

Jesus Christ and Auschwitz

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Nineteen years ago, when I delivered the 8th Cardinal Bea Memorial Lecture, I said this:

History obliges Jews to take account of the figure of Jesus, because Jewish life is lived in the midst of the gentiles, and for the majority of Jews that means in the midst of Christians. We are compelled to respond to Jesus—not Jesus the ancient Jew but Jesus the Christian Lord.

And I concluded with the positive judgment of Franz Rosenzweig:

Before God, Jew and Christian both labour at the same task. He cannot dispense with either.¹

I fully share Franz Rosenzweig's optimistic vision, and it is in the light of this belief, and in the spirit of my earlier talk, that I accepted the invitation to come back and give a second lecture in memory of the man we are gathered to honour. We owe it to Cardinal Bea and to other predecessors who, like him, laboured to clear away the bitterness and hatred of centuries, to continue this work, each one of us in whatever way we can.

I would like to take this opportunity to push my own thinking further than I was willing or able to do nineteen years ago. In the intervening years my thoughts have moved on, and so has the climate of Christian-Jewish dialogue. I think we are ready now for some tougher talking. I hope I am not wrong about this.

Looking back at the 1978 Cardinal Bea Memorial Lecture, in which the Christian partner was Bishop David Konstant, there is one thing that now astonishes me: the lack of any explicit mention of the Shoah, the Nazi genocide. To be sure, both Bishop Konstant and I were conscious of the presence of this cataclysmic event in the background of all contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue. But somehow we avoided naming it. I do not think today that it is possible for Jews and Christians to come face to face in honest dialogue without acknowledging and naming the Shoah.

It is not that pronouncing the name in talismanic fashion can lead us straight to some simple solution. The problems raised by the Shoah are very complex, and we should shoo away the gaggles who mutter the name of the Shoah as an incantation. The Shoah is a mystery that challenges us to peer deeply into our hearts, to scrutinise our feelings, to rethink all our thoughts. And remember: it is only after we have examined ourselves that we may perhaps be in a position to make any judgment about others. That is crucial.

Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?

We Jews have afflicted our souls most painfully trying to understand the question 'Where was God at Auschwitz?' It is a good and necessary question, and the jury is still out. Some very hard things have been said, and there may be worse to come. (Contemporary theologians have still not approached anywhere near the agonising directness of Yehudah Hallevi in the 12th century, who likened the relationship between Israel and God to that between a battered wife and the brutal husband she cannot live without.) We have reached the point now, I believe, where we cannot engage in meaningful dialogue with any Christian who has not similarly confronted the question: 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?'

Let me state plainly that I am not formulating this question as a rebuke or accusation. As I have already said, I start from the premise that we are both, Jews and Christians, labouring at the same task. We need to help and support each other. But how can we labour together unless we can share our burdens, and tackle the same challenges?

I have encountered many times the argument that the Nazi nightmare was a violent rejection of the Christian heritage of Europe. I have no quarrel with that thought. I can agree with those who speak of the Nazis reopening the wounds of the Crucified Christ. But that approach will not yield a satisfactory answer to the hard question 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?' There is more at stake.

Let me quote, purely by way of example, the words of the heroic German Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1933, at the beginning of the Nazi hegemony. Bonhoeffer had not yet worked out fully his response to Nazism. He argued that the Church has no right to criticise or oppose the state, although it is entitled to ask whether the political actions of the state will lead to desirable results. In the context of the anti-Jewish legislation of the state, Bonhoeffer draws a distinction between the state, which may adopt a racial definition of Judaism, and the church, which adopts a religious definition and must accept Jewish converts to Christianity as full members. The church must resist any legislation of the state that would proscribe or limit the participation of Jewish Christians in the life of the

Church. As for unconverted Jews:

The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the 'chosen people', who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering.²

Bonhoeffer's words carry all the more weight in that he is one of the prime witnesses of those Christian apologists who try to make Christianity and Nazism into contradictory categories. In giving voice, in the face of Nazism, to the age-old Christian justification for the persecution of Jews, which makes Jesus Christ an accomplice in the crucifixion of his own people by his devotees, Bonhoeffer brings us sharply face to face with some of the complexities of the question 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?' For all I know Bonhoeffer later changed his mind about the connection between the persecution of the Jews and the monstrous Christian theory of 'deicide'. Perhaps he did not. Others certainly continued to articulate it, and some still do. If I understand him correctly, the influential and radical German theologian Jürgen Moltmann does so when he writes (in 1973) immediately after mentioning 'the cries for righteousness of those who are murdered or gassed':

Or do the executioners ultimately triumph over their innocent victims?... does inhuman legalism triumph over the crucified Christ?³

This kind of language is a major stumbling-block to dialogue between Christians and Jews. How can we Jews hold serious discussions with Christians who believe, like Bonhoeffer and Moltmann, that the only valid choice facing a Jew is to be reconciled to God by becoming a Christian? And remember, these are the radical Christian theologians who want to change the Church for the better, not the ones, infinitely harder for us to talk to, whose instinct is to preserve the medieval heritage of the Church at all costs.

Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz? The answer to this frightening question cannot be clear or straightforward. There has never been anything clear or straightforward about the relationship between Jesus Christ and his own people, that Jewish people which he so loved and so castigated, in true prophetic fashion. I do not turn my back on the image of Christ recrucified in the Shoah, but as a Jew I have to say that my prior concern must be with the image of Christ crucifying his own people. Where does that image come from? Certainly not from the fantasy of Jewish polemicists. It comes from the iconography of the Christian Church itself—yes, even 'good' Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann and Martin Niemoeller.

Martin Niemoeller, who after initially welcoming Nazism eventually became an outspoken opponent of the Nazi regime, rejects the claim that

Christians have a duty to hate Jews with these words:

Even Cain received God's mark, that no one may kill him; and Jesus' command, 'Love your enemies!' leaves no room for exceptions.⁴

I listen carefully to these words, and what do I hear? That for this Christian German the Jews are to be considered by Christians as enemies, but that they are not to be hated or killed by Christians. Presumably that task is left to God, and Christians, even if they love their enemies, are not called on to help or protect them. Niemoeller's mention of the mark of Cain brings to my mind the words of God the Father to Cain the first son: 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground' (Genesis 4:10). The rabbis point out that in Hebrew the word 'blood' here is in the plural. The memory of the Shoah invests that plural blood with a very heavy meaning!

It is the poisonous theological language of Niemoeller, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and so many other 'good' Christians that compels me as a Jew to say, in all solemnity: 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground'. And to ask again, of every Christian, the awesome question: Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?

It is painful to contemplate the thought of those pierced hands dripping with the spilt blood of so many innocent victims.

Ignaz Maybaum and the Calvary of the Twentieth Century

Very few Jewish theologians have faced squarely the question 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?' One of the few is Ignaz Maybaum, the centenary of whose birth in Vienna falls this year. Maybaum came to this country as a refugee from Nazi Germany in 1939. His mother and his two sisters perished in what he always called the Third *Churban*, the third destruction. He devoted the rest of his life to meditating on what happened and asking why it happened. Why did the most 'civilised' society in Europe sink into the most debased barbarism? How could a 'Christian' nation have behaved in such an un-Christian way? Ignaz Maybaum was a disciple of Franz Rosenzweig and Leo Baeck, and he was committed to the idea of Jewish-Christian symbiosis. He fully recognised the German roots of his own culture. It was for this reason that, unlike other Jewish theologians of the Shoah, he could not escape the terrifying question, 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?' Although a lot has changed since Maybaum published his book *The Face of God After Auschwitz* in 1965, it still repays careful reading now. In this book Maybaum speaks of Auschwitz as 'the twentieth century Calvary of the Jewish people' (p. 35). At Auschwitz 'Jews suffered vicarious death for the sins of mankind' (*ibid.*; cf. pp. 78–80)

Maybaum does not pull his punches in exploring the relationship between Auschwitz and Calvary:

Children and normal adults are horrified and terror-stricken when they see pictures of the inmates of Auschwitz, degraded, dehumanised creatures in thin and dirty pyjamas, reminding us of the Servant of God as portrayed in the book of Isaiah. Christianity presented the man on the cross as a glorified persecuted tragic hero and obscured the fact that he was a Jew hanging on a Roman gallows. Christianity made this pagan and cruel monstrosity respectable, representing it through the symbol of the Cross as the Christian tragedy. The world knows now what history stands for when it is nothing but the history of the sole kingdom of the all-powerful state. Mankind now knows that when man is permitted to regard himself as subject to original sin, he will soon cease to be human. The Cross, as the poetic symbol of suffering, hides the truth. Auschwitz is the truth, the truth which reveals such monstrosity that the word tragedy becomes a white-washing lie. (pp. 47–48, slightly edited)

Maybaum insists, rightly, that the Jews were not the only victims of inhumanity sanctioned by 'Christian' civilisation:

The Irish who perished in the great famine perished in their Auschwitz. The young boys who died in 1914 in the mud of Passchendaele, died in their Auschwitz. The soldiers who died at the Somme and at Verdun in the first world war died in their Auschwitz. The soldiers, airmen and sailors of the second world war, the Russian prisoners who were starved to death in Germany, the Russian peasants who were destroyed like useless cattle by Stalin, the men, women and children who died in the air raids, the victims of Hiroshima and of the air raid on Dresden, they all died in their Auschwitz; they died because what happened was a monstrosity: to call it tragedy is to attempt to lie with the help of poetry. The Cross did not prevent the greatest carnage of history from happening; what happened happened while the Cross was the sign of respectability, while the Star of David was the sign of the outcast; the Cross was the smug symbol of a religion which lived in Concordat with Hitler. Auschwitz is the uncompromising *ecce homo*, behold the suffering of man. Auschwitz cries out that mankind is threatened by monstrosity whenever man ceases to be [as every Jew is called to be]... the messenger and witness of God. (p. 48, slightly edited)

The Cross of Christ is a powerful challenge to all complacency and hypocrisy. Ignaz Maybaum was my teacher. He ordained me as a rabbi. I am proud to have sat at the feet of such a teacher. Maybaum was a pioneer. In his time it was hard to understand and to accept what he was saying: for there to be real dialogue between Jews and Christians, Jews must confront and in a sense reclaim the symbol of the Cross of Christ.

The Gospel as post-Holocaust literature

It is thanks to Maybaum that I can now begin to reread the Gospel as post-Holocaust literature. In designating the Shoah 'the Third *Churban*', Maybaum was assimilating it to the pattern of the first and second *churban*, the Babylonian and Roman catastrophes that are engraved as crucial moments in the commemoration of Jewish history. Centuries of reflection on the Babylonian *Churban* made it possible for Jews to face and survive the Roman *Churban*. The experience of the Christian centuries can help us to confront and survive the German *Churban*.

The Gospels were written in the light of the First *Churban* and probably the Second *Churban* too. What can they tell us as we contemplate the Third *Churban*?

It is instructive to compare them with a contemporary post-*Churban* text, the apocryphal book known as 2 Esdras. Here the *churban* is faced head-on, in the most explicit fashion.

It was the thirtieth year after the fall of our city. I, Shealtiel, was in Babylon. I lay in bed feeling disturbed, my mind whirling. I kept seeing a picture of Zion in ruins and the Babylonians living in prosperity. My soul was all stirred up, and I voiced my fears to the Almighty.⁵

There follows a bewildered meditation on God's plan for Israel and the world in the light of the destruction. 2 Esdras may be compared to the book of Job as an attempt to fathom the ways of God and understand God's justice and mercy in the face of incomprehensible adversity.

For the narrator of 2 Esdras, it is clear that if God's city was destroyed it was because of the sins of its inhabitants. 'The inhabitants of the city deserted you, and were no better than Adam and all his other descendants: they also wrapped themselves in the evil tendency. So you gave your own city to your enemies.'⁶ This is the response to catastrophe which we now call in theological jargon *mipnei hataeinu*, 'because of our sins', after the prayer in the Jewish liturgy for solemn days which begins:

But on account of our sins we were exiled from our land and removed far from our country, and we are unable to go up in order to appear and prostrate ourselves before thee, and to fulfil our obligations in thy chosen house, that great and holy temple that was called by thy name, because of the hand that hath been stretched out against thy sanctuary.⁷

What were these sins?

Rabbi Johanan b. Torta said: Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of idolatry, unchastity and murder. But in the days of the second Temple they were earnest about the Torah, and careful about tithes. Why then did the destruction come? Because they loved

money, and hated one another. So learn that the hate of man for his fellow-man is a sore sin before God, and weighs as heavily as idolatry and unchastity and murder.⁸

This is a telling homily, but is it a serious theological explanation of *churban*? I shall return to that in a moment. For the present let us take note that it accords very closely to one persistent theme of the Gospels. The setting of the drama of the life and death of Jesus is one in which people 'loved money, and hated one another'. Against this backcloth the story of the death of Jesus unfolds inexorably, just like the story of the destruction of Jerusalem as told by Josephus, another post-*churban* writer. How could the post-destruction generations fail to be sensitive to the parallelism between the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem? Indeed, according to John's interpretation at least,⁹ Jesus drew an explicit parallel between himself and the Temple, between his own death and resurrection and the destruction and eventual rebuilding of the Temple. What a powerful image of hope for those Jews who believed in his resurrection and mourned the destruction of the temple! Just as the first Temple had been rebuilt after a time, so would the second Temple: this was the belief of Jews who read the story of Vespasian and Titus through the story of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. For the post-*churban* reader, the Gospels abound with bleak images of the destruction, reminiscent of the Nazi years.¹⁰

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. (Mt 24:9–12)

The narrative of the death of Jesus in the Gospels is, in a strange way, an allegory of the story of the destruction of the Temple. It is a drama in which every step is guided by divine destiny, yet in which human choice and human responsibility play a full part. And it is clear that groundless hatred and wickedness play a large part in bringing the drama to its disastrous conclusion. It happened *mipnei hataeinu*, because of our sins. It is this aspect that lends such poignancy to Jesus' prayer, 'forgive us our sins' (Lk 11:4): if only their sins could have been forgiven, they might have been delivered from the evil.

'Because of our sins'

Is it really possible to say that destruction came 'because of our sins'? According to Maybaum, it is not.

After Auschwitz Jews need not say this. Can any martyr be a more innocent sin-offering than those murdered in Auschwitz! The

millions who died in Auschwitz died 'because of the sins of others'.¹¹

I agree with Maybaum: it seems grotesque to say that Auschwitz happened 'because of our sins'. And yet if the Jesus of the Gospels can pray to God 'Forgive us our sins' he throws down a challenge that we must take up. There are two ways that the Jew of today can read these words. On one level, they sound like a plea to Jews in our post-Auschwitz generation to forgive Jesus himself and all those who have persecuted us in his name. This is a thought which I leave to others to comment on: it does not accord with my own understanding either of the Gospels, as documents of history, or of the Jewish view of 'forgiveness'. The second interpretation is more fruitful, potentially, for me. *Het* is not only wrongdoing, it is also shortcoming or failure. It is in this sense that I can understand the phrase *mipnei hataeinu*, in relation to the Babylonian *Churban*, the Roman *Churban*, and also the Third *Churban*. The Jews who died in the Shoah were collectively innocent of wrongdoing. They were vicarious victims of the wrongdoings of others. Yet were they not also guilty of failure, as we all are? If the Jewish people had succeeded in making its message of humanity and compassion heard in the world, the Shoah could not have taken place. This is what I understand Maybaum to be saying. *Hatanu*: 'We have failed'. The 'we' embraces not only the Jews but also the Christians who were true to the message of the Old Testament and the Gospel.

Jesus was not an upholder of power and the established order. On the contrary, he strove to overturn the established order. He proclaimed freedom and compassion. In this he was a typical and prophetic Jew. It is the real tragedy of Jesus that the established order seized him and turned him into an implement of its own power. The name of Jesus became the false currency of Nazi antisemitism, as it had previously been attached to the Crusades, the Inquisition, the conquest of the Indies and all the other European empires. The Christian Church became the accomplice of the Nazi state.

In facing up together to the question 'Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?', we must recognise the complexity of the question, and we must listen attentively to Jesus who says 'Forgive us our sins.' It was our failure that made the *churban* possible. The Christians who allowed the name of Jesus to be used as an instrument of oppression, the Jews who failed to make their message of mercy and humanity heard in a cruel and uncaring world. *Mipnei hataeinu*: the Holocaust happened, in part at least, because of our failure.

This post-Holocaust reading of the Gospel strengthens me in my belief that Jews and Christians must labour together to make certain that such a *churban* cannot happen again.

The post-Auschwitz generation is a forlorn and bewildered generation. So many certainties have been shattered, so many false gods toppled. Where then is the true god? That is the question posed by Auschwitz, to which we strive to find an answer. 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.'

- 1 'Who Is Jesus?', *The Month*, April 1978, p. 121. The quotation from Rosenzweig is from *The Star of Redemption*, tr. W.W. Hallo, London 1971, p. 415.
- 2 *No Rusty Swords*. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936 from the collected works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, vol.I, edited and introduced by Edwin H. Robertson, translated by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden, London/New York 1965, p. 226. See Marc Saperstein, *Moments of Crisis in Jewish–Christian Relations*, London/Philadelphia 1989, pp. 41f. Saperstein quotes this statement, and also an analogous remark by Martin Niemöller.
- 3 J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, tr. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, London 1974, p. 175. Many other examples could be given of Moltmann's attitude. See the discussion in A. Roy Eckardt, *Long Night's Journey Into Day. Life and Faith After the Holocaust*, Detroit 1982, pp. 87–110.
- 4 Quoted by Saperstein, *op.cit.* p. 42, from *Here Stand I*, tr. Jane Lymburn, Chicago & New York 1937, p. 195.
- 5 English translation from *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations...* New edition, London 1962, p. 319.
- 6 Tos. *Menahot* 13:22, quoted from C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, reprint, New York 1974, p. 463.
- 7 John 2:19–21.
- 8 My late colleague Geoffrey Lampe, in his article 'A.D. 70 in Christian reflection', in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C.F.D. Moule (Cambridge 1984), pp. 153–171, minimises the impact of the destruction in the Gospels and other early Christian writings, and concentrates on the polemic against Judaism. While justified so far as it goes, this approach neglects the purely Jewish dimension of the Gospels.
- 9 *The Face of God*, p. 35.

A New Dawn? The Roman Catholic Church and Environmental Issues

Celia Deane-Drummond

Introduction

Awareness of environmental issues, seems, if anything, to be on the increase. In spite of fears that the public debate about the 'green' agenda would fade, rather like the anxiety over a threat of a nuclear holocaust, which is now far less prominent compared with the 1970s, politicians today seem even more aware of the need to include environmental concerns in their policy statements. Yet there still seems to be a gap opening up between political affirmations and cries for more radical