Introduction

> *The Holocaust is, in my judgement, the greatest tragedy for Christians since the crucifixion. In the first instance, Jesus died; in the latter, Christianity may be said to have died. Will there be, can there be, a resurrection for Christianity? That is the question that haunts me. Am I part of a religion that is in fact a fossil rather than a living entity? Can one be a Christian today, given the death camps that, in major part, were conceived, built and operated by a people who called themselves Christians?*
>
> Henry James Cargas[1]

I have been meaning to write this book since I sat in church as a teenager, listening to a sermon about prayer and how God answers it. The preacher was well-educated, well-meaning and clear. God cared about His people so much, we were assured, that He would look out for us in the smallest details of life. Indeed, on several occasions, when the minister had been driving around the city in urgent need of a place to park, he had said a prayer and – lo and behold – God had provided one.

I had not yet encountered Rabbi Irving Greenberg's rule that, after the Holocaust, 'no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children'.[2] Yet, I knew instinctively even then that a religion which thought God found parking spaces for His believers whilst letting the Holocaust happen

1. Henry James Cargas, *Shadows of Auschwitz: A Christian Response to the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 1.
2. Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust", in Eva Fleischer (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), p. 23.

lacked moral credibility. If that was Christianity, it deserved nothing but decline and death.

The question about prayer and Providence was, however, only the question that had struck me first. Others were at least as important, and as testing. In the wake of the Holocaust, for instance, what sense could be made of the Christian language of hope, salvation, heaven and reconciliation? Is there hope for the killers, or must we imagine them tormented forever in some kind of post-mortem concentration camp – or (perhaps even more difficult) believe they are somehow reconciled to their victims? To what extent could Christian theology itself be blamed for what had happened to the Jews – a question which might seem outrageous at first, but is increasingly reasonable the more one absorbs (to take but one instance) Jesus' reported rebuke to the Jews: 'You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and there is no truth in him' (John 8:44).[3] Can there be a Christianity which does not rely on the denigration of Judaism and encourage hatred of Jews? Moreover, even if there can, given that actual Christianity has in fact done both, has the Church's wickedness been so thorough that the truth of the Gospel itself is called into question? All these questions are addressed in the second section of this book.

It is of course possible, for a while, to live in denial of at least some of them. It might be argued that Christianity had nothing to do with the Holocaust: that the genocide was committed by neo-pagans driven by half-digested and perverse readings of Darwin and Nietzsche, who hated Christianity as much as they did Judaism and who would eventually have turned their killing machine in the Church's direction. Attention might be focussed on the stories of those heroic Christians who resisted the killers, hiding Jews even to the point of sacrificing their own lives. The Holocaust, it might be suggested, poses no sharper questions to Christianity than does any other instance of terrible suffering through radical evil.

As the first section of this book will show, this rosy view stems from ignorance about the Holocaust itself and the centuries preceding it. It is true, of course, that Nazism and Christianity are not the same thing, and that leading Nazis became increasingly hostile to Christianity over time – murderously so. It is also true that there were many instances of Christian resistance to the killing. However, the resisters represent

3. Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

but a tiny minority of European Christians. Most, whether through intimidation or inertia, did nothing. It is not plausible, as we shall see, to say that they did not know what was happening: they may not have known precise details and locations but, by the end of 1942 at the very latest, it was common knowledge that mass slaughter was under way (and, long before that, that it was likely). Many Christians, of course, did more than turn a blind eye. They drew up lists, manned cordons, made arrests, drove trains. They killed.

We cannot console ourselves that those Christians involved in the killing were merely 'nominal' believers, born and raised in historically Christian societies but lacking personal faith. Even if that were so, things would be bad enough: had European Christianity been *so* ineffectual that those raised within it saw no problem with genocide? In fact, though, things are worse. At the level of political leadership, one of the Nazis' most enthusiastic collaborators in the genocide was the President of Slovakia, Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest (never disciplined by the Vatican for his actions). The most notorious concentration camp in Croatia, Jasenovac, was at one stage under the command of a Franciscan friar, Miroslav Filopovic-Majstorovic – known to the prisoners as 'Brother Satan' for his unusual cruelty. He presided over the murder of more than 40,000 Jews and Serbs, killing many personally. Executed for war crimes in 1946, he went to the scaffold in his Franciscan robes. Protestants were no better: one Wehrmacht chaplain, on trial in 1958, justified his involvement in the mass executions of Jews thus: 'These acts were the fulfilment of the self-condemnation which the Jews had brought upon themselves before the tribunal of Pontius Pilate.'[4] These were not nominal Christians, but serious believers – indeed, public representatives of the faith.

Such men inherited a long history of Christian justification for the hatred and persecution of Jews. It is ignorance of that history which allows Christians today to imagine that the Holocaust poses no special challenge to their faith. Most people nowadays, for instance, are well aware of how the Nazis proceeded by stages: how the deportations and extermination camps were preceded by the forcing of Jews into ghettoes and by marking them out with yellow stars. It comes as a shock to most Christians, however, to learn that such measures were simply a revival of old Church laws. As far back as 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council enforced ghettoisation and required all Jews in Christian Europe to wear a yellow badge – measures which, unsurprisingly, served as the

4. Cited in Robert Michael, *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 174.

prelude to extensive anti-Jewish violence. Contemporary Christianity's forgetfulness of this (and, as the first chapter of this book shows, much else) allows it to pretend that Nazi anti-Semitism came out of nowhere. The truth, however, is that Christianity in both Roman Catholic and Protestant forms had for centuries set the Jews up as ready victims. The Church primed Europe not to care about the murder of the Jews and even, to some extent, to welcome it. The Holocaust was not a Christian crime in the same direct sense as, for instance, was the burning of witches or heretics. Others took the lead out of a variety of motives, sometimes explicitly anti-Christian. Yet, the bitter truth remains: without Christianity, the Holocaust would never have happened.

What does all that mean for Christianity today? There is an ironic echo of the traditional Christian view of Judaism as a spiritually bankrupt religion. It should, the Church said, have come to an end with the coming of Jesus: perversely, inexplicably the Jews chose to reject him and so they staggered on throughout history, spiritually paralysed, bereft and barren. This was, of course, a grotesque misrepresentation of Judaism. It may, however, seem hauntingly accurate as a description of post-Holocaust European Christianity. We have staggered on, largely in denial of our history, without facing the fundamental questions raised by our historic blood-guilt, refusing radical revision of our faith. Christianity is still here, yet, we inchoately sense it is terribly and perhaps even mortally wounded. It is haunted by unconfessed guilt, vitiated of spiritual power, trapped in half-conscious self-loathing and a sense of overwhelming futility. This is true to some extent of European culture as a whole, and even more so of the religion that gave that culture its moral and spiritual foundation. Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits delivers the verdict: the Holocaust means 'bankruptcy – the moral bankruptcy of Christian civilisation and the spiritual bankruptcy of Christian religion … a moral and spiritual collapse the like of which the world has never witnessed before for contemptibility and inhumanity'.[5]

There has, of course, been some reckoning with this. The blood-guilt is not entirely unacknowledged. Indeed, in one respect (traced in chapter five) the Holocaust has prompted a theological revolution in Christianity, with an astonishing *volte-face* on historic teaching about Judaism. Equally, the Church has to some extent engaged with the complicity of Christians in genocide. As we shall see in chapter three, however, that engagement has in many respects been somewhat half-hearted and not

5. Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 1973), p. 39.

searching enough. It is also questionable how far repentance has really gone. Many grassroots Christians remain far too keen to accept the most comforting narratives of the Church's involvement with the Holocaust; far too ready, even now, to perpetuate caricatures of Jews, whether of Jesus' day or our own; far too complacent that Christian teaching and practice can continue essentially unchanged by the Holocaust. A suspicion of bankruptcy may lurk somewhere deep in our souls, but it has not yet attained radical clarity in most Christian minds. This book is written in the conviction that, if there is hope for the resurrection of Christianity, it will only be through such clarity: through the most honest accounting of quite how far adrift from God we have come and a willingness to radically rethink our theology. Dry bones can indeed live again, but not through any pretence that they *deserve* to. If there is a future for Christianity, it will be through grace alone.

Grace, of course, is also the key to the most important question of all. 'No statement should be made, theological or otherwise, that is not credible in the presence of burning children', said Rabbi Greenberg. One hesitates to write another sentence. Silence might indeed be the only course. Greenberg's rule remains the single most serious challenge to any kind of religious faith today – and not only of the parking space variety.

Yet … if ultimately there is nothing but silence, then there is nothing but burning children. We would be confessing that at the heart of things, there is finally only torment and death. For all that Christianity needs to repent and change, in this respect at least this book remains stubbornly Christian. It is written in the conviction that futility is not the end, that there is something – Someone – who meets even extinction, who goes into its depths and lights them up with hope. Who on a Roman cross made it so that no one must end in the execution pits or crematoria, and the world will not end in defeat. Christianity may indeed be terribly broken. Jesus Christ remains. In Him nothing is doomed, and hope lights up the destiny of all.

The Feast of the Annunciation, 2022