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Questions Out Of The Fire: Spiritual Implications of the Holocaust

> The Conflagration was so universal, . . . all the sky were of a fiery aspect, like the top of a burning Oven, and the light seen above 40 miles around for many night: . . . the noise and crackling and thunder of the impetuous flames, . . . and the air all about so hot and inflamed that at the last one was not able to approach it, so as they were forced [to] stand still, and let the flames consume. . . . The stones of [St.] Paules flew like granados, the Lead melting down the streets in a stream, and the very pavement of the glowing with a fiery redness, so as nor horse nor man was able to tread on them.[1]

This essay reflects on the continuing spiritual implications of the Holocaust of 1933-45, the Nazi program for the extermination of millions of humans deemed physically or mentally unfit, or racially impure.

The following questions will guide our investigation of the spiritual consequences of this human tragedy: 1) Are human values rooted in reality? 2) Is there any permanent "human nature," and if so, what is it? 3) What is the meaning of the Holocaust for contemporary Christianity? 4) What are the implications of the Holocaust for our understanding of the "modern" world?

the Holocaust involved the systematic organization of great technological resources and millions of people for the basic purpose of extermination. "It was genocide for no military or economic purpose. It was to be the mythical beginning of an evil empire to establish the reign of death on this earth."[2] "Unique in all human history, the Holocaust was evil for evil's sake."[3] Discussion about the tragedy itself generates questions about human values and their relationship to reality.

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[1]E. S. De Beer (ed.), The Diary of John Evelyn (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), Vol. III, pp.452-54.

[2]Gregory G. Baum, "Christian Theology after Auschwitz," the Robert Waley Cohen Memorial Lecture for 1976, published by The Council of Christians and Jews [of Great Britain], London, p. 16.

[3]Emil Fackenheim, "The People Israel Lives," in The Christian Century Vol. 87, No. 18 (May 6, 1970), p. 564.

1. Are human values rooted in reality

Judaism and Christianity, which share the biblical assumption that God is creator and lord of history both find that the theological implications of the Holocaust are fundamental, because they bring into question the power and/or the goodness of God.

> It must be admitted quite frankly that after the Holocaust it is almost impossible to believe in the living God. If there were a God, how could he permit such evil? And if God were wise and all powerful, an event like Auschwitz could never have taken place. It would have been stopped.[4]

For Gregory Baum, the evil of the Holocaust is so enormous as to burst the seams of any traditional theodicy, and thus to undermine the foundations of biblical theology.

At first sight, it might seem that Baum's conclusion is of real importance only to those realtively few moderns who still seriously believe in God as the omnipotent author of history. The secular humanist, having long since abandoned belief in such a God, is not fundamentally challenged—it might seem—by Auschwitz. But more careful reflection reveals that a philosophical, ethical or religious position which makes any claim about a positive correlation between human values (e.g., love, justice, freedom, truth, life) and the "structure of reality" is challenged by this explosion of evil. For what is the ground of love or life, what is the evidence for saying these are more primary than hate and death, if the latter can be made, as the Nazis made them, the foundations of a state and a culture? The death camps and crematoria of the thousand year Reich were in operation for only seven or eight years—but during those years they constituted the "structure of reality" for millions of people. Before the Nazi period, as Golda Meir has written,

> normal decent men and women. . . couldn't believe that such a monstrously evil thing would ever actually happen—or that the world would permit it to happen. . . . It was simply that we couldn't conceive what was then still inconceivable. Today, however, no horror is inconceivable to me anymore."[5]

This is the searing question that comes out of the Holocaust fire: is there any foundation in reality for the values we cherish? Are these values no more than the preferences, fragile and temporary, of a particular social group at a given time and place? Richard Rubenstein accepts this latter conclusion, arguing that, when the Holocaust succeeds in undermining the assumption of God's reality, it undermines also the assumption of any ground for ethics.

> God really died at Auschwitz . . . . This. . . mean[s] that nothing in human choice, decision, value, or meaning can any longer have vertical reference to transcendent

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[4]Baum, op. cit., p. 15.

[5]Golda Meir, My Life (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1975), p. 140.

> standards. We are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos. Our actions are human actions. Their entailments are human entailments. . . . Though most of us will refrain from antisocial behavior, we do so because of the fear of ourselves and others rather than fear of God.[6]

Rubenstein's conclusion, radical though it is, does not—at least as it is stated here—plumb the depths of its own dark insight. For if there are no transcendent standards whatsoever, there is no such thing as "antisocial" behavior per se, but only what is defined as anti-social by a particular regime in power, it was antisocial to resist Nazi racial policy, and to seek to prevent the extermination of the Jews. If there are no transcendent standards (and it matters not whether these be called divinely ordained, or simply "natural" or "fated"—the key question is whether they are!) there are no grounds for saying that what the Nazis did was wrong. Wrong, not in the weak sense that the Nazis lost the war and hence were (some of them) judged by their captors. But wrong in the absolute sense that what they did was a violation of the "structure of reality," and hence would be wrong even if a majority of mankind, indeed even if every human on earth, affirmed it to be right.

Here we are brought face to face with a paradox in this first and fundamental Holocaust question: the paradox that an evil so enormous as to demand absolute, immediate condemnation, initiates a process of reasoning which calls into question whether there are any grounds for absolute moral judgments, and hence any ground for our absolute condemnation of the original evil. Richard Rubenstein has not flinched from the absoluteness of the evil, nor from the radical conclusion that such absolute evil makes it impossible to speak any more of standards grounded in reality outside ourselves. But he does not appear to have seen the paradox: beginning with an absolute moral judgment about the Holocaust, his reflection ends by undermining the possibility of any moral judgment.

Some other contemporary thinkers, both religious and secular, have seen this paradox and have insisted that it must be taken into account. In a sermon entitled "Auschwitz and the Death of God," Eugene Borowitz has asked: "If there is no transcendent standard of holiness by which all men are bound, then why should the strong not rule and torture and destroy? If God is dead, then, as Ivan Karamazov said, then (sic) all things are possible."[7] And Albert Camus, while convinced that there is an absurd contradiction between man (who yearns for life and love) and this world (an "order of death"), recognizes that the one who rebels against this absurdity must, to be consistent with his own rebellion, re-

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[6]Richard Rubenstein, After Auschwitz (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), pp. 224-25.

[7]Eugene Borowitz, How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today? (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), pp. 33-34.

main true to those values (life and love) in whose name he originally rebelled.

2. Is there any permanent "human nature," and if so, what is it?

"Man's image of himself and of God was permanently impaired by what took place"—so writes Richard Rubenstein concerning the effects of the Holocaust.[8] But in exactly what way(s) has our conception of human nature been impaired or altered? Many answers to this question have been put forward, some of which disagree so radically as, in effect, to cancel each other out.

First, the answer which Rubenstein himself suggest: "Man has proven capable of irredeemable evil." In his "psychoanalytic interpretation" of the death camps, Rubenstein sees them as an expression of "man's primal desire to do away with his impediments to instinctual gratification." The camps allowed the Nazis to kill, to rape, to create a world of prohibited feces-filthiness, without restriction. Whereas this does not mean that human nature is evil only, it does mean that aggressive desires are "inextricably bound together" with any human desires for love and affection; the former are as "inescapable" as the latter.[9]

A second answer is suggested by Elie Wiesel, in the form of another question: "Was this all there was to man?" Wiesel shifts the focus from the Nazis alone to include

> all of humanity: executioners and victims alike. The first too anxious to become executioners, the latter too ready to assume the role of victims. . . . To a victim of the "concentrationary" system, it no longer mattered that he had been intellectual, laborer, angry student or devoted husband. A few beatings, a few screams turned him into a blank, his loss of identity complete. . . . Camp law and camp truth transcended all laws and all truth, and the prisoner could not help but submit. . . . Was this all there was to man?[10]

Implicit in these words is the conclusion that human nature is so malleable that it can be formed into any shape, under sufficient pressure. Germans can be made into Nazis; opponents can be made into victims. Implied is the notion that there is no permanent human nature, only human material to be formed.

In a different work, Wiesel suggests a third answer to our question: "Bread, soup—these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach."[11] A stomach is even less than a body; a body is less than a human being. If the concentration camps reduced

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[8]Rubenstein, op. cit., p. 82.

[9]Ibid., pp. 89, 12.

[10]Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, trans. from the French by Lily Edelman and the author (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 6.

[11]Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. from the French by Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1969) p. 63.

humans to stomachs, such that bread and soup were literally their "whole life," then the Holocaust would seem to justify the conclusion: when the garments of civilization are stripped off, human nature is exposed as simply animal need, bodily hunger. Human "fulfillment," minus the structures of civilization, is a full stomach.

Since the camp situation was one of radical deprivation and scarcity, this paradigm of fulfillment would seem to require an ethic of unqualified struggle for individual survival—which is in reality an anti-ethic, the rejection of all ethical considerations as superficial relative to the fundamental needs of hum-animality. Here my self-realization is understood to be not only independent of yours, but in fundamental oppostition to yours. So understood, the Holocaust paradigim would finally collapse human fulfillment and destructiveness into the same gruesome act: murder for food, destroying your life to sustain mine. Among the most disturbing chapters of the Holocaust story, none are more threatening to the ethicist than those in which one survivor kills another in order literally to rob the food out of his mouth. Wiesel tells of a son who beats his own father to death to obtain a piece of bread.

Conrad's heart of darkness seems noble compared to this modern "stomach of darkness." Yet even here, in the darkest region of the Holocaust anthropology, there is a flicker of light which directs attention toward a fourth answer to our question: "I've got bread . . . for you too." As he is being beaten by his stomach-son, the father, Wiesel reports, cries out: "Meir, Meir, my boy! Don't you recognize me? I'm you father . . . you're hurting me . . . you're killing your father! I've got some bread . . . for you too . . . for you too. . . . "[12] The father's "for you too" is an expression of the mutuality, the need to care for each other, that was also present—along with all the brutality—in the camps.

Terrence Des Pres is right, I think, in arguing that reflection on the Holocaust experience produces a tendency—even (especially?) on the part of camp survivors—to overlook the evidences that, though they were reduced to stomachs, men and women in the camps were, most of them, also more than stomachs.

> There is a contradiction in Wiesel's view of the camps, a contradiction which occurs so often in reports by survivors that it amounts to a double vision at the heart of their testimony. In The Holocaust Kingdom, Alexander Donat describes Maidanek as a world in which "the doomed devoured each other," but he includes another kind of evidence as well, for instance his near death from a beating he received for refusing to beat others, and the help he was given, when he was desperately in need of time to recover, by someone who found him a clerking job."[13]

Wiesel's Night, as Des Pres observes, provides a dramatic illustration of

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[12]Ibid., p. 113.

[13]Terrence Des Pres, The Survivor (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), p. 112.

this contradiction, in two diametrically opposed words of survival advice which Wiesel heard from different inmates during his years at Auschwitz. The first is the stomach-ethic: "Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. . . . Everyone lives and dies for himself alone."[14] The other survival-ethic correlates survival with mutuality: "We are all brothers, and we are all suffering the same fate. . . . Help one another. It is the only way to survive."[15]

We are left with contradictions: the four answers we have considered disagree quite radically with each other. And we have discovered a contradiction or "double vision" within the testimony of survivors themselves as to the anthropological implications of their experience. Is there any way to push beyond these contradictions?

I find a way suggested in the words of another survivor: "Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man." Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, has written of the significance of Lorenzo, an Italian civilian who, asking nothing in return, volunteered to provide Levi with food and small favors over a period of six months. "I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo," writes Levi,

> that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror . . . for which it was worth surviving. . . . Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.[16]

Levi's experience reminds us of something we, as "autonomous" modern persons, often forget: that whatever we mean by "human nature" or personhood, it is not something we ourselves create and control. Our human nature (as opposed to our simple animal existence) is a social product. Just as the infant can become a human person only through interpersonal relationships, the adult person is able to remain human only insofar as he is shown the way and reminded to keep on the way, by other persons, by social traditions, by religious teaching and law. As Malamud's Morris Bober puts in The Assistant: "We ain't animals. This is why we need the Law. This is what a Jew believes."[17]

To recognize the fundamentally social character of our human nature is to begin to understand why all of the four anthropological implications of the Holocaust considered above can be true, though they contradict

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[14]Wiesel, Night, p. 122.

[15]Ibid., p. 52.

[16]Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz, trans. from the Italian by Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 111.

[17]Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (New York: Signet Books, 1957), p. 99.

each other. The key variable that changes human "nature is the social structure by which humans are shown and reminded what it means to be human.

The Nazis organized the death camps so as systematically to destroy the supportive context of civilized human relations. "What the Germans wanted to do," Elie Wiesel has written, "was not only to exterminate the Jewish people physically; first of all, they wanted to exterminate them spiritually. Therefore, they invented this whole society—what we call in France universe concentrationnaire—with its princes and priests and high priests. The Germans wanted to deprave, to debase the Jew . . . to impose an inhuman concept of man and of the universe upon the Jewish people."[18] It should be no surprise that our human nature, dependent upon a supportive social context, can be fundamentally distorted and even destroyed by a new form of "society designed with the demonic intent to do just that.

But this brings us back to our original question, which now poses itself with even greater force: Is there any permanent "human nature" capable of resisting even totalitarian efforts to "impose an inhuman concept of man," and if so, what is it? What is the ground of our humanity in that extremity when our social structure is dedicated not to nurturing it and reminding us of it but to denying its existence?

3. What is the meaning of the Holocaust for contemporary Christianity?

There is a documentary movie about the rise of Nazism, entitled "The Twisted Cross," sometimes used in courses dealing with this period. In a brief section concerning religion, the film shows the looting of Jewish business, the beating of Jews on the street, and the destruction of synagogues. The narrator then suggests that "when one religion is threatened, all are threatened," and the film goes on to depict the arrest of a priest in front of his church, two nuns 'set seated' in a jail cell, and vandalism of a Christian church by Nazis. If this were all there is to say about the roles of the Christian Church and Christian people during the Holocaust period, then there would be no need to consider the question we here consider. Unfortunately for us Christians, there is more to say.

It is true, of course, that some Christian clergy and laypeople opposed the Nazis, and that some paid for this courage with their lives. Nothing in this discussion is intended to diminish their spiritual integrity and heroism.

But it is also true—and more important for an understanding of our present situation—that Nazism arose within Christian Europe and had

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[18]Elie Wiesel, "Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent," in Franklin Littell and Hubert Locke, The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 274.

many leaders and active followers who died baptized Lutherans (e.g., Goering) or Catholics (e.g., Hitler); that most Nazi policies toward the Jews had extensive historical precedent in the policies of the Roman Catholic Church and of Protestant groups; that a large number of "German Christians" could enthusiastically affirm that "in the person of the Fuhrer we behold the One sent from God, who places Germans in the presence of the Lord of History;"[19] that untold numbers of German and European Christians aided the Nazis in rounding up Jews for deportation; that the birthday of Jesus Christ was celebrated in the death camps by SS Officers and others who supervised the camps; that even those Christian who opposed the Nazi program tended to do so only when they saw the church itself threatened, but not earlier when they saw the livelihood and the lives of Jews threatened; that the remainder of the Christian world, including the Pope, Protestant leaders, and the government officials of the United States, remained largely silent even when evidence of Nazi extermination of the Jews was made known to them.

Christian complicity in the Nazi program has led some Christians to conclude that, while it may be true that "for the Jew . . .the Holocaust is clearly meaningless," this is not the case for the Christian. "For Christians in Christian nations . . . who, after an apparent tradition of two thousand years of the love of Christ for Man, to be able to think of, then construct, and finally even use ovens for human beings—for these people the Holocaust must indeed have a message."[20]

What exactly is that message? In his book The Crucifixion of the Jews, Franklin Littell argues that "the murder of six million Jews by baptized christians raises the most insistent question about the credibility of Christianity"—and elsewhere he refers to this as the problem of "the incredibility of Christianity." Though Littell is not as careful and systematic as he might be in defining the exact nature and dimensions of this problem of credibility/incredibility, a careful analysis of his book suggests that the Holocaust places in question the credibility of all of the following: 1) the spiritual and moral integrity of the baptized Christians who actually participated in the Nazi program; 2) the spiritual and moral integrity of Christians who, then or now, fail to see and to oppose the anti-human and anti-Jewish thrust of the Nazi program; 3) the sincerity and fitness of Christians who would today propose to participate in theological dialogue with Jews, without repentance first; 4) the spiritual integrity of "Christianity"—meaning the various institutional churches, hierarchies, teachings, and educational systems; 5) the reality

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[19]Franklin H. Littell, The Crucifixion of the Jews (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 52-53.

[20]Harry J. Cargas, In Conversation with Elie Wiesel (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 11.

and relevance of God, even for Christians who nominally worship him; and 6) certain fundamental doctrines or assumptions of the Christian gospel, especially the central Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah.[21]

Presumably the meaning of the first four of these aspects of Christianity, now brought into question by the Holocaust, will be fairly clear. But points five and six will require some further explanation. Point five has to do with the decreasing vitality of Christian faith in a living God, after the event in which great numbers of Christians in effect denied the existence of that God by denying his children, the Jews and other peoples. Littell quotes from Emil Fackenheim who has "no doubt that if masses of Christians in Hitler's Europe had voluntarily put on the yellow star there would today be no doubt or confusion in the Christian churches, no talk of the death of God."[22] A correlation is here suggested between the believer's loyalty to God in his own actions, and the believer's ability to continue to experience and affirm the reality of God. As a result of the churches' disloyalty to God during the Holocaust, Littell argues, "to many of their own 'members' Christianity has become incredible. . ."[23]

The sixth aspect of Christianity which the Holocaust threatens to render "incredible" is doubtless the most important, most fundamental to the continuing vitality and integrity of the Christian faith. It has to do with the fundamental claims of the gospel itself, particularly with the central Christian claim that Jesus is the Christ, that his appearance constitutes the beginning of a new covenant between mankind and God. Littell writes:

> The truth about the murder of European Jewry by baptized Christians is this: it raises in a most fundamental way the question of the credibility of Christianity. Was Jesus a false messiah? No one can be a true messiah whose followers feel compelled to torture and destroy other human persons who think differently. Is the Jewish people, after all and in spite of two millennia of Christian calumny, the true Suffering Servant promised in Isaiah?"[24]

No more radical question can be raised about the credibility of Christianity than this: Was Jesus, after all, a false messiah? From the beginning this has been the major issue in dispute between Jews and Christians (who, in the beginning, were of course Jews who affirmed Jesus was the Christ). Concerning Jesus, the Jew has from the beginning said: "He would seem to have claimed to be the Messiah foretold by the prophets

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[21]These six points represent my distinctions rather than Littell's, but they seem to be suggested in The Crucifixion of the Jews on the following pages: point 1), pp. 2, 41, 79; point 2) pp. 49, 56, 48, 64; point 3) pp. 3, 66; point 4) pp. 2, 45-46, 65; point 5) pp. 29-30, 57, 130-31; point 6) pp. 17, 79.

[22]Littell, op. cit., p. 130.

[23]Ibid., p. 57.

[24]Ibid., p. 17.

as the inaugurator of God's Kingdom on earth. The condition of the world since his advent has never impressed Jews as justifying such an appraisal of him."[25]

The Holocaust raises questions about other theological doctrines which are of central importance to Christianity: e.g., about God as the omnipotent Lord of history; about the Christian church as the primary locus of the work of God's Spirit; and about salvation as having to do primarily with the activity of God in a "spiritual" dimension of life and history, to be distinguished from the activity of man in the merely "temporal" realm. Some Christian scholars have taken note of the challenge of the Holocaust to the traditional Christian view of God as the omnipotent Lord of history, and have made creative suggestions about how the Christian (and Jewish) concept of God must be revised to take account of the Holocaust.[26] But the most threatening challenge of the Holocaust to Christianity will, I believe, go to the very heart of the gospel, and will be harder for Christians to deal with than these other theological questions. It is the challenge of this question: Does the complicity of Christians in the Holocaust make "incredible" the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ?

4. What are the implications of the Holocaust for our understanding of the "modern" world?

For us the concept "modern" has highly positive connotations: secular autonomy, individualism, scientific reason, pluralism and toleration, this worldliness, and a "self-confident optimism and belief in progress."[27] If it is modern, it is by definition good. It is presumably because we begin with this assumption that we have often been tempted to interpret the Nazi period as something which, though it occurred very recently, is not truly an expression of the the modern world. Thus Harvey Cox, in his well-known book celebrating The Secular City, claimed that "Nazism was a throwback to a lost tribalism."[28] To which claim Emil Fackenheim made the following response:

> What an insult to any tribe ever in existence. And what a staggering failure to grasp that Nazism, far from being a mere falling-out-of-step innocuous to all who are in step, is, alas, a distinctly modern phenomenon. How, except for modern anonymity and modern technological quantification, could Nazism have engaged in its grisly

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[25]Milton Steinberg, Basic Judaism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1947), p. 108.

[26]See for example, Gregory Baum, op. cit., pp. 15-22; Howard R. Burkle, God, Suffering, and Belief (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), pp. 43-63.

[27]These six characteristics are assigned to the modern world by Ernst Troeltsch in the first chapter ("The Meaning of 'the Modern World' ") of his book Protestantism and Progress.

[28]Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 3.

mathematics of mass murder?[29]

If Nazism is indeed a "distinctly modern phenomenon," we are faced with the need to reconsider our definition of modern, and our valuation of our own period.

What is it about the Nazi program of extermination that makes it "modern"? Most of the thinkers who have addressed this question agree with Fackenheim in associating the radical evil of Nazism with precisely that characteristic of modern culture which is often praised most highly: scientific reason and the technology it produces. Of course we find among these critics different emphases, different analyses of the way in which scientific reason led to or contributed to the Holocaust.

Albert Speer, who began his Nazi career as Hitler's chosen architect, and served during the final war years as the dictator's very successful minister of armaments, argues that there is something inherent in the power of technology that drives toward unrestricted dictatorial control of the state, and unlimited destruction. In his final statement at the International War Crimes Trials held at Nuremberg, Speer—who incidently was the only one tried who publically accepted full responsibility for Nazi war crimes—uttered the following warning:

> The more technological the world becomes, the greater is the danger. . . . As the former minister in charge of a highly developed armaments industry it is my last duty to the state: A new great war will end with the destruction of human culture and civilization. There is nothing to stop unleashed technology and science from completing its work of destroying man which it has so terribly begun in this war. . . . Every country in the world today faces the danger of being terrorized by technology; but in a modern dictatorship this seems to me to be unavoidable.[30]

Technology threatens in Speer's view, human freedom and even existence in two basic ways: Modern means of communication give a dictator the power to control the thought of his people, and to transmit his orders directly to unquestioning followers; and modern weapons of mass destruction, serviced and controlled by just a few people, have the power to destroy millions in a few seconds.

Richard Rubenstein agrees with Fackenheim and Speer: "the Holocaust cannot be divorced from the . . . culture of modernity. . . ."[31] But in addition to scientific reason and technology, Rubenstein finds other factor in modern culture which contribute decisively to the mentality that permits mass murder by the state. "The Holocaust was an expression of some of the most significant political, moral, religious demo-

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[29]Emil Fackenheim, "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern World," in Daedalus, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Winter, 1967), p. 201.

[30]Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 521.

[31]Richard L. Rubenstein, The Cunning of History (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 6.

graphic tendencies of Western civilization in the-twentieth century."[32] The primary political development to which Rubenstein refers is "the transformation of the state from an institution of law into an instrument of the dominant national community" which was completed with the signing of treaties to protect minorities' rights following World War I.[33] The process of secularization (i.e., the primary religious tendency in modern culture) dovetailed with this political development in that it led to "the collapse of every credible religious and moral restraint on the state."[34]

> Thus, the process of secularization ends where it began. In the beginning secularization involved the demystification of and the limitation of the sovereign's power. In the end, the secular state has dethroned all mystifications of power and morality save its own. The state becomes the only true god on earth with the power to define realistically what is good and will be rewarded and what is evil and will be punished; this truly sovereign god also has the ultimate power of divinity, the power to decide who shall live and who shall die.[35]

Rubenstein's warning is even more sombre than that of Speer: "the explosive combination of surplus population, finite resources, and the expanding sovereign powers of government suggest that the Nazi extermination program may yet foreshadow other exercises in the politics of total domination by future governments as they face catastrophic population problems arising out of mankind's very success in mastering nature."[36]

These are some of the questions out of the fire. There are many other questions, of course, which are important and might be raised. Is the Holocaust experience a new "revelation" or "root experience" for our age, as some thinkers have suggested? And if it is, what exactly does it reveal? And to whom: To Jews alone? To all men and women of Judeo-Christian West? To all peoples of the world?

And what about the study of the Holocaust: Does teaching our children of this modern tragedy make it more or less likely that it will happen again? Where should the Holocaust be studied? In schools, in religious education programs? How should it be studied? In that laissez-faire "objective" spirit of contemporary education which allows the student to draw any conclusions he finds appropriate, or. . .in the spirit that sees in the fire an urgent message for ourselves?

The fires of the Nazi crematoria are long since extinguished. But somehow, even after more than 30 years, the spiritual and ethical ground

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[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid., p. 13.
[34]Ibid., p. 87.
[35]Ibid., p. 91.
[36]Ibid., p. 86.

under us is too hot to tread upon. How shall we stand in such a fiery place? What shall we do with these burning questions?