Suffering: Challenge to Faith, Challenge to God

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Alice L. Eckardt, Professor Emerita of Religion Studies at Lehigh University (U.S.A.), offers a review and analysis of Christian and Jewish reflections on human suffering, especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Suffering: Challenge to Faith, Challenge to God[1]

Alice L. Eckardt

Evil and suffering have always been, and doubtless always will be, subjects of great concern not only to their victims but to any system of thought that postulates a good creator or a purposeful universe.[2] Attempts to explain them are many. The problem with explanations is that all too often they put the burden on the sufferers: Either it is their fault (even if no one, except God, knows exactly what sin or wrongdoing has been committed by them or their predecessors!). Or it must be endured because it somehow fits into the divine scheme. Explanations become part of theologies that seek to assign positive value to reality. Thus justification is provided and an ethic of suffering is created. Yet we instinctively sense that something is not only wrong but evil in that process though we desperately want to believe that such suffering ultimately serves some good purpose. Are we still satisfied to rely on such hope? Elie Wiesel's answer is primarily No (as are some others' responses).

This century has seen inordinate suffering deliberately and cold-bloodedly inflicted on millions of humans – not only in the *Shoah* but in countless other situations around the globe. Without minimizing any of the suffering in other cultures, we in the Western hemisphere need to pay particular attention to what has been done within our own communities. Since that history has been predominantly Christian, Christians are called on to test their ideals, theology, and professions of faith in light of the historical consequences to which they contributed. The same history has to be a primary concern for Jews as well since so much of their past experience has been at the hands of the Christian world, and most of their present existence and future hope lie within Western societies.

Suffering as redemptive and its function as an ethic

One of the primary ways by which the problem of evil and suffering has been approached is to go beyond attempted explanation and ask more directly whether suffering has some kind of positive function in the process of redemption, and if so, how.[3]

Judaism's bases for asserting some role for suffering are rooted in the Binding of Isaac, the martyrs of Maccabean, Hadrianic, and later times, the Sacrifice (actual) of Isaac, and the Thirty-Six Just Ones of every generation.[4]

Christianity's arguments for redemptive power in suffering are rooted primarily in Jesus' sacrificial and atoning death although a number of similarities between the sacrifice of Jesus and the sacrifice of Isaac were elaborated on by the Church Fathers and the *Akedah* was seen as a prefiguring of Golgotha. Thus Isaac was the "prototype for the sufferings and trials of Jesus"; Isaac carried the wood for the sacrificial pyre just as Jesus bore his cross; Isaac was the sheep for the burnt offering and Jesus was the lamb slain for others, even as the Paschal lamb.[5]

But Augustine spelled out for the church the absolute uniqueness of the Christ event as an ineradicably necessary and revolutionary "reversal of human history."[6] Thus the church celebrated the suffering of God's new people as a faithful witness to God's truth as embodied in Christ and his church, and as a faithful witness to Christ's power to save. But it perceived the suffering of the unfaithful ones – the people of the "old" covenant – as nothing less than deserved punishment for their "hardheartedness and unbelief." Their suffering verified for Christians that God had indeed rejected His former people.[7] In this way the theme of the suffering of the righteous was turned into a weapon against the Jewish people who had originated both the concept of righteous suffering and the deed of martyrdom, and who continued to die (at least in their own view) as witnesses to God. Moreover, adding insult to injury, Christian persecutors often interpreted Jews' voluntary martyrdom as connivance with the devil.[8]

With considerably more reason Jews also turned the concept of the suffering of the righteous against the faith of their Christian adversaries. During the persecutions and massacres of the 10th to 14th centuries Jews viewed their own martyrdom as sacrifical suffering on behalf of the true faith whereas the religion whose representatives were forcing this choice on them was seen not only as false but also as contemptuous.[9]

Responses to Shoah Suffering: Jewish

Since the suffering of the people Israel as part of God's "secret aim" of transforming the world had become the recurrent theme of Jewish writings from the Middle Ages on, particularly at times of intense Jewish suffering , it is not surprising to find that during and even after the *Shoah* it continued to be expressed in some circles. Rabbi Hirschler, who died in Mauthausen in 1943, is reported to have said, "To us [Jews] the world is like a crucible into which God plunges us in the course of time because we have forgotten him and have not respected his laws, *perhaps* for our purification, *perhaps* for a sacrifice of atonement for the salvation of others. [Therefore,] it *may* be right and beautiful to suffer beyond one's own sins."[10] Notice, however, the lack of certitude with which he propounds the traditional views, a diffidence that only partially hides his unspoken questions.

On the other hand, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman restated the theme of atoning sacrifice with more assurance at the very moment when he and others awaited execution at the Ninth Fort outside Kovno on July 6, 1941. He spoke to his fellow Jews as follows: “It would seem that in heaven we are considered *Tzaddikim* (righteous). For atonement is to be made with our bodies for *Klal Yisroel*. As we do *Teshuvah* (repentance) we should [be concerned] with saving [the souls of] the *Shearith* Israel (the saving remnant). . . . We now carry out the greatest *Mitzvah, Kiddush HaShem* (good deed, sanctification of the Name of God). The fire which will burn our bodies is the fire which will resurrect the Jewish people.” Wasserman’s brother-in-law Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzensky (Achiezer) of Vilna saw Torah and faith as supplying the means to endure the suffering, turn the catastrophe back, and bring redemption. For both of them the *churban* had “a positive meaning: the more evil, [the more] punishment, [then] the closer the redemption. Each moment of cosmic catharsis, of suffering, is a moment of messianic entry into history.” Interpreting events from the midrashic perspective, they saw all of the actors in the drama as “instruments of God’s plan to transform history.”[11]

As we will see, Elie Wiesel rejects this view.

But in these rabbis’ views the negative side of the scenario had less to do with Israel’s vicarious suffering for the world and was directed at Israel’s suffering for its own sins: for its abandonment of Torah in favor of secular ideologies, its assimilation with non-Jewish cultures, and its nationalistic Zionism. Writing in the Fall of 1939, after the pogrom of *Kristallnacht* and at the beginning of Polish Jewry’s agony, Rabbi Wasserman held that the punishment fitted the crimes. However, he assured Jews, once the nation was purged of these evils, remembered its real identity and returned to Torah, the catastrophe would be turned back. In fact, persecution ultimately is Israel’s salvation because God searches out the persecuted.[12]

Rabbi Issachar Shlomo Teichtal of Budapest in late 1943 came to a quite different conviction regarding the cause of the extreme suffering. It was opposition to political Zionism that indirectly contributed to and compounded the tragedy of European Jewry. The very purpose of the suffering was to be a stimulant to the Jew in *galut* to return to the Land and his true Jewish self. Still, for Teichtal also, suffering could be the “prelude to redemption,” the beginning of *tikkun* (mending), by shattering defective reality.[13]

After the war Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum in England also dared to speak of a constructive outflow from the horrors of the *Shoah*, and the vicarious nature of Jewish suffering. By God’s “severe decree” (*gezeirah*) the history of mankind had been thrust into a new age. The old obstructions to progress and community were now removed, specifically, the medieval Christian dogma that outside the church there is no salvation, and the medieval Jewish Codes that “worked on the principle: outside the din, you cannot be a Jew.” Now “Jew and Christian meet as equals. . . .” The third *churban* (the *Shoah*) makes possible “messianic progress,” just as the two earlier *gezeirot* did.

Maybaum was driven to find some such meaning in the 20th century destruction because he “refused to consider the possibility that Jewish history was devoid of meaning.” For the Jew, “Auschwitz is the great trial. The Jew is tried, tested, like Abraham at Moriah,” but the faithful remnant will pass the test. There was no doubt for Maybaum but that the six million “died an innocent death; they died because of the sins of others. Western man must, in repentance, say of the Jew what Isaiah said of the Servant of God: ‘Surely, our diseases he did bear, and our pain he carried . . . he was wounded because of our transgressions, he was crushed because of our

iniquities' (53:4, 5)." Maybaum insisted that "Jewish martyrdom explains the meaning [of this passage of Isaiah] . . . better than the medieval Christian dogma [of the cross] ever did."[14]

Some Orthodox survivors living and writing in the Munich area in the years 1945 to 1948 were convinced of the uniqueness of the *churban* even while they saw it aligned with Jewish history. For them (as for Wasserman and Grodzensky) assimilation to modernity and abandonment of Torah were the root causes of the terrible suffering and annihilation. In other words, it was not God's fault but the people's. But Torah could not be destroyed for it is eternal and transnatural; and it offers Jews resurrectibility and survival. Still, Torah-history now required a national state. Eretz Israel offered dignity and life while *galut* meant spiritual slavery and death. In fact, for Benzion Firer "the *galut* mind-set of passive suffering and of obedience to orders [even] until death itself" was shattered by the Warsaw Ghetto's revolt. The fighters were asserting national self-consciousness and freedom. Their purpose was to shatter despair and reestablish ambition for nationhood, a goal the new State of Israel would reaffirm and carry forward.[15]

For all of these individuals history – events – had meaning and it was for Jews to discern the divine purpose and their own appropriate response. For them, the course of history could be reversed by returning to Torah.

There was another type of Orthodox response – a radical one – that claimed there was no meaning to be found in contemporary events, "because the *hurban* went beyond history and because the history that allowed for the *hurban* proved inherently disastrous.[16] Thus, from the midst of the Warsaw Ghetto's death agonies, while wondering how the world could continue to exist after hearing the screams of the victims, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro concluded that the atrocities can only be understood as part of an aggadic-cosmic drama between Israel and the evil ones.[17]

Similarly in 1947 Simcha Elbert wrote from Shanghai that there is no basis left to understand the suffering: "The world has descended [to] the deepest depths [into] the abyss of mass murder. . . . There has to be a new six days of creation [which] become possible when Torah . . . becomes a light to the nations." Even so, for Elberg the *Akedah* of Treblinka – exemplified in the victims' declaration of the *Sh'ma* "from within the fires that split the heavens" – atones for the sins of mankind in general and for Israel's sin of assimilation in particular. It was for that reason that the holiest Jews, those of Poland, were selected – "to intensify the sacrifice and thereby enhance the sanctification. . . ."[18]

For Kalonymous Kalman Spira the main consolation for the suffering appears to be the recognition that it is a co-suffering with God – a God so infinite suffering infinitely, that God must retreat to an inner chamber lest the world explode from the divine suffering. The awareness of God's co-suffering helps the victim transcend his pain. And

perhaps God will take action when not only Jews are attacked, but also Torah.[19] Again we find notes of uncertainty.

How more generally have survivors of the *Shoah* responded to traditional ways of dealing with suffering? A detailed survey, done in the late 1970s, of 70 survivors showed that only 11 percent agreed that in the Holocaust the Jewish people were the sacrifice for humanity's sins. As one survivor said, "God is not unjust and He is not a Christian God who can offer some third party, Jesus or the Jews of Europe, to die for the sins of others. . . . there is no vicarious atonement in Judaism in a way which would have God sacrifice six million of the innocent for the guilty. . . ."

Almost none of Judaism's traditional attempts to explain suffering is to be heard from these survivors. A significant 72 percent voiced the opinion that God was not involved at all and that the destruction was due entirely to human relationships. In fact, 98 percent of the survivors in this study rejected the theory that Jewish martyrdom in the *Shoah* was the result of divine judgment.[20] In conjunction with this conviction, Elie Wiesel insists that the Jewish tradition does not "believe that suffering can create or engender anything that transcends it. Suffering . . . is a persistent mystery. . . . it would be against tradition to choose suffering."[21]

Rabbi Albert Friedlander also echoes and reemphasizes this judgment. Any such conclusions are misuses of the Holocaust, even if made by victims or survivors of the *Shoah*. They become "a defense for established position; a substitute for religion, and a substitute for thinking." Just as Jews had to reshape their theology after the previous *churbans*, Jews of today must seek for new understanding. After Auschwitz Jewish self-definition rejects "imposed concepts" of Jewish destiny "that view Israel as the vicarious atonement, as a lamb of God or a suffering messiah figure. The *tremendum* . . . may never be defined as Jewish destiny." Moreover, "we can never understand Auschwitz (though) we dan come to terms with our reactions to radical evil."[22]

Protest as response and Elie Wiesel

Where in all of this are we to situate Elie Wiesel's thoughts and questions? We find that he is troubled by the traditional answers and tales particularly as they speak of suffering and determine response to it. Thus, in his *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, while Abraham dared to query God and remonstrate with Him on behalf of others in Sodom and Gomorrah, he was silent when God told him to make of his son an *ola* (a totally burnt offering). Why did not Abraham protest on behalf of this innocent son, as well as on behalf of Sarah and himself?[23]

Must we not also wonder about rather than celebrate Abraham's obedience? By his not protesting in this instance, did Abraham consign his people to being perpetual victims? And even to their being participants in their own victimization? After all, was it not Abraham's silence before God that led the father in Auschwitz in 1944 on the eve of Rosh Hashanah to conclude not only that he was prohibited from ransoming his son from the death barracks (because another father's son would be put there in his place), but also to conclude that it was a *merit* to offer his only son to God as Father Abraham had done?[24]

And yet ----. Wiesel wonders whether the test of Abraham with Isaac was perhaps a "double edged test." "God subjected Abraham to it, yet at the same time Abraham forced it on God. As though Abraham had said, 'I defy You, Lord. I shall submit to Your will, but let us see whether You shall go to the end, whether You shall remain passive and remain silent when the life of my son – who is also Your son – is at stake!' And God changed his mind and relented." And still Abraham didn't let go of God. He insisted, "I want You to make me the following promise that, when, in the future, my children and my children's children . . . act against Your law and against Your will, You will also say nothing and forgive them." And God agreed. In this way, Abraham brought God closer

to His creation.[25]

And what about Isaac and the suffering imposed on him by God's testing of his father and by Abraham's counter-testing of God? Wiesel finds that it is Isaac's privilege to "remain Israel's *Melitz-Yosher*, the defender of his people, pleading its cause . . . . entitled to say anything to God, ask anything of Him. Because he suffered? No. Wiesel says, *Suffering in Jewish tradition, confers no privileges. It all depends on what one makes of that suffering.* Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer and love rather than rancor and malediction."[26]

André Neher has gone a step beyond Wiesel and raised still another question: What about Sarah, Isaac's mother, the person left behind, ignorant (as far as we know) of the command given to her husband by the Lord? Would she have acquiesced as he did? Or would she have protested? She was given neither alternative. And, according to the Midrash, because of being left in ignorance, Satan was thereby enabled to tell her a lie: that Abraham had sacrificed their son Isaac. In this way Satan brought about her fatal collapse for she could not survive Isaac "without betraying him."[27]

Wiesel also challenges Job: Why did he not carry his protest, his accusations against God, to the end? Why did he suddenly give in? Wiesel points out that Job's "resignation as a man was an insult to man. . . . He should have continued to protest. . . .[28] In fact, Wiesel prefers to think that the "true ending [of the book of Job] was lost. That Job died without having repented, without having humiliated himself." If this is not the case, then "Job's resignation as a man was an insult to man. . . . He should have continued to protest. . . . He should have said to God: Very well, I forgive You, . . . to the extent of my sorrow. . . . But what about my dead children, do they forgive You? What right have I to speak on their behalf?" Job should have recognized that his "'restitution' was worthless next to his previous suffering. . . ."[29] In *Night* Wiesel wrote about how he sympathized with Job. He doubted God's absolute justice.[30]

The need to protest is one of Wiesel's major themes: protest against human injustice and protest against divine injustice. For Elie Wiesel, failure to protest is a failure to be involved in the divine-human drama; it is a renunciation of responsibility, and thus it enables evil and suffering to prevail. He cites a Jewish legend in which God points out that the difference between a group of pure and a group of impure people is that the pure ones had protested. God says that the others *should* have protested: "against Me, against Man, against everything wrong. Because protest in itself contains a spark of truth, a spark of holiness, a spark of God."[31]

Does protest affect divinity? Wiesel has wrestled with that question most particularly in his cantata *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again*.

Though Wiesel remains within the tradition, he also pushes the tradition into confronting the revolutionary differences with which it was faced in the years of the Third Reich and which it cannot ignore even now since the precedent of attempted total annihilation of the Jewish people has been set. André Neher insists that *Night* is Wiesel's rewriting of the *Akedah* "in the light of the *Night* of Auschwitz. . . . the story of the *Akedah* is suddenly singed . . . with the fires of reality." Thus Night is "an exorcism of the Bible through the challenge of the real." And Wiesel's protests and reworking of the Bible stories are a serious and existential attempt to make biblical faith face that ultimate test.[32] In this way Elie Wiesel sees Isaac as the first survivor. A survivor who taught his people, "the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac. . . never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust that had marked him and continued to haunt him

forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter."[33]

The precedent of the *Shoah* requires not only protest to and against God and against any social injustice, but it also requires that the Jewish people not ignore the consequences of powerlessness and the decimation it has brought on them. So Wiesel is convinced that the Jewish people could not survive today physically or spiritually without the State of Israel. "Israel is the cornerstone, the backbone of Jewish existence everywhere."[34]

Responses to Shoah Suffering – Christian

How do Christians speak of suffering after the *Shoah*? Have their thoughts and words been changed at all by that cataclysm in history and human relations? Do they feel any need to change them? Or do they assume that their theology has said the final words on the subject based on their inherited understanding of Jesus' death?

Most books of Christian theology (especially outside the West, but also in the West) still are written and read, and most sermons are preached as if the slaughter of six million Jewish individuals had never occurred, and certainly as if it is not relevant for Christian thought. Those mainline theologians who do mention the Holocaust are apt to find a nice little niche for it and then surround it with basically the same theology that could have been written before 1933 or 1939.[35] On the basis of the theologically rooted conviction that Christ's experience on the cross encompasses (and even exceeds) all human agony whenever and wherever it occurs, theological constructs do not have to be altered in order to take something new into account for nothing new matters. For such Christians, the best that can be done with Auschwitz is to identify it as the Golgotha of the Jewish people in the 20th century without considering whether there are any significant differences in that Golgotha and the original one, or without wondering whether Auschwitz has something to say to themselves about how the church has been interpreting Golgotha all the intervening centuries.

Yet the Holocaust requires a recognition that a rupture in history occurred that cannot be set aside. Fortunately, there are Christians who recognize this and the radical challenge with which it faces the church. To cite just two of them: The German Catholic Johannes Baptist Metz is insistent that Christianity cannot do theology with its back toward Auschwitz; and once facing Auschwitz it must realize that Christian theology in its entirety must be revised. "*We will have to forego the temptation to interpret the suffering of the Jewish people from our standpoint in terms of saving history. Under no circumstances is it our task to mystify this suffering.*" [36]

The American Protestant Robert McAfee Brown agrees: "No theodicy can encompass this event so that its wounds are closed, its scars healed. The event forever precludes easy faith in God or faith in humanity. . . . Neither faith, I believe, can confront the Holocaust without in some ways being transformed."[37]

If one were to identify Auschwitz with Golgotha, what could the redemptive purpose of six million deaths be? The American Catholic Eugene Fisher has dared to suggest that, since "Jesus' death is a divine gift bringing all humanity closer to God's love, [and since the] sense of hope amidst despair is true because of the death of [that] one Jew long ago, . . . might it not be also true, and much more so, of the deaths of six million Jewish women, men and children . . . .?"[38] However I

must raise a question: *If* in the Christian scheme, Christ has already made redemption available to all humanity, what else can six million “crucifixions” accomplish? Pope John Paul II and John Cardinal O’Connor have attempted to grapple with that question.

Addressing the Jews of Warsaw on June 14, 1987, the Pope confessed, “We believe in the purifying power of suffering. The more atrocious the suffering, the greater the purification. The more painful the experiences, the greater the hope . . . . You have become the saving warning . . . . you continue your particular vocation, showing yourselves to be still the heirs of that election to which God is faithful. This is to be your mission in the contemporary world . . . .” And on June 24, 1988, speaking to the Jewish community in Vienna, the Pope observed that “faith teaches us that God never forsakes those who suffer persecution but reveals himself to them and enlightens through them all people on the road to salvation.”[39]

Cardinal O’Connor confesses that he approaches the agonizing question of the Holocaust within the context of his and Archbishop Cushing’s theology of suffering. He is convinced that “the crucifixion and its enormous power continue mystically and *will* continue until the end of time. Christ . . . continues to suffer in His Body, the Church (and through the Church in *all* people) . . . quite, quite *really*. And this suffering has a purpose and an effect [on other persons elsewhere in the world], as does ours *if we cojoin it with His*, if we ‘offer it up.’” Because of its effect (namely, the “salvation of souls”), it is a gift to the world. Consequently, “if the suffering of the crucifixion was infinitely redemptive, the suffering of the Holocaust, *potentially cojoined with it*, is incalculably redemptive.”[Article40]

Two questions clamor to be heard: First, how is Jewish suffering in the *Shoah* to be cojoined to Christ’s on the cross? Can the suffering of those now dead fifty or more years be offered up by someone else on their behalf? And what if it was not then (or is not now) offered up? We know that numbers of Jews went to their deaths affirming their trust in God – “offering up” their lives, *kiveyachol*. Yet almost certainly a larger number of the victims would not have done so given the circumstances under which they perished, or would not even have been in a condition to do so, and certainly not with the name of Christ on their lips. Is their suffering then non-redemptive and hence meaningless? Clearly for these Catholic churchmen the suffering of the Jewish victims can only be interpreted – and hopefully redeemed – within Christian concepts of saving history. But using Metz’s dictum, we must ask whether the Cardinal’s back – and the Pope’s – are not turned to Auschwitz even though they think they are facing it.

Second, are Christians such as O’Connor and John Paul II asking Jews of today to offer up their own pain (as survivors, relatives or victims, or even as part of the Jewish community which is the “accidental remnant” and thus vicarious sufferers of Hitler’s obsessive hatred)? Does this mean their having to be accepting of that pain because of its having a possible positive effect somewhere in the world? Can such victims believe that? Is asking for such a response not further burdening those already victimized or intended for victimization?

One cannot deny anyone his ultimate faith (just as we do not deny that of the various Jewish Orthodox with whom we may not concur). But one can challenge the ethical and practical consequences of its public affirmation. Would it not be more appropriate for such churchmen to urge their own community take on (in whatever ways are possible) the pain of the victims and survivors and vicariously bear that pain as fellow sufferers? Not in order to “offer it up,” which would be presumptuous, but simply to help alleviate it for the people of suffering by sharing it.

When Elie Wiesel and his fellow inmates watched the slow and agonizing death of a young boy on the gallows at Buna, he heard a fellow prisoner ask, “Where is God?” And again, a half hour later as the boy still lingered between life and death, “Where is God now?” And a voice within Wiesel answered: “Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .”[41] André Neher sees this passage as “a strange evocation of the Passion [of Jesus – but] *with the difference, deep as an abyss, that it was not, however, God who was hanging on the cross but an innocent little Jewish child, and that after three days he was not to rise again.*”[42]

Other questions are raised by the theology of suffering.

Does the concept of vicarious suffering really function so that one or more person’s suffering really atones for the sins of others, as both Christianity and Judaism have affirmed? Wiesel insists that if we say the suffering was *not* in vain (as Pope John Paul II and Cardinal O’Connor say), it may sound as if “we are justifying it [whereas] the life and death of a single child is more important than all the answers. But at the same time, it would be just as awful to say that the suffering had been in vain. . . .” Why? Because there would be no connection between the suffering and death of the Holocaust time and the “burst of humanity” after the Holocaust. When Philippe de Saint-Cheron pushed Wiesel further and asked again: Does suffering count, does it have a positive impact? (as François Mauriac also asserts), Wiesel admitted to having opposite feelings. At times he tells himself “all suffering will count, and since God exists, nothing can be lost.” But at other times he cannot believe that as “all [that] pain and suffering and misery” are just too much![43] As he had written years before, “If God needs human suffering to be God, how can man foresee an end to that suffering?”[44]

Protest as Christian response

In considerable contrast to the Christian affirmation of suffering’s positive role is the rediscovery, in some Christian circles, of the Jewish model of faith as a dialectic of trust and questioning (*hutzpah k’lapei shamaya*).[45] The absence in Christian tradition of prayer of lament, of “daring prayer,” of outbursts against God, is seen to have stripped the faith of “eschatological tension and too readily [have] drawn [it] to an easy theodicy.” We need to see that the renewed interest in arguing with God is the result of several factors: Christian grappling with the Holocaust and other enormities of suffering in [the 20th] century, exposure to the writings of Elie Wiesel and discovery of the Hasidic tradition, sensitivity to unremitting suffering prompted by liberation theologians, and a new emphasis within Christian theology on the suffering/passion of the Creator-God.[46] Darrell Fasching insists that the world “can no longer afford the luxury of unquestioning faith. . . . All faith that asks for a total surrender of will is, finally, . . . demonic. . . . For all such faith is a training ground in fanaticism. . . . The only authentic faith is a questioning faith, a faith prepared to call even God into question.”[47]

Roy Eckardt invokes Judaism’s tradition of protest, and God’s own standards of justice, to enter an indictment against God, “from the side of the Jewish people.” Why? Because “God is responsible for having created a world in which man is free to make history” – specifically, free to make the *Shoah*; for having inflicted (or having allowed the infliction of) his children.[48] Even so, Eckardt adds, it is, or may be, still possible for us to forgive God, for God originated forgiveness.[49]

In response to the terrible sufferings of the 20th century Ronald Goetz, another American, also challenges Christianity's traditional effort to take God "off the hook for creating so brutal a world" by contending that it was humans who introduced suffering and death into the world, and thus it was "not the ontological precondition of existence." But Goetz says we can no longer evade the Creator's responsibility. "What [then] is revealed about the Father's nature and love in his resolute determination to slay the son?" Goetz finds that he must conclude that "Jesus Christ's death entails not just God's atonement for our sins but God's own atonement for being the ultimate agent of evil as well as good." Thus the only way Goetz can affirm the "ultimate trustworthiness of God in the face of the 'woe' that God has created" is by seeing "God suffering with us, suffering at our hands as we suffer at God's own hands. . . ."[50]

Against finding meaning in unmerited suffering

Lawrence Langer contends that in the circumstances of the death camps the very word suffering is inappropriate; atrocity is more correct. "The Nazi evil not only subverted good as we know it; the forms it took poisoned the possibility of a redemptive suffering. . . ."[51]

In such extremity Terrence Des Pres insists that death can never be a victory. "The luxury of sacrifice – the strategic choice of death to resolve irreconcilable moral conflicts – is meaningless in a world where any person's death only contributes to the success of evil."[52]

These two Americans (Jewish and Christian) point up the danger in all efforts to find meaning in unmerited suffering – not just that of the Holocaust. The questions this raises are: How much of the effort to give suffering a purifying or redemptive power is a result of our not knowing how else to cope with it? Trying to provide ourselves with reassurance that pain is not meaningless and that evil will not have the last word? And how much of the commendation of the meek and powerless is a result of our fearing the upset of the status quo, of change?

Instead of speaking about rediscovering the capacity to suffer, or about God's indebtedness to his people for allowing divine forbearance with human sin to persist, would we not be better advised to listen to the witness and warning of some additional spokespeople today – among the poor and tortured, Blacks, women, Hispanics? Along with survivors of death camps these victims of oppression insist that suffering does not ennoble, does *not* provide moral stature or spiritual depth or refined sensibility. It does *not* make a person superior or more authentic than a non-sufferer. As long as we try to comfort ourselves or others with ideas about the positive effects of suffering – including a redemptive function – the less we will be inclined to reject it as the evil it is, and the less we may be inclined to fight against it.[53]

God's pathos/suffering

If we recognize that suffering is *not* part of God's will or wish for the creation – that it is, in fact, the reverse of what God intended – then all attempts to find God's beneficent action in any event involving suffering are incoherent with the divine will. Furthermore, if we find that God suffers because of the pain inflicted on God's human children, then God's suffering along with them may even represent the continual threat of destruction and dissolution that faces both humankind and God.[54]

Christiaan Beker is persuaded that the "Holocaust and all other holocausts which followed in its train or preceded it . . . have rendered all our previous explanations of suffering either obsolete or

insufficient."[55] And Lawrence Langer reminds us that death camp survivors attest to the "utter irreconcilability" of their experience with any "prior consoling system of values." For the atrocities they beheld or endured were *beyond suffering, as they were beyond the framework of conventional theodicy.*"[56] So the ineradicable problem of suffering, especially after the *Shoah*, must remain an unanswered question, forever troubling us, so that we will not seek to justify it or cease fighting against it.

ENDNOTES

1. Presented at the International Symposium on the Works of Elie Wiesel as a Challenge for Religion and Society Today sponsored by the Rottenburg-Stuttgart Academy, Federal Republic of Germany in May 1995, and published in German in *Kultur allein ist nicht genug*, Reinhold Boschki and Dagmar Mensink, eds. (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1998). For a fuller treatment of this subject see Alice L. Eckardt, "Suffering, Theology, and the Shoah," in Steven L. Jacobs, ed., *The Holocaust Now: Contemporary Christian and Jewish Thought* (East Rockaway, NY: Cummings & Hathaway, 1997); and in Jacobs, *Contemporary Christian Religious Responses to the Shoah* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).
2. We need to keep in mind the particularly obscene forms of suffering and helplessness the Nazi "Final Solution" imposed on its special victims: From the early stages on it included the day to day torment of parents who found themselves totally helpless to protect their children or their elderly parents – those dearest to them who looked to them for safekeeping – from humiliation, beatings, exclusion, and the ever increasing dangers that culminated in starvation, shooting, and deportation to the murder camps. In the ghetto stage it encompassed the torturous choice a father or mother sometimes had to make as to which child to give over to a rescuer, or which parent or spouse should receive the precious work permit or hiding place. In the extermination camp stage it could place a person in a literal race of death in which losing meant immediate death but winning meant sending someone else to immediate death.
3. Some dozen Jewish rationales for sufferings and catastrophes range from seeing suffering as deserved punishment or divine discipline, through asserting that the suffering of the righteous is on behalf of others, to proclaiming that their innocent suffering represents the birth pangs of Messiah and redemption. Christians built on Jewish answers and added others, particularly that suffering is a corruption of the original creation and is purposeless, hence only Christ is able to vanquish it.
4. Among many sources, the following can be recommended: Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: Behrman Housse, 1979); Nathan Hanover, *The Abyss of Despair* (*Yeuven Metzulah*), trans. Abraham J. Mesch (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Books, 1983); ;and Robert Hayward, "The Present State of Research into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *Journal of Jewish Studies* [Oxford] XXXII, 2 (1981); and Alice L. Eckardt, op. cit.
5. See *Epistle of Barnabas*, Irenaeus; Tertullian; Augustine. However, for the synagogue there are significant differences between its claims regarding Isaac's sacrifice and the church's claims regarding Jesus' sacrifice: The rabbis never "set up all salvation and hope of Israel on one man's grace in times gone by," as righteous persons of all times gain merit for the people before heaven. Moreover, the rabbis acknowledged that there are times when the

Akedah fails to be sufficient due to Israel's iniquities (Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 114, 115, 116).

6. Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 122-23, 121-22. Irenaeus's view that the Christ event was a further evidence of God's grace which had already been present in the world from the beginning was rejected categorically by Augustine.
7. Compare views in Acts of the Apostles and Pauline letters that not only express expectation of persecution but also acceptance with rejoicing: e.g., the disciples rejoice that they have been found worthy to suffer for the name (Acts 5:41);; Paul believed that suffering and death were the basis of his right to be called an apostle (II Cor. 4:11, 6:4-10); Paul preached that only through afflictions did one attain the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; I Thess. 3:4).
8. Almost every one of the apostolic Fathers had something to say regarding the suffering of Jews as deserved. Origen (185-254) claimed "that Jews suffer here and will hereafter 'on account of their unbelief and other insults which they heaped on Jesus'." Hippolytus (170-236) concluded "the trail of Jewish crimes leading to deicide is 'the cause of their present condition involved in these myriad troubles'" (Clark Williamson, *Has God Rejected His People*? [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982], pp. 98.104). John Chrysostum (ca. 347-407) vehemently asserted that for the "odious assassination of Christ" there is "no expiation possible, . . . no pardon"; the loss of temple and nation, and the dispersion of the people was God's work (cited by Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* [New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985], p. 51). Cyril (385-423; bishop of Alexandria) saw the Jewish exile, and destruction of the temple, Jerusalem, and the land as punishment for disobedience to God, specifically the Jews' failure to "understand the shadows of the Old Testament" (Robert Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971], pp. 86-87). In the East, Jacob of Sarug (ca. 449-521) argued that the Cross was the turning point in Jewish history; while previously Jews had been most favored of peoples, afterwards they became the most rejected. Jerusalem's fall was a result of their rejecting the Son and willfully continuing to do so (Homily V; translation from the Syriac by Alison Salveson, Oxtord).
9. Jacob Katz, Exclusiveness and Tolerance, (New York: Behrman House, 1983), chapter VII; also H. H. Ben-Sassoon, ed. *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 414-20.
10. Cited in *Encounter Today* [Paris] VII, 2 (1972): 84, italics added. The date and occasion of this quotation (along with its source) are, unfortunately, not supplied.
11. Gershon Greenberg, "Orthodox Theological Responses to *Kristallnacht*," paper presented to the 18th Annual Scholars Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust, Washington, D.C., March 1988; and a revised and extended version, "Foundations for Orthodox Jewish Theological Response to the Holocaust: 1936-1939," in *Burning Memory: Times of Testing and Reckoning*, Alice L. Eckardt, ed. [Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993]. Greenberg has pursued his analysis of this strain of thought in a number of papers since published.
    Cf. Israel Shapiro of Grodisk who told his Hasidim when they arrived at Treblinka that "*these* were at last the *real* birthpangs of the Messiah, and that he and they were blessed for their ashes would help purify Israel and thus hasten the end" (cited by Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, [New York: Schocken, 1982, 1989], p. 256).
12. Wasserman in *Ecclesiastes* 3:15, cited by Gershon Greenberg, "Orthodox Theological Responses . . .", op. cit.
13. Cited by Pesach Schindler, "Faith During Auschwitz and the Paradox of Tikkun in Hasidic Documents," *Conservative Judaism* XXXI, 4 (1977): 31, 32. Parallel quotations are cited by Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 255. A sixteen year old Dutch Jewish boy, living in Brussels with papers identifying him as a Gentile, came to very similar conclusions, although with much more anguish and uncertainty as he did so (Moshe Flinker, *Young Moshe's Diary* [Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976], pp. 56, 108, 112).

14. Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God After Auschwitz* (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep Ltd. Pub., 1965), pp. 61-67 passim; and Dow Marmur, “Holocaust as Progress: Reflections on the Thought of Ignaz Maybaum,” *Remembering for the Future*, Vol. I (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), p. 956.
15. Of the several who expressed these views Diamant added that the return now would be mournful. Because Jews had not heeded the call to Zion when they should have, they would now go as a *She’rit ha-Paleteh* (remnant of the Destruction) rather than as a nation, as lonely individuals rather than as families, and would have to go by difficult and circuitous routes rather than directly. Even the new Jewish state would not survive without Torah. Firer was writing in April 1948 as the Jews of Palestine waited for the moment to declare their national independence, even while already under military attack (Gershon Greenberg, “From *Hurban* to Redemption: Orthodox Jewish Thought in the Munich Area, 1945-1958,” *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual,* Vol. 6 [New York: Philosophical Library, 1990], pp. 98, 101-103).
16. Greenberg, “From *Hurban* to Redemption,” ibid., p. 105.
17. Gershon Greenberg, “History as Midrash.” Shapiro’s *Esh Kodhesh* (1939-1942), published in Hebrew in Jerusalem, 1960 is the source.
18. Elberg, *Akedas Treblinka* (Shanghai, 1947), cited by Gershon Greenberg in op. cit.
19. *Esh Kodesh*, pp. 178-79, 191-92, as cited by Greenberg, ibid.
20. Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: The Free Pres; & London: Collier Macmillan, 1980), pp. 226, 206-07. These 700 survivors reject the Orthodox views previously considered.
21. Elie Wiesel and Philippe de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 24.
22. Friedlander, “The Misuses of the Holocaust,” *European Judaism* 17, 1 (Summer 1983), pp. 6, 4; and “Destiny and Fate, “ in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds.,. *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Free Press, and London: Collier Macmillan, 1988), pp. 139-40.
23. Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 71-72, 75, 80-82.
24. Irving J. Rosenbaum, *The Holocaust and Halakhah* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1976), p. 3. Albert Friedlander asks, “Can we understand this [father]? Should we understand . . . ?” (“Stations Along the Way: Christian and Jewish Post Holocaust Theology,” *Common Ground* [London] #2, [1978]: 13).
25. Wiesel, *Messengers*. . ., p. 93. Wiesel adds: “Because of Abraham and Isaac, He knows it is possible to push some endeavors too far” (p. 93).
26. Wiesel, *Messengers*. . ., p. 97.
27. André Neher, T*he Exile of the Word* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p. 218 citing Rabbi Tanhuma, and p. 219.
28. Wiesel, *Messengers* . . ., pp.233-34; Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, pp. 219-20. Wiesel continued his reproach of Job for capitulating in *The Town Beyond the Wall* (New York: Avon Books, 1964): “Michael never ceased resenting Job. That biblical rebel should never have given in” (p. 52).
29. Wiesel, *Messengers*. . ., pp. 233, 234.
30. Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 53; cited by Neher, p. 220, who agrees with Wiesel in his bitter reproaches to God. Wiesel wrote elsewhere “there comes a time when only those who do not believe in God will not cry out to him in wrath and anguish: (“Why I Write,” *New York Times Book Review*, April 14, 1985, p. 14).
31. Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), p. 130. Neher finds that the Book of Job is “the breviary of revolt for the man of Auschwitz” more than the *Akedah* (*The Exile of the Word*, p. 219).
32. Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, p. 216. Neher observes that Wiesel’s work has wrought a “Copernican revolution in the realm of the Bible” (p. 215).
33. Wiesel, *Messsengers*. . ., p. 97.

34. Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), vol. III, p. 199.P
35. See, for example, how Jürgen Moltmann uses Wiesel's account of the young boy hanging on the gallows as "a shattering expression of the *theologie crucis*" (*The Crucified God* [New York: Harper and Row, 1974] pp. 273-74). For a full survey and critique of Moltmann's theology through 1987, and some consideration of others who continue pre-Holocaust Christian theology, see Alice L. Eckardt and A. Roy Eckardt, *Long Night's Journey Into Day: A Revised Retrospective on the Holocaust* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988]. Also see Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).
36. Johannes Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) p. 19; and "Facing the Jews. Christian Theology After Auschwitz," in *The Holocaust as Interruption*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds.. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1984) pp. 27, 28 (italics added).
37. Robert McAfee Brown, "The Holocaust: The Crisis of Indifference," *Conservative Judaism* XXXI, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1976-77): 18.
38. Fisher, "Mysterium Tremendum: Catholic Grapplings with the Holocaust and Its Theological Implications," *SIDIC*, XXII, 1 & 2 (1989): 13.
39. John Paul II, in "John Paul II: On the Holocaust," (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988) pp. 8, 12.
40. John Cardinal O'Connor, "Yad Vashem Revisited," *Face to Face* XIV (1988): 47-48; italics added.
41. Wiesel, *Night*, p. 76.
42. Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, p. 218.
43. Wiesel and Philippe de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, pp. 36, 87.
44. Wiesel, *Messengers* , , , p. 73.
45. See Belden C. Lane, "Arguing with God: Blasphemy and the Prayer of Lament in Judaism and Other Faith Traditions," in *Remembering for the Future*, Yehuda Bauer, Alice L. Eckardt, et al., eds. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), Vol. III, pp. 2543-2557; and Darrell J. Fasching, "Faith and Ethics After the Holocaust: What Christians Can Learn from the Jewish Narrative Tradition of *Hutzpah," Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 27, 3 (1990): 453-59; and an earlier version in *Remembering for the Future*. ibid., Vol. I, pp. 598-611. For more specific attention to the trial of God, see A. Roy Eckardt, *For Righteouness' Sake* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 315-25; "The Holocaust and (*Kiveyachol*) the Liberation of the Divine Righteousness," in *Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide*, Israel Charny, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 25-64; and Alice L. Eckardt and A. Roy Eckardt, *Long Night's Journey Into Day: A Revised Retrospective on the Holocaust*, pp. 68-70, 147.
46. Belden C. Lane, op. cit., pp. 2559-61, 2554-54.
47. Fasching, "Faith and Ethics. . .," pp. 454, 465, 469, 479.
48. A. Roy Eckardt, *For Righteousness' Sake*, pp. 315, 317, and citing Eliezer Berkovits, "The Hiding God of History," in T*he Catastrophe of European Jewry*, Yisrael Gutman and Livia Rothkirchen, eds. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976), p. 704.
49. A. Roy Eckardt, "The Holocaust and (*Kiveyachol*) the Liberation of the Divine Righteousness," pp. 260, 262.
50. Ronald Goetz, "Jesus Loves Everybody," *The Christian Century*, 109, 9 (March 11, 1992): 275, 276, 277.
51. Lawrence Langer, "Beyond Theodicy: Jewish Victims and the Holocaust," *Religious Education* 84, 1 (1989): 50-51, 52.
52. Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 100.
53. Consider this: Any theodicy that makes Blacks "God's contemporary suffering servant has to be rejected." ". . . any theodicy that breeds quietism thereby sustains oppression." A "morally viable and defensible theodicy [must] become the foundation of a moral

commitment to human liberation from the plague of unjust suffering. This is the only road along which the divine righteousness can be saved, sustained, and honored" (William Jones, *Is God a White Racist*? [Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1973], as cited and paraphrased by A. Roy Eckardt, *Black-Woman-Jew* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989] pp. 23, 24). In this volume Eckardt provides extensive coverage of these liberation movements' views.

54. Wiesel, *Ani Maamin*. ". . .God, surprised by his people, weeps without restraint, and with – yes – love. He weeps over his creation – and perhaps over much more than his creation" (p. 103). See also Hans Jonas's "The Concept of God After Auschwitz"in Albert Friedlander, ed., *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of the Holocaust* (New York: Schocken Books. 1976).
55. J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 16.
56. Lawrence Langer, "Beyond Theodicy," pp. 53, 54, 52.

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