

## **Post-Holocaust Christian Theology and Its Implications for Multireligious Conversations: A Roundtable Discussion**

**Moderator:** Victoria Barnett

### **Participants:**

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### **Introduction (by Victoria Barnett, moderator)**

Narrowly defined, “post-Holocaust theology” refers to the theological body of literature (much of it written in the three decades immediately following the Holocaust) that used this historical event as a point of departure to re-examine the Jewish-Christian relationship as well as theological and ethical issues, such as complicity, antisemitism, theodicy and forgiveness, that posed particular challenges in the Holocaust’s wake.<sup>1</sup> In the ensuing years, the very nature of the Holocaust as a historical and international event has necessarily broadened the scope of theological reflection, and new historiography on the role of the churches and other religious groups continues to raise troubling questions.

I would contend that post-Holocaust theology should be more broadly understood in terms of three central aspects of this history with respect to the role played by religious leaders and institutions during the Holocaust. The first concerns the historical and theological role played by the Christian teachings about the Jewish people and Judaism that helped lay the foundation for what happened in the Holocaust. The second is the historical role not just of the Christian churches, but of other religious groups, including international interfaith organizations and ecumenical bodies, during the Holocaust. The third concerns the questions and challenges that arise in the wake of the Holocaust particularly, but not only, for Christianity. In other words, post-Holocaust theology, which in its early decades focused understandably on the particulars of that event and what was known at the time, might be a useful body of literature for contemporary scholars who are grappling theologically and historically with

interreligious conflict, genocide, memorialization, issues of religion, incitement, and violence, and a host of other challenges.

The participants in this roundtable conversation are theologians and professors who have been engaged in these issues for many years, often in interreligious contexts. This conversation was recorded on March 29, 2014. The participants have been allowed to edit and expand on their remarks.

**Victoria Barnett:** My opening question is this: as Christian scholars who have been engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue and wider interfaith discussions, has the Holocaust and post-Holocaust theology had an influence on your work and your engagement? Has it been central in your own work, or has it been more marginal? And what has been your experience in teaching the Holocaust, either as a course in its own right or as part of a larger course?

**John Pawlikowski:** I consider the Holocaust very important. Both in terms of the history of Christian theology as a force for social relations, and then I think theologically, not just in isolation but in its impact. Certainly we can see how the whole history of antisemitism prepared the ground for the kind of denigration of Jews and Judaism that was central to the “success” of the Nazi effort. I certainly am a person who does not draw a simple straight line from classical antisemitism to the Holocaust. I think there were many factors that brought about the rise of Nazism. But on the grassroots level, particularly, and in the attitude of people, whether that attitude was outright collaboration with the Nazis or just indifference leading to “bystanding,” I think traditional Christian theology played a role. Even, interestingly, in a place like Poland, where the Żegota movement tried to save Jewish children ... some of the people who founded Żegota really believed in the Zionist movement, not so much because they believed in Zionism, but because they felt it was a more humane answer for the purification of Poland.

**Victoria Barnett:** How has the Holocaust shaped your own work over the decades?

**John Pawlikowski:** Well, it’s been very influential, first of all, because I teach a course on a regular basis on Holocaust, genocide and the ethical implications. So as someone who works in the field of social ethics I find the Holocaust extremely important, as well as other genocides, for a discussion of contemporary ethics. I think also for me one of the places where the Holocaust has played a very important role is the way I try to struggle with the God question after the Holocaust. What does it mean today to say that God somehow has a role in directing the course of history or the course of human civilization, in light of the Holocaust? I mean Irving Greenberg’s<sup>2</sup> question: did God abandon the covenant?

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** I would echo what John said, except that I’m not a social ethicist, but I think that questions of theological anthropology are very different in a post-Holocaust key. As far as teaching, I’ve been teaching a study abroad course about Christianity and the Holocaust at Auschwitz for the past five years. The way into the subject of the Holocaust for me is through questions of classical Christian anti-Judaism and Christian responsibility in that regard. So I think it’s very important to look at theology in that way.

**Victoria Barnett:** How have your students wrestled with this over the years? Is this something that grabs them? What aspects of it affect them?

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** Their understanding of Christian theology is a little bit thin. If they know the biblical phrase “God is love” they’re not quite sure exactly what that means, so to present them with questions of Christian anti-Judaism is shocking and very, very disturbing to

them, most of them. (I've had) students kind of in tears: "I thought this was a God of love. How could we do this?" and others outright rejecting that anything I said about Christian anti-Judaism was true, but they're another story. Mostly it affects them so that they want to know more, and they actually learn more about their own tradition that way and are motivated to teach others to understand the difficult aspects of their tradition's history so that they can live the tradition in a better, more authentic manner.

**Esther Menn:** What about in biblical studies? I don't know if in the United States, in our context, it's directly related to the post-Holocaust (issue) or whether it's because we have a larger Jewish population, but biblical studies has really been impacted. Instead of the "Old Testament" and "New Testament" we start talking about the "Hebrew Bible" and even the "Jewish New Testament," and we have Jewish scholars and Christian scholars talking about the same materials from different methods-- historical, critical, literary. Midrash and Jewish interpretation has come to the fore and is beginning to be better known. Inter-Testamental literature is called Second Temple Literature, and we know that Second Temple Judaism was a vibrant and multi-faceted phenomenon. That's very different from what we used to think about the Persian period and the Hellenistic period as a kind of decay, and what may be called the traditional Christian, anti-Jewish arc—Judaism's sort of "failure." It's just a very different framework now, especially the last thirty years or so.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** In my case it's being a second generation German. The Holocaust actually brought me into theology as a place to explore questions of "why" and "how." It was the one place within the German school system where we could engage these questions. And since I grew up in Germany and had never met any Jews as a consequence of the Holocaust, when I came to the United States the first issue that I needed to work through was why I had certain assumptions about Jews and whether what I thought I knew about Jews and Judaism, was in fact real or antisemitic. So I wrote my dissertation on anti-Judaism and I tried to define anti-Judaism and to learn to distinguish between who Jews were and who I thought they were on the basis of my Christian upbringing and theological education. My interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue and anti-Judaism led me back to the Holocaust. As the only German in the room in Jewish-Christian dialogue in America, I was forced to respond to German and Christian responsibility for the Holocaust, and with an urgency that American Christians didn't. The perpetrators of the Holocaust were German but also baptized Christians, even though some of them renounced their church membership. So I became interested in family history and the ideology and experience of perpetrators.

**Robert Cathey:** For me, teaching in a seminary related to the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Barmen Declaration<sup>3</sup> is one of our confessional documents, and that's always kind of an open door to teaching our students about the Holocaust, taking them to the Illinois Holocaust Museum just outside Chicago and introducing them to some figures, one of whom most of them know—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his story—but also Reinhold Niebuhr and his awareness of the nazification process, and then Karl Barth. Both are theological figures I've taught about, so it's in a sense doing historical theology but then re-reading those documents from a post-Holocaust perspective. So one of the things we introduce students to is that the Barmen Declaration did not raise a protest against what the Nazi government was doing to the Jews and looking at why that was the case, even though people celebrated the Barmen Declaration as a document of resistance.

**Paul Knitter:** I'm not a scholar of the Holocaust or post-Holocaust theology or of Jewish-Christian dialogue. My area has been the broader dialogue of Christianity with other religions. But certainly the reality of the Holocaust and the theologies that have developed within the churches and the academies in response to the Holocaust have played a crucial role in my work. From the start I've tried to look at the consequences—the very dangerous consequences—that can result when any religion (especially my own Christian religion) claims that it is meant to replace or fulfill all other religions. Such claims, I have tried to show, make dialogue very, very difficult, if not impossible. How can you enter into a dialogical relationship with another person or another religion and expect to learn anything when you are convinced that you've got the full, the final, the absolute truth? How will you look on the other religion? How will you treat the other religion? For me, the Holocaust stands as the clearest and most horrendous answer to that question. It illustrates what can happen when one religion believes that God wants it to replace another religion. I'm not saying that claims of possessing the only or the final truth must lead to things like the Holocaust. But I am saying that these claims make things like the Holocaust so much more possible... And they are especially possible when a religion that makes absolute claims becomes the majority religion, that is, when it is the dominant religion in a political system that has economic or military strength. When you put these two realities together – that is, absolute religious claims and the political power to enforce them—you have a lethal situation, such as the Holocaust. So absolute claims to have the one and only truth, or the truth meant to swallow up all other truths, not only prevent dialogue; they cause death.

**John Pawlikowski:** If I could interject one other idea here, following up on this point: I think one of the impacts in theology is in fact what I would call in quotation marks “Nazi theology.” Because Nazi theology clearly said that Nazi leadership had assumed the role that God played in previous ideologies. They (i.e., the Nazis) became the ultimate arbiters of who was fit to live and who had to die for the advancement of humanity. While it was not a religion per se, it acted like a religion in a very profound fashion, and led to massive human destruction. So I think we have to learn from this, and I've tried to learn as an officiant from this, how easy it is for certain ideologies of human destruction to penetrate into social acceptability. One of the concerns I would have right now is what's happening in Africa with gay people, which is also a concern from the Holocaust since gays were among the victims. You know that gays are being defined as fundamentally not equal human persons, and in some cases the churches have embraced these new secular laws in places like Uganda, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic. I saw a bishop on France 24 (the international French television network) telling his newly ordained priests about the evils of gay people and how they're not equal and so on. This is reprehensible to me and I am glad that certain African Catholics, including the head of the Pontifical Peace and Justice Commission Cardinal Turkson, who is a Ghanaian, stood up and criticized the embrace of this kind of legislation by Catholic leaders. I applaud him for this as well as the Archbishop of Dublin, who has also issued a statement condemning this kind of legislation.

**Karla Suomala:** It's a really interesting question. I have come to post-Holocaust theology late but have learned a great deal in the last few years. My first introduction to Judaism in a serious way was in Israel. My second was at a Jewish institution where I did my Ph.D., so I was largely formed within these Jewish contexts and the idea of post-Holocaust theology never came up and it was not part of our conversation. The whole idea of theology is still perceived as a significantly Christian enterprise, so it didn't strike me as having a lot of importance until I became part of the Christian Scholars Group. Then I started learning and reading more the longer I've taught Judaism and I've tried to integrate some of this into my coursework in terms of theological

aspects. Working with students in post-Holocaust theology has been moderately successful. It's very complicated. First of all, you have to introduce the idea of theology itself and sometimes it feels a little bit manipulative because my students don't have a grasp of theology to begin with, and then when they have post-Holocaust theology they're not in a very good place to argue back, because it can be shaming. How could they possibly argue against this? First of all, "I don't know anything", they say, and second, "How can I say anything when this has happened to these people?" So they're at a real disadvantage. I've worked with students once they've had some theology courses and Jewish studies courses that I teach, and then in independent studies, and this has been much more successful. But in general I feel that they need more tools so that they can actually interact with the material on their own terms and actually be able to be in conversation with it, as opposed to only feeling this deep guilt. I don't know that that is productive because then all they do is associate Judaism with shame, which is the last thing that I want them to do. So it's been kind of an interesting trajectory and I'm still wrestling with the kinds of pieces they need to deal with it in a productive way.

**Victoria Barnett:** Let me just ask, because all of you have been involved in some sense in Jewish-Christian dialogue or broader interfaith dialogues: how important is this body of material, the post-Holocaust theology that is out there in the various books and the literature? How important is it for your interfaith conversations? Has it shaped you? What kind of role has it played—or has it played a role at all? Has this played a role in your Jewish-Christian conversations; when you as a Christian engage in interfaith dialogue with Jews, is the Holocaust relevant? Did it play a role twenty years ago that it doesn't play today?

**John Pawlikowski:** On the contrary, I think it's the reverse. It didn't play a role in the early days. As one who entered the post-*Nostra Aetate* Christian-Jewish dialogue fairly early, it wasn't on the agenda, it wasn't on the Jewish agenda. The first major conference took place in 1974 at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City and this led to a whole series of conferences at universities around the country.

**Victoria Barnett:** Was this the Littell Conference [NB: The Annual Scholars Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, co-founded by Franklin Littell]?

**John Pawlikowski:** With Franklin Littell, and I think that brought certain things to consciousness, but for me where it's relevant is that indeed it opens that door to all the major challenges of what I would call modernity. The loss of the influence of biblical scholarship, the greater sense of autonomy, the technological, the enhanced technological capacity to destroy—all these are central issues for humanity, and therefore they also must be central issues for the people engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue. In that sense, theology and theological discussions in the Christian-Jewish dialogue cannot just be ethereal, they really have to be related to the consequences of theology in human society today, or the lack of theology.

**Victoria Barnett:** This is an interesting question though, because Krister Stendahl, Paul van Buren, and James Parkes—these were people who wrote and began to produce before *Nostra Aetate*, so there were people thinking about this. But what you're saying in a way is that it wasn't until Holocaust history became better known that people began really talking about it. Is that—would that be accurate do you think?

**John Pawlikowski:** But there was also—the problem, if I can put it this way, is that there was also positive resistance within the Jewish academic community to the theologizing of the Holocaust. The classic example is David Hartman, who said "I will mourn the Holocaust and its

victims all day long, but I am not building contemporary Jewish theology on the Holocaust, it has to be built on the covenant.” Frankly, I think that’s somewhat naïve, but that’s what his view was.

**Karla Suomala:** That is exactly my experience, but it wasn’t on the covenant because I wasn’t in those circles, it was on the state of Israel. That is what our focus was. So the Holocaust was always there, but in many ways it had the kind of configuration that Yad Vashem in Israel does—you go through it up onto this balcony overlooking the land, the land is always there, so my whole experience was always framed by the land and the state of Israel. The Holocaust is a reality but it’s not the final reality—you have to talk about Israel.

**Victoria Barnett:** Is that true for other people?

**Esther Menn:** I would say that in light of the Holocaust, in knowing what our texts and our traditions can do now, which was so horrifically made clear—for example, some of the statements in the New Testament that seem to lead to a demonization of Jews—we have a more critical stance now toward our own texts, at least we should, also to figures such as Martin Luther. Speaking as a Lutheran: we have the 1994 ELCA Declaration to the Jewish community that repudiates his anti-Jewish statements and expresses repentance and a commitment to live in a loving and positive religion. So I think we have a more critical perspective on our own texts and our own history, which is an important new beginning.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** I also think there are stages ... beginning with survivor literature and powerful literary voices such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, ... then came the primary documentation by historians, such as Yehuda Bauer and Lucy Dawidowicz and only recently has the particular historical role of the churches come under investigation. It was historians who forced the churches to question the dominant narrative, which had cast the churches, first and foremost, as victims and resisters of secular National Socialism. This narrative had allowed church leaders to claim the moral capital to help rebuild the moral and cultural infrastructure of Germany after the war. But this narrative in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches was challenged in the mid-1980s, when historians began to take a closer look at the churches’ silence and complicity, particularly with respect to the persecution and murder of Jews. These new histories of the churches reaffirmed the need to recognize the deep roots of anti-Judaism in Christian theology.

**Victoria Barnett:** But you’ve got *Nostra Aetate* in the 1960s, you have the Episcopal repudiation of the deicide charge in the 1960s—these are things that predate that [more critical historiography]. So where do they come from? I agree with you that in the historical scholarship the critical examination of the churches came late, and you can certainly see how the Littell conferences began to shape people. But there does seem to be a theological shift that began earlier. So was it just that there were these few people who were writing about this stuff earlier?

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** That’s what I was going to say. I don’t know the history of those writers enough. Certainly we are all thankful for John Connelly’s work,<sup>4</sup> which has sketched out this thicker description, shall we say, of the preparation for [*Nostra Aetate*]. His book was specifically about Catholic teaching and of course we have Seelisberg before that. But I do think that the shock of the Shoah caused far more people to start looking at these issues and to have to look at what’s been called so often “the shadow on the cross,” and how that played into what John Pawlikowski said when the conversation started, into different people’s positions ... [the fact that] that there’s some sort of sense of “oh well, this is just a consequence of stubbornness

or giving up the covenant,” as in the book *The Holocaust Kingdom* when Alexander Donat relates his walking back from Germany to Warsaw and hearing Catholic Poles saying “oh well, we thought Hitler had at least taken care of that problem for us.” You know, I think that’s really significant ... I think Poland’s a really instructive example. John Pawlikowski knows far more than I do, but post-communist Poland shows this kind of split. Only then could Poland begin to deal with its legacy in terms of Christian anti-Judaism, because the narrative for them was that ... for Christian Poles this was “our tragedy, and we were the ones who were hurt.” ... Then to begin to understand really what happened in the Holocaust and what happened on Polish land through the German death camps so that whole Polish-Jewish dialogue begins. The stages are important. I think the understanding of the teaching of contempt in that history only gets integrated at a real level [in the post-communist period] so that at least in that particular cultural context the conversation of post-Holocaust theology becomes very possible.

**John Pawlikowski:** Well, part of the problem in the countries in the eastern bloc, especially maybe Poland, was that the Communist government, while it certainly began to acknowledge the Holocaust and build up the memorial sites, did so as an element of their own ideological perspective: that basically this [i.e., the Holocaust] was due to fascism and ... the description of what happened in those camps kind of stripped Jewish identity from the victims. Because if you went to Auschwitz-Birkenau prior to the change in government, you had the national buildings, and they would say “Ten thousand Belgians were killed.” Well, 95% of them were Jews, but there was no [acknowledgment of that]. At the end they put up a Jewish building, which was hardly open except when a group of Jews came to visit from America. But you know, you can say that was all wrong and stupid or something, however it influenced an awful lot of kids, students who used to travel to Auschwitz-Birkenau as part of their education, and they didn’t really have the ability to question that at all. Certainly the church wasn’t in a strong position to challenge it, frankly, because the church’s ability in the communist era to educate was minimal. There were no schools, the only kind of education they could do would be inside the church.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** You know, the word “shock” is very revealing because it’s somewhat unpredictable who was shocked at a particular point in time. There were some people who were shocked immediately in 1945, and there were other people who were shocked in the fifties or in the sixties or in the eighties, even within one community. So the knowledge was kind of there but whether or not a person was “shocked” by it depended on a variety of personal and political factors...

**John Pawlikowski:** Just to follow up on your point, the liberators are an interesting example of that. When the Holocaust Museum (prior to its existence actually, when there were just a council while the Museum was still in construction) sponsored a program, a conference on liberators—it was the first time that many of these liberators had ever told their story. They never told their wives, they never told their children about it and so this quickly related, and for many of them this was very cathartic. This was the first time that they actually were able to tell their story. A very interesting connection occurred and that is with the situation that developed a decade or so ago in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho, where neo-Nazis tried to take over the town and the mayor mobilized the religious community. It was vicious—I mean, the Catholic church was burned down, the pastor suffered a nervous breakdown ... We brought the mayor to the Holocaust Museum to honor him for this and he revealed only then that the reason he did this was because he had been a liberator. He had gone into a camp two days after the end of World War II, and he said “On my watch as mayor, not even the beginning of something like this is going to occur if I can possibly stop it.”

**Victoria Barnett:** I really feel, working at the Museum, that I've seen this history change people, including people who are not Christian or Jewish, people who come from parts of the world where this is European history, it's not their history. So I don't know if people want to comment on that. The question I had as my next question was: are there elements of this history of post-Holocaust theology, of the Jewish-Christian conversation, that can be generalized to other interfaith conversations, or is this just a Jewish-Christian thing? And if there are things you could generalize or expand, what would they be?

**Robert Cathey:** Well, one place this has come up in my teaching in a Presbyterian context is that our denomination has been scrutinizing all our investments for the past ten years, and in the debate that has swirled around that, some of the rhetoric that has been used has recycled some of the anti-Judaic tropes. So one of the things I have done with students is to introduce them to that debate, but also back to the 1930s and to look at who were the theologians, who were the Protestant theologians in Germany who actually thought that Nazism was a good idea, and how did they theologically rationalize that and how did that impact even debates over issues like natural theology between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. You can read that debate from 1933 on a kind of pure theological methodological level, but if you look politically at what was going on, and why Barth has this very angry protest against natural theology, in an indirect way he's responding to the *Deutsche Christen*, who were arguing that there was this other revelation in their history and their conscience that said Hitler is the person who will redeem Germany. When students become aware of these connections between ancient disputes, or in this case disputes in the 1930s, and the theological issues today, they begin to see that it's not just history but is also part of the legacy of the past, where the structures we have in talking about religious "others" can be put into operation in terms of contemporary conflicts in very negative ways that make dialogue extremely difficult. That's kind of a revelation to some of my students because they assume "Well, Protestants, Presbyterians, we're not anti-Jewish, we're not antisemitic today" and yet for them to discover that some of the ways we talk about contemporary phenomena like the contemporary nation state of Israel, some of the rhetoric around that, recycles ancient tropes that have been around for many, many centuries in Christianity... Jews are aware of that, but often Protestants are not.

**Karla Suomala:** When you asked whether elements of the Holocaust could be generalized, I realized that the post-Holocaust theology that I have in mind, and the only stuff that I am familiar with, is Jewish. And the overwhelming emphasis of post-Holocaust Jewish theology is on this event being unique; you can't generalize it. That's almost always the opening statement. You can't generalize it and you can't find meaning in it. This is somewhat different to the Christian approaches to this. When I teach, it's in a Jewish studies context, which is where I see my role. Before they read anything Christian, I have them say "what do Jews say about this, in terms of what they think?" But in those settings where they say this is unique, don't compare.

**Victoria Barnett:** Have you yourselves rethought certain things as a result both of your interfaith conversations and knowing something about the Holocaust?

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** I think Metz's<sup>5</sup> statement—that you can't do theology with your back to Auschwitz—is something that has not been taken seriously enough by enough Christian theologians. All good people doing all sorts of good work aren't antisemitic, but in the theological sense [they] don't necessarily realize that they are continuing to do their theology outside of this context, and that perhaps in lesser ways, outside of the rhetoric around Israeli politics that Bob mentioned, their theology still ends up tilting a little bit too far into these



supersessionist modes. As Paul [Knitter] said, the idea that “it’s only this way” has dangerous consequences. So people seem to be satisfied when they can say, “oh, okay our academic organization has a subgroup on Jewish-Christian relations, we’ve taken care of that.” But the fact that this subgroup exists and is supposed to have an effect on the rest of what’s going on in those other sections of the organization is not necessarily a conscious connection that happens regularly. So I think it has to affect all areas of systematic theology, particularly theological anthropology, notions of salvation, and theodicy. So I think if we’re serious about it we have to keep this in mind all the time and it’s hard, it’s hard work. It’s not how most of us were trained but now at least there are programs teaching explicitly from the perspective of interreligious dialogue.

**Victoria Barnett:** And if you keep this in mind—the changes you’re thinking of as a Christian—does that lead you to enter a conversation with a Muslim differently?

**Paul Knitter:** Well, yes. As you pointed out, Karla, if we say we really want to respect the uniqueness, the distinctiveness of the Shoah—that is, what it was and is and means for our Jewish brothers and sisters—then we’re going to have to listen, really listen, when our Jewish (or Muslim) friends tell us: “look at what your theology has allowed; look at what it has allowed to be done to us; be mindful of this.” But I’ve heard, dare I say, essentially the same message ... from Native Americans: “look at what your theology and your missionaries have done to our culture.” This is the message that we continue to hear from the postcolonial studies: this same dynamic of cultural disrespect and domination is taking place. So ... this goes back to your earlier question about how the Holocaust affects my conversation with Jews and the Jewish-Christian dialogue. My first experience with Jewish-Christian dialogue was in Len Swidler’s<sup>6</sup> dialogue group. I think this group began to meet back at the end of the 1980s or early 1990s or even earlier. I still remember my first experience in the group, where I came on with my theology of religions—“Let’s sit down and we’re all going to listen to each other; do know that I’m aware of my claim to superiority and I’ll keep them in check, don’t you worry.” And David Blumenthal<sup>7</sup> said: “I don’t trust you, I don’t trust you.” “What do you mean you don’t trust me? I’m sincere,” I retorted. “Yes, I know you’re sincere, but look at what you’ve done to us in the past; look at why it is so difficult for us to trust you.” He was speaking out of his Holocaust experience; that was my first experience of it. Since then, I’ve grown much more aware of how my traditional Christian language sounds to others, the language I use at liturgies, the language we heard from John’s Gospel at Mass today, where John’s doing another job on the Pharisees. I’m just so aware of how that sounds now. I just wish that Christians could have multiple occasions where they could be in a room where they are using their Christian language and then have Hindus or Buddhists or Jews right there listening to what’s been said.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** I think that Holocaust theology is maybe generalizable, but it’s actually the other instances of mass violence that don’t lend themselves to the same deep theological analyses that the Holocaust does. There is something unique about the Holocaust that can’t be replicated in other ways. Let me just say that as a chair of the Religion, Holocaust and Genocide Studies group at the American Academy of Religion, we tried very hard to organize panels that included other genocides: Native American, Rwanda, Cambodia. But we were often not successful because genocides other than the Holocaust do not generate the same kind of theological response or reflection.

**John Pawlikowski:** The Armenian genocide does.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** The Armenian [genocide]; there is some response there, yes.

**Paul Knitter:** So is it a question of degree?

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** I think it's because the Holocaust goes to the heart of Christian message, the heart of Christendom, Western Christendom. What we say about Jews in the Gospel of John, in our sacred texts, we do not say about Indians or Rwandans.

**John Pawlikowski:** I see.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** So whatever messages of hate are out there, they are not part of the sacred fabric. This makes the Holocaust theologically a different kind of challenge from any other, even though those instances of genocide or mass violence are horrific.

**John Pawlikowski:** Yes I agree with you about 75%. Because I think, for example, that in Rwanda, the role of the church in creating a sense of societal superiority on the part of one group—which then was the cause of the genocide against the other—the church bears some responsibility there. Now it isn't the same kind of explicit theology that we had relative to the Jews, but there is a certain theological—

**Paul Knitter:** It's the same dynamic.

**John Pawlikowski:** It's more like [David] Nirenberg<sup>8</sup> saying that while there may not be explicit anti-Judaism in this or that society, there's a kind of structure that is implanted in the culture and I think you can make the case in Rwanda that there was some involvement there and I mean from—

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** Of anti-Judaism?

**John Pawlikowski:** Not anti-Judaism, no, but a social theological involvement that accepted the notion of certain superiority among a particular group. I mean, the church was very instrumental, along with the Belgian government, in creating a social situation in which there was real stratification, in which one part of the society was put at the very top. I mean it even went down to the recruitment of students for the priesthood and all that kind of thing—who could go into seminary and from what tribe, what ethnic group and so on. Myself, though, on this question: it [i.e., the Holocaust] affects my ecclesiological definition but I would extend that to say that it ought to affect the basic fundamental identity of any religion, and that is that any religion that does not put human rights at the center of self-identity is a religion that is in trouble and a religion that is potentially a force for hatred and destruction in society. This is what I see happening now in these African [churches]. I'm so concerned, I spoke about this in Los Angeles a couple weeks ago and someone came up to me and asked: "are you promoting gay marriage?" I said I'm not addressing that question, what I am promoting is the basic recognition of human dignity, you cannot say that people are inferior. But for me it also raises the question, and this is even more controversial on the Christian side: are in fact efforts at evangelization a soft form of genocide? As my friend David Sandmel<sup>9</sup> says—David has said that that you know, when you look at it, if it were successful it would eliminate the Jewish community.

**Paul Knitter:** That's the intent.

**John Pawlikowski:** But talk about a hot issue in Christian circles right now, if you question evangelization...

**Paul Knitter:** So even when you look towards Native American religion and culture? Certainly, of course, they're not mentioned in the scriptures as the Jews are, and so there is that crucial

difference and I'm not sufficiently aware of that. Yet the attitude toward the religion, toward the Native Americans, was that they were of no value, that they were despicable, and this led to what we did in terms of trying to de-culturize them, trying to steal their children...

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** Yes, there's anti-paganism, anti-heathenism, and there's certainly enough hatred there, but it's still different. All I'm saying is that in terms of putting out a call for papers we did not get theologians or biblical scholars but historians, sociologists, anthropologists who are writing and working in these fields. There is very little theological reflection.

**Victoria Barnett:** So this brings me back to my question: if you had a class of undergraduate or graduate students from all different faiths, is there a reason why you would educate them about this history, not just so they would know this history, but because you hope you're giving them something useful and crucial theologically? As they go out into the world and confront their own ethical dilemmas, what would that [knowledge] be?

**Robert Cathey:** I don't have the historical confidence to do this, but the Illinois Holocaust Museum last spring hosted the first international conference on what they're now calling the Anatolian/Armenian/Assyrian genocide that started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and went into the 1920s. One of the stories that's told is that there were German diplomatic corps and military officers in Turkey when the genocide occurred, and they wrote reports back to Berlin about how this was carried out and there were officers that were horrified and asked should the German government do something. Well, the story that was told was that, before Poland was invaded Hitler said to his generals "kill as many people as you have to; who remembers the Armenians." So historically to compare what happened in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in that region of the world and then the Holocaust could be very generative for a conversation between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the United States today. Not to take away from the uniqueness of the Holocaust, but there is this historical connection between [that and] what was known about how Turkey was rid of many of its Armenian Christians.

**Paul Knitter:** Didn't I read that Hitler also referred to the extermination of Native Americans as kind of an example?

**Victoria Barnett:** Well, he referred to the problems of racism in this country, I don't know if he said Native Americans, but he certainly said, "Who is America to tell us anything; look at what they're doing."

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** Sometimes I am afraid that teaching the Holocaust may have the unintended outcome of teaching the technologies of destruction. Are there ways in which the lessons of the Nazis have actually served to improve methods of oppression, domination, but also annihilation? By going through the Holocaust Museum, there's a way in which we also are desensitized and take for granted something that used to be unthinkable and is now thinkable and it has a name. Sometimes I'm quite worried by that.

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** Moving directly from that, either apart from questions of uniqueness, or even saying it was unique: it doesn't mean that there aren't lessons to be learned. Some would say that it was unique because it was orchestrated, it was organized, it was engineered—I mean the Wannsee Conference—very consciously done. And certain people actually took delight in making towns "Judenrein" for Hitler ... Premeditated mass murder as an expression of love and loyalty to a leader and his ideology is certainly something I want my students to consider. So it

happened as you just said, it could happen again, and that's a lesson to be taught, to reflect on what human dignity means, as John said. We haven't learned it very well, because we've had all these other horrific crimes as Katharina said before. I'm not comparing sufferings, but I think that the fact that we have not learned the lessons of the Holocaust is in itself a reason to talk about it in a multi-religious classroom, as you asked.

**John Pawlikowski:** Regarding Katharina's point about the theological connection: certain Roma historians argue, and I'm not that familiar with the literature, that in traditional Christian literature there is an anti-gypsy motif that played right into the selection of the Roma as victims under the rubric of social purification. Because you had basically two groups of victims, the victims who were victims because of their failure to provide political allegiance, but then you had those who were designated as in some way parasitical on society and polluting society, and certainly the Roma were in that category, not as bad as the Jews, but nonetheless they were in that category. I think it would be remiss not to include in this conversation what's happened very recently with post-Holocaust theology, and that is its elevation in the minds of certain people to a fundamental theology of injustice, [claiming] that in fact post-Holocaust theology contributes mightily to the injustice against the Palestinians. That motif is out there, primarily I would have to say in Protestant circles, I haven't seen much of it in Catholic theological circles, but it's certainly there at the World Council of Churches. Many of us ran into this at a conference that was organized by the WCC ... where I myself and others were personally attacked on this score.

**Victoria Barnett:** Would you say that [this charge] distorts the body of post-Holocaust theology as you know it?

**John Pawlikowski:** Well, I would say I think it's a stupid charge, but nonetheless, yes, sure it distorts it. ...

**Victoria Barnett:** In conclusion, who is the person or the thinker in this field who really has had an influence on you, if there is someone? Is there somebody that you read to reflect on?

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** Irving Greenberg.

**Karla Suomala:** I was going to say the same thing. It's Greenberg.

**Katharina von Kellenbach:** Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. I would go to the survivor literature.

**Robert Cathey:** Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*.

**Victoria Barnett:** And do you have your students read these people still?

**Esther Menn:** Making a connection to the living people of Israel—that's my post-Holocaust theology. At our seminary we don't really talk about the Holocaust except at our interfaith *Kristallnacht* commemoration, but the connection to a living people, especially the Jewish community in our neighborhood, is an important conversation.

**Elena Procaro-Foley:** This constructive work on relationships that Esther mentions (whatever its source, for example people living in Israel or students' interacting with Holocaust survivors in the States) is so important, because on the one hand it prevents young people from thinking in a vacuum and believing that "history is past and it does not affect us;" while on the other hand it helps to continue to provide a hermeneutic for these dangerous texts that we have

in our tradition. Amy Jill Levine<sup>10</sup> has written about how dangerously easy it is for seminarians, for examples, to reinscribe anti-Jewish motifs into their teaching and preaching when they are learning the New Testament on continents where people have had no historical connection to the Holocaust and don't know [the literature on this].

**Esther Menn:** These connections to people are so important. It's the conversations and joining together, growing gardens in our neighborhoods, holding common commemorations and other events, that are so important—there has to be something else positive that we're building. Am Yisrael hai! The people of Israel lives!

**Karla Suomala:** In my survey course on Hebrew Bible, I use Tanakh, Jewish order, everything so it's a very Jewish approach to learning that text, as opposed to this Christianized veneer. The notes are different, the perspective is different, and all the texts I've required—the very mode of learning is Jewish, and I've integrated this into my Jewish courses and tried to integrate the Havruta style, where you learn the text in community.

**Robert Cathey:** Arthur Cohen makes a profound distinction between the cross on Golgotha as the redemptive mid-point of Christian history and the Shoah as a revelatory mid-point in Jewish history that involves not the slaughter of one Jew but rather millions of Jews without the Christian redemptive significance. *The Tremendum* highlights Jewish and Christian differences rather than the commonalities many Christians find. For example, Cohen calls attention to the Cold War phrase “Judeo-Christian tradition” that was highly significant to theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr but that expresses a false understanding of Judaism for Cohen and other Jews, and that subsumes Judaism into the Christian narrative.

**Victoria Barnett:** Thank you all for this discussion.

For additional resources see the *Selected Bibliography on Post-Holocaust Theology and Interfaith History*, following.

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<sup>1</sup> See the selected bibliography at the conclusion of this article as well as the bibliography of Daniel Langton's article in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> See Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, Modernity after the Holocaust* (1978).

<sup>3</sup> The 1934 Declaration written by Karl Barth in response to church tensions in Nazi Germany and adopted as the foundation of the Confessing Church; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barmen\\_Declaration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barmen_Declaration).

<sup>4</sup> See Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother* (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, a German Catholic theologian whose experience during National Socialism led him to advocate new understandings of Christianity in light of the Holocaust.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Swidler, Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University.

<sup>7</sup> David Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic Studies at Emory University; in this issue see Daniel Langton's discussion of his contributions to post-Holocaust theology.

<sup>8</sup> David Nirenberg, Jannotta Professor of Medieval History and Social Thought at the University of Chicago and author of the recent book *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> David Sandmel, Crown Ryan Professor of Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union and now Director of Interfaith Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League.

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<sup>10</sup> Carpenter Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and author of *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (2006).