

The Holocaust and Its Implications for Contemporary Interreligious Studies: An introduction to this issue of the *Journal of Inter-religious Studies*

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The Holocaust—the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators-- unfolded in a nation and on a continent that was predominantly Christian with a long history of violence and persecution against its Jewish population, much of it propagated in the name of Christianity. For that reason the Holocaust raised fundamental challenges for the Jewish-Christian relationship. It unfolded in a nation and on a continent that was predominantly Christian and had a long history of violence and persecution against its Jewish population. Although the victims of Nazi terror from 1933-1945 included many other groups, ranging from political opponents in Germany to the Roma people to civilians throughout Europe, the planned and intentional genocide of the European Jews was a central priority of Nazi ideology and policy, and the reactions to the persecution of the Jews throughout Europe as well as in the United States were often openly shaped by religious prejudice.

Yet, this history raises a number of issues that have broader relevance for the study of religion and could be instructive for contemporary interreligious studies. The sheer enormity of this event opened the door to a new body of literature on theodicy. This history offers abundant examples of the dynamics of evil and complicity and of the ways in which "religion"—whether through its institutions, its leaders and members, or its texts—can become a murderous and ideological tool. The persecution and genocide of the European Jews first in Nazi Germany, and then throughout occupied Europe, is a horrific case study in how a minority population can be targeted as "the other." The ways in which ordinary people throughout Europe became perpetrators, "bystanders", or rescuers and resisters, challenge us with complex questions about human ethical behavior. Throughout Europe there were theologians and church leaders who developed ethnicized versions of their faith that combined the racialized ideology of National Socialism with traditional doctrine. There were also some groups and individuals, however, whose faith led them to become rescuers and resisters, and the attempts of various church leaders throughout this period at interreligious engagement and peacemaking are a fascinating and still largely understudied topic. The history of the post-Holocaust Jewish Christian relationship is another remarkable aspect of this history that bears examination. The questions that could be opened up in a course on contemporary interreligious ethics are endless: are there aspects of religion that open it to dangerous ideological alliances? How do religious people rethink and revise their doctrine and their theology after such an event? The study of the Holocaust offers a well-documented case study in such issues.

Any analysis of such issues by theologians and religious scholars begins with the history itself. There is now a solid foundation of scholarship on the role of the churches in Nazi Germany as well as historical research on the responses of religious populations throughout Nazi-occupied Europe and North Africa, the reactions of religious leaders around the world, and the factors that shaped their reactions. There is a growing body of scholarship on how religious leaders addressed the aftermath, beginning with the groundbreaking 1947 Seelisberg conference in Switzerland. Over subsequent decades the body of theological reflection known as post-Holocaust theology emerged as well as a new kind of dialogue between Jews and Christians

which in recent years has expanded to include representatives of all faiths. All these areas of historical and theological scholarship offer rich material for study and reflection for the field of interreligious studies and for the world of interreligious engagement in general.

History as a discipline, and this history in particular, can offer powerful insights into such engagement. Historical work gives us the concrete record and the actual details that must be considered when we attempt to draw theological and ethical conclusions. The historical record of religious leaders and communities during the Holocaust is a complex one that prevents simplistic conclusions. It includes the record of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox church leaders who embraced National Socialism, as well as those who courageously opposed it. It includes the records of Muslims who rescued their neighbors in countries like Albania and Tunisia, as well as the history of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who embraced common cause with the Nazi regime for his own political aims. The reactions of some religious leaders were shaped by their theological understandings; others were driven more by factors like nationalism and institutional self-interest. This history shows us how certain theological interpretations of scriptural texts can be used to justify the murder of innocent human beings. It illustrates the ways in which the institutional church all too often made the same moral compromises as other German institutions. The ways in which Germans, church leaders, and others addressed this historical record after 1945 is instructive for other post-genocidal situations. The unfolding history of Jewish-Christian dialogue after 1945 offers rich insights into other difficult interreligious conversations.

Like every other event in human history, the Holocaust has certain characteristics that are unique and others that lend themselves to comparison. Historians make such distinctions not to rank these events in order of importance or to compare the suffering of different victim groups, but to better understand how specific circumstances shaped the history and the reactions of those who were part of it. Historically, for example, most genocides and other forms of widespread political violence have unfolded in the context of territorial disputes or civil wars. In contrast, the persecution and genocide of the European Jews began in peacetime and in a nation with a fairly assimilated Jewish population that was smaller than 1%. By 1945 it had encompassed an entire continent and was no longer being perpetrated solely by the Germans; civilian populations throughout Europe had joined in the persecution and murder of their Jewish neighbors. Moreover, the pervasive antisemitism in Europe as well as in North America shaped the reactions of the world to this genocide and its victims as it unfolded.

These are some of the distinctive features in this history—and yet there are other aspects, including the dehumanization of the Nazis' victims, the ways in which ordinary people became complicit, and the factors that led some people to become rescuers—that lend themselves to comparative study. And as scholars examine newly available archival material—such as historical records from French North Africa—they gain new insights into both the particulars of this history and its broader implications. Aomar Boum's new book, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (based upon his research as a research fellow at the Museum in 2012-13), is an example of how such new research can open the door to new conversations that have implications not just for historians, but for people engaged in interreligious dialogue.

Most importantly, the history of the events from 1933 to 1945 tells a profoundly human story that touches most people—whether they are visiting scholars or tourists, whether they come from the U.S. or another part of the world. I believe that it's the human connection—our capacity to feel empathy, outrage, solidarity, shame, and to reflect on history because we want to understand its implications for us today—that explains the numbers of people who visit the

Museum each year as well as the continued interest in Holocaust history in classrooms around the world.

The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* explore many of these themes. They are examples of the broad scope of scholarship and the challenging questions that are laying the foundation for scholars of interreligious studies to study and analyze the Holocaust and its implications. Each article in its own way illustrates the different approaches and the complexities of the issues that arise. Rachel Baum, Khaleel Mohammed, and John Roth write about the ways in which conversations about the Holocaust influenced their Jewish-Christian-Muslim triologue. Daniel Langton gives an overview of post-Holocaust Jewish theology and its possible application for broader multifaith conversations. A roundtable discussion by a group of Christian seminary professors and scholars illustrates how post-Holocaust Christian theology has informed their teaching. Professor Beverly Mitchell analyzes how her study of the Holocaust and of slavery has shaped her theological emphasis on the significance of human dignity and the way she teaches her courses on human rights. Finally, several members of the State of Formation speak about the impact of their recent visit to the USHMM in Washington, D.C.

It's an ongoing conversation and one that will shape the fields of Holocaust studies and interreligious studies. I'm very grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* for inviting me to be part of it, and I look forward to seeing the responses of the readers of this journal.

The views of the contributors to this issue of the Journal of Inter-Religious Studies reflect their own opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.