peter Hayes has clearly shown how such an ethic overwhelmed an initially hesitant German business community and transformed it into major players in the Nazi system. David H. Jones, writing within the framework of what is termed "virtue ethics," and David H. Blumenthal, relying in part on sociological analysis, both stress the importance of reaffirming "core values" from religious tradition in the development of a post-Holocaust ethic. For Jones it is primarily the classical virtue tradition in Christian ethics that needs to be reappropriated; for Blumenthal, classic Jewish texts must be mined anew for fundamental notions of God, covenant, justice and caring. Blumenthal also emphasizes the importance of case histories in moral education and calls for a reexamination of the process of such education. Jones shares Blumenthal"s emphasis on “core

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values” by stressing that after the Holocaust we must insist that there is an absolute good that makes certain actions absolutely wrong. In my judgment neither Jones nor Blumenthal leave us with a fully satisfactory ethic after the Holocaust. Their basic failure is to recognize that some of the so-called "core values" of classical Judaism and Christianity need to be rethought in light of the Holocaust experience. This is especially true with regard to our sense of God and the depth of human responsibility that must serve as moral barometers in the contemporary world.

John Roth and Michael Berenbaurn both emphasize the significance of the Holocaust for generating ethical commitment today without entering into the discussion of methodology and ethical sources that characterize the writings of many of the other contributors to the discussion of ethics after the Holocaust. Roth cannot conceive of an adequate moral response to the Holocaust without a commitment to solve the problems of racism, human rights violations and widespread poverty that affect our global civilization. He would agree in part with critiques of Holocaust studies that end in banal ethical generalities of simply moral outrage. In his most recent book *Holocaust Politics* in particular he argues that we cannot say that we have responded to the moral challenge of the Holocaust unless we have fully committed ourselves to limiting and even curing the unjust realities that continue to plague our global village.

Michael Berenbaum was centrally involved in the development of the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as well as with the creation of its Center for Advanced Holocaust Research. He has also supported the establishment of its Committee on Conscience which was an integral part of the congressional mandate given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council at its creation. Berenbaurn terms the Holocaust "the nuclear bomb of moral epithets." It serves in his mind as the foundation for a negative absolute – absolute evil. (Berenbaum, 2001 257). He emphasizes two points in particular for an ethic framed within a religious tradition. The first is that "no religious ethic is acceptable if it demonizes another religion and disparages their right to hold their faith and the right of another religion to worship their God as they see it." (Berenbaum, 2001, 239) The second is a creative use of guilt that will spur us to repentance and personal transformation.

My own perspective on ethics in the shadow of the Holocaust moves very much in the same direction as Roth and Berenbaum. But I would highlight four particular crucial areas for discussion that are at best touched upon in their writings. They are the question of how we understand God"s role in human society after the Holocaust and the implications for a sense of human responsibility; the centrality of human rights in religious self-definition; the influence of structures on moral behavior; and the role of ritual in shaping public morality.

I have been profoundly influenced by Irving Greenberg regarding the God question in light of the Holocaust and its implications for ethics. Greenberg has argued that Holocaust experience has turned our understanding of the God-human community relationship upside-down in terms of moral responsibility for the world. The primary responsibility has now gone over to the human community. God retains a continuing role, but it is no longer the interventionist God to whom people prayed in the hope of direct, divine action in terms of combating injustice in human society. The new enhanced human responsibility also requires, according to Greenberg, a willingness to use human power to control evil, though he agrees that there must be some controls over the use of power.

While I believe Greenberg"s understanding of the divine-human role reversal is too dramatic, I do believe that in light of the Holocaust the classical interventionist God is dead. The human community must now recognize that the ultimate fate of the world as we know resides in human hands. A central role remains for God in terms of healing and strengthening the human community as it carries its greatly enhanced role. God also remains a fundamental moral barometer. But it is imperative for the human community to assume its far more central role. It is a choice, as Buckminister Fuller has put it, between oblivion and utopia.

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Speaking primarily as a Catholic, I must acknowledge the lack of a deep-seated commitment to human rights on the part of my church during the time of the Holocaust that muted Catholicism"s moral response during this critical era. It is my conviction that the lack of a human rights tradition contributed significantly to moral failures on the part of Catholics during the Third Reich.

Modernity, especially the Enlightenment with its creation of new pluralistic societies rooted in individual equality and human rights, posed a real dilemma for classical Catholic thought. In many instances Catholics were not above appealing for protection under the laws of the new democratic, secular societies. But their theology had not yet freed itself from the ideal of Catholic domination of the state where that could be achieved nor the principle that human liberties were ultimately dependent on adherence to the authentic faith tradition possessed by Catholicism.

When we come to the question of Catholicism and the Holocaust, we still are very much in a pre-Vatican II mind set in terms of the Church"s attitude towards the public order. Here it is critical to stress the profound differences between liberalism in America and liberalism in Europe which, unlike its American counterpart, displayed profound hostility toward all forms of Christianity. A virtual state of war existed between the liberals of Europe, especially in the form of freemasonry, and the Catholic leadership in particular. Even Catholic liberals who claimed a Christian basis for democratic principles were castigated by Catholic authorities with some leaving the Church. In 1832 Pope Gregory XVI issued an encyclical in which he spoke of the errors and evils of those who argued for freedom of conscience.

Pope Pius IX, Gregory XVI"s successor, appeared at the outset of his papacy to be more sympathetic to liberalism. But as the liberal challenge to Vatican sovereignty over the papal states grew stronger, Pius IX grew more vocal in his opposition to liberalism. In 1864 he issued the famous *Syllabus of Errors* in which he condemned liberalism as an "absurd principle" which argued that the state should treat all religious alike without distinction.

The accession of Leo XIII to the Papcy in 1878 brought a bit of moderation to the Catholic war against liberalism. But, while Leo XIII was open to a measure of toleration in the public order, on the theological level he described any notion of church-state separation as a fatal error. In the Italian context he was especially condemnatory of the Freemasons and their liberal ideas. He described them as a part of the kingdom of Satan which was at war with God in their struggle against the Church and Christendom. He spoke of a conspiracy at work that was endangering the very fabric of Christian civilization.

The 1930"s were a time of great anxiety among Catholic leaders in Germany, France, Poland an elsewhere. They were apprehensive that the Weimar Republic"s liberal governmental model, which in part was associated with Jews, would cause the final collapse of the Christian notion of the social order. Many Protestant leaders shared this apprehension. Pope Pius XI expressed the hope that the stock market crash and the experience of the brutality of the Russian revolution would turn people in Europe away from liberalism and socialism towards a distinctly Catholic vision of society.

My point is therefore that the two Popes of the Holocaust era, Pius XI and Pius XII, worked within the framework of a century-long crusade against liberalism. They were not enamored with fascism. Pius XI in his anti-Nazi encyclical soundly denounced the racial policies of the Third Reich. But when the Church faced the difficult choice of a coalition partner, liberalism and socialism were ruled out as realistic possibilities because of the priority of defending the Catholic social order. Fascism, and even Nazism, despite their severe limitations as ideologies, became the preferred options for protecting Catholic institutional interests. Historians such as Michael Marrus have correctly underscored this point.

Within such an ecclesiastical framework the human rights of Jews, and even of the Catholic victims

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of the Nazis such as the Poles and the Roma (Gypsies), had little or no priority. Viewed in the context of a fundamental commitment to ecclesiastical preservation for the sake of a moral public order and ultimately for the sake of human salvation, Jews, Poles, Gypsies and other victim groups became unfortunate expendables.

The lack of a human rights perspective thus significantly curtailed the Catholic institutional response to Nazism. Now that we are coming to see that at the level of institutional Christianity fear of liberalism and concern for the loss of the Church"s influence over the public order were in fact stronger motives for acquiescence or even collaboration with Nazism and Fascism than classical Christian antisemitism itself, we are in a position to ask seriously whether the Church"s response would have been different if those Christian voices who advocated incorporation of dimensions of the liberal vision into Christianity, including its human rights vision, had been heeded. And what if Church leaders had made a concerted effort to establish a working relationship with the liberal opposition to Nazism despite that opposition"s widespread hostility to religious belief? A coalition somewhat along these lines was in fact forged within the “Zegota” movement in Poland between Catholic lay leaders and people whose social ideology had an anti-religious, but pro-humanist, bent, but who were able to make common cause in the rescue of Jews, especially Jewish children.

I recognize hindsight can never reproduce the difficulty of the actual challenge in this regard. But my suspicion is that if Catholicism had earlier embraced aspects of the liberal vision prior to the rise of Nazism rather than adopting the position of fierce opposition that I summarized earlier, such a coalition would have proven more feasible. Whether it would have resulted in the survival of many more Jews, Poles and Roma remains an open question. Some prominent historians such as Michael Marrus and Gunther Lewy believe it would not have made much difference. But on the level of protecting the Church"s basic moral integrity, it might have proven quite significant.

Earlier in this presentation, I mentioned briefly the work of historian Peter Hayes on the German business community during the Nazi era. His work clearly shows the influence of social and cultural structures on public morality. Personal ethical commitment remains vital. But we need to recognize that unless ethics is woven into the very fabric of human society personal ethical commitment will not be able to sustain a high level of ethical commitment in global society. Obviously, this is an increasingly complicated question because of our growing globalization and its forced intersection of varied religions and cultures, each with specific (and sometimes quite different) moral traditions. We need also to recognize that religions have often been, and remain, a source of direct social conflict and injustice. Such conflict must be overcome if religions are to contribute to world peace and justice. But any effort to totally privatize religion will only result in a greatly reduced moral tone in global society.

Finally, there is the very important question of sustaining human responsibility through ritual. My colleague in the Hyde Park Cluster of Theological Schools at the University of Chicago, the psychologist Robert Moore, has written at length of the need for what he calls "ritual containment" if society is to develop a sensitivity to justice and human rights. In other words, an ethic rooted exclusively in human reason cannot guarantee human responsibility because the human person is an intricate blend of reason and what ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr termed the "vitalistic" dimension of the human person. Any adequate social morality must recognize that good and evil emerge from both human faculties. Yet there has been a strong tendency in Western thought, including Western ethical thought (both religious and secular) to downplay the role of the vitalistic.

The regeneration of the vitalistic side of humanity, albeit in highly destructive directions, stood at the heart of the Nazi enterprise. The historian J.L. Talmon once described Nazi ideology as the denial of any "final station of redemption in history" which gave birth to a cult of power and vitality as needs in themselves (Talmon, 1973, 22-24) The Nazis became aware of the tremendous power of this vitalistic dimension. No scholar has made this point as clearly as George Mosse who spent considerable time examining the impact of Nazi public liturgies during his academic career. While it

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verges on the obscene to give the Nazis credit for anything, Mosse"s writings demonstrate that the Nazi leadership was extremely perceptive in recognizing the influence of ritual in human life.

In light of the Holocaust we can no longer afford to give scant attention to the vitalistic dimension of humanity, to reduce it simply to the realm of play and recreation, if we hope to develop the sense of human responsibility to which the Holocaust summons us. The development of moral reasoning remains crucial; but it is no substitute for the healing of the destructive tendencies lurking in humanity"s vitalistic side through symbolic encounter with a loving God. Without ritual containment of the vitalistic dimension of human life, human responsibility cannot grow.

As I close, let me say that studying the historical details of the Holocaust and continuing to memorialize its victims remains a sacred task. But we shall ultimately fail the victims of the Nazis if we do not choose life over death, as Deuteronomy instructs us, by wrestling with the ultimate ideological implications of Nazism, especially in the realm of ethics, for our contemporary global society. In the Slovak Pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany, there was a powerful film that was in part based on the Holocaust. The film"s title asked a question that remains our question after the Holocaust, *Quo vadis humanity?*

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