

**Editor's note:** The book *Encountering the Stranger: A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Triologue* (reviewed in this issue) was written by a group of professors, many of whom had focused on the teaching of the Holocaust. In October 2007, as part of their writing process, they came to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum for a two-day workshop. The following articles by three group members reflect on how this continues to shape their thinking.

## Know before Whom You Stand

By John K. Roth

*“Do you feel our coming here is a good move?”*

Peter Haas, October 29, 2007

In the summer of 1995, I arrived in Norway for a sabbatical year that included research about the ways in which Nazi Germany's “Final Solution” targeted even the very small population of Norwegian Jews who lived north of the Arctic Circle. The items on my “to do” list included meeting an early August application deadline for participation in the first of a series of biennial symposia on the Shoah. Organized by Leonard Grob and Henry Knight, the symposium would take place the following June at Wroxton College, Oxfordshire, England. Grob and Knight convened and sustained a group of scholars—international, interdisciplinary, interfaith, and intergenerational—whose tenth meeting takes place in June 2014. From its inception, the Wroxton symposium has tapped its roots in Holocaust studies to advance reflection and action focused on present-day situations, particularly those in which ethical and spiritual concerns loom large. Its members commit to working together beyond the few days that we spend at Wroxton College every other year. Writing projects play a key role in that commitment.

One of the books in a growing list of Wroxton-related publications is *Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*. It resulted from Grob's patient but persistent persuasion that Holocaust scholars should share how their perspectives shed light on the dilemmas and prospects in that fraught situation. Work on that project led to the realization that the Wroxton writing circle could and should be enlarged to include Muslim voices in what largely had been Jewish-Christian discussions.

Dialogue needed to become *trialogue*. So it was that in the autumn of 2006, sixteen persons accepted invitations from Grob and me to work together on a writing project that eventually became the book called *Encountering the Stranger: A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Triologue*. Consisting of six scholars from each of the Abrahamic traditions, this cohort agreed to pursue a writing plan in which each chapter would have three parts: an essay by the primary author; responses by two other members of the writing circle, each of them representing a tradition different from that of the main essayist; the latter's reply to the responses. Beyond this structure, the aim was to see how triologue could address the fact that in the new millennium “collisions of faith” among the Abrahamic traditions have contributed to violence that threatens the well-being of individuals and groups worldwide. More than that, our writing group agreed that it would be worthwhile to engage in this reflection by making the Holocaust—a catastrophe

spawned by Christian hostility to Judaism and Jews—a touchstone and compass that show what can happen when individuals and religious traditions fail to regard the other as inviolable.

Fortunately, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C., Victoria J. Barnett, staff director of the Committee on Church Relations and the Holocaust (now the Committee on Ethics, Religion, and the Holocaust), learned about the project, concurred that the Holocaust could orient and ground it, and invited all eighteen contributors to the museum for a three-day workshop, October 29-31, 2007. We were gifted with the opportunity to meet one another face-to-face—some of us for the first time—as we explored ways in which engagement with the Holocaust might help inform creative approaches to Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.

Prior to arriving at the museum, the writers had been drafting their chapters, but everyone was encouraged to leave writing time and space to allow the experience awaiting us at USHMM to affect what we most needed to say. First at a Sunday evening gathering in the hotel where we were staying and then on Monday morning in a USHMM classroom, our seminar began conventionally with the contributors describing where their chapter drafts were going. Caution diminished and intensity grew as we explored museum exhibitions—together, in small groups, and individually—and then reconvened to share what we had seen and learned, felt and discerned. We found that it was one thing to be in the museum as an individual Jew, Christian, or Muslim, and something different and special to be there up close and personal with women and men whose traditions were different from and yet related to our own. This ferment influenced how we continued to think about what we were writing. What might engagement with the Holocaust teach us about key dangers of religious exclusivism? Would such engagement help us learn what inclusiveness and pluralism ought to mean? At a time when many Jews and Christians mistrust “the Muslim other”—and at a time when many Muslims mistrust both “the Jewish other” and the “Christian” West—could our time together at USHMM help us all to see how the three traditions could work to dispel such mistrust? In our own ways, each of us looked deeper to consider how confronting the Holocaust needed to shape what we were finding most important about encountering the stranger.

During our morning session on Tuesday, October 30, the Jewish scholar Peter Haas raised a question that we all wanted to address: “Do you feel our coming here is a good move?”

As I recall and the detailed seminar notes of Zayn Kassam confirm, nobody said *no*, but everybody agreed that doing interreligious dialogue explicitly in the presence of the Shoah increased the dialogue’s weight, partly because standing in that presence complicated our senses of personal and communal identity and made us think long, hard, and critically about what is most valuable and most problematic about our traditions and their interactions. We contemplated the shared feeling that in ways very different and yet closely related our traditions were vulnerable and shattered by the experiences recorded at USHMM. The words *decentering* and *recentering* threaded through our conversation. The former signified the challenge and need to be genuinely hospitable to the stranger and to welcome the pluralism such hospitality entails. The latter meant re-envisioning our own traditions so that their particularity advances rather than hinders the understanding, respect, and action that dialogue at its best can inspire.

At least for me, one experience shared at USHMM became pivotal as we worked toward decentering and recentering ourselves and our traditions. While exploring the permanent exhibition at USHMM, the contributors to *Encountering the Stranger* stood before the remnants of a Torah ark from the synagogue in the German town of Nentershausen. Desecrated but not destroyed completely in the November 1938 pogroms collectively called Kristallnacht, this Torah ark is honored within the museum, which is appropriate because the *Aron ha-Kodesh* (the Holy Ark), as it is called in Hebrew, occupies a special, sacred space in every synagogue.<sup>1</sup> It

does so because the ark houses scrolls, precious possessions for each and every Jewish community, that contain inscriptions of the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the most important parts of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*).

Visitors to USHMM are not told what happened to the Torah scrolls that were once safely kept in the ark of the Nentershausen synagogue. It is not far-fetched, however, to think that those scrolls, like so many others during the years of the Holocaust, were mutilated and burned. So, as one stands before the Torah ark at USHMM, an absence can be felt. Disrespect for and defacing of the other, as the scarred and empty Torah ark suggests, would silence—if it could—scripture that proclaims one God to be the creator of the world and human life, tells the story of Abraham, whose faith gave birth to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and affirms that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

Absence and silence can be intensified as one stands before the Nentershausen Torah ark at USHMM because, while the Torah scrolls from the Nentershausen ark are missing, Hebrew writing on its lintel, a supporting beam or mantel above the ark’s doors, is not. Like many Torah arks, the one at Nentershausen had an inscription taken from the Talmud, the authoritative rabbinical commentary on the Torah: *Da lifnei mi attah omeyd*—Know before Whom you stand.<sup>3</sup> These words, which call one to attention and accountability, to reverence and awe before God, the source and sustainer of life, did not escape the notice of those who plundered the Nentershausen synagogue in November 1938, for an unknown assailant attacked them in a violent attempt to silence their voice, erase their authority, and eradicate their credibility. Their scarred condition bears witness to shameless arrogance even as the wounded words provide a fragile and poignant, if not forlorn, judgment against the hubris and hatred that divide humankind.<sup>4</sup>

When the contributors to *Encountering the Stranger* reconvened for discussion after exploring USHMM’s permanent exhibition, the trialogue concentrated for a time on the Torah ark from Nentershausen. We came to feel that the ark had addressed us through the words on its lintel: Know before Whom you stand. Differences in our religious traditions meant that our experiences were not identical during and after the time when we faced those words, but all of us agreed that the encounter with the desecrated Torah ark and its scarred inscription made us deeply aware of concerns we shared. Whether our identities were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, we all could feel the loss, including the denial of freedom to practice one’s religion that would be ours if places and writings sacred in our own traditions were so horrifically disrespected and profaned. We could also feel abhorrence for any person or community identified with our own tradition who would stoop to such atrocity, an experience that made us mindful of our accountability and responsibility for the traditions that are ours.

With an audience that included the numerous museum staff whom Barnett especially invited to attend, a public discussion brought our time at USHMM to a close. The speakers included the Jewish scholars Rachel Baum and David Patterson. Khaleel Mohammed and Sana Tayyen represented Islam. Didier Pollefeyt and I spoke as Christians. My remarks noted that since USHMM’s opening in 1993, it has frequently been a place where things happen for the first time. The Wroxton symposium, too, has been a place where things have happened for the first time. Of course, before and after our time at USHMM, scholars have shared their papers in countless meetings, and Jewish-Christian-Muslim trialogue is more common in 2014 than it was in 2007. But in the history of USHMM, the Wroxton symposium, and that of Jewish-Christian-Muslim trialogue something distinctive did take place when scholars from those traditions were welcomed by the Museum to explore how attention devoted to the Holocaust might challenge, inspire, and advance interreligious understanding.

During our discussions at USHMM, we often wondered what would happen after we left that place and how our traditions could best make a positive difference in our suffering world. That wondering referred not only to the three traditions that met there, but also to the recognition that far from being monolithic each of the three is multi-faceted. Some of the most instructive and compelling moments in our time together took place when Muslims, or Jews, or Christians vigorously engaged and disagreed with one another—sometimes about the Holocaust itself—allowing the rest of us to listen and learn in ways that we had not experienced often enough.

Confronting the Holocaust makes nothing easy. To the contrary, engaging the Holocaust tends to complicate everything. Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue is no exception to those judgments. This is true because one cannot fully encounter the Holocaust without facing the contemporary world, too. At one point in our USHMM discussion, I asked: What would our dialogue be like if we took the Holocaust off the table? The response was that our dialogue would be polite and “nice,” but probably it would lack the urgency, intensity, and, importantly, the vulnerability that our standing together before the Nentershausen ark brought to the fore.

In 1995, I scarcely could have imagined that participation in the Wroxton symposium would take me to USHMM in the way it did in October 2007. Time at USHMM did much to advance *Encountering the Stranger*. Those discussions, however, also delayed the book’s publication because rethinking and rewriting went on for some time before Leonard Grob and I had a final manuscript to submit to the editors at the University of Washington Press, which published the volume in 2012. By that time dialogue-oriented discussions and books were proliferating, a fortunate trend that needs to be amplified and enlarged.<sup>5</sup>

Not many of those discussions and books center on the Holocaust and its reverberations, but that event remains waiting for the Abrahamic traditions to engage it dialogically. The contributors to *Encountering the Stranger* experienced that such engagement compels expanded comprehension and deepened gravity about where and before whom we all stand. Well shared, that experience will always be one that needs to guide and govern Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Authorized and incited by Nazi leaders when a minor German official died after an assassination attempt by a young Jew named Herschel Grynszpan, the antisemitic riots of Kristallnacht (“crystal night”) targeted Jewish communities throughout Germany and Austria on November 9-10, 1938. Sometimes those November pogroms are referred to as the “Night of Broken Glass” because the wreckage included so many smashed windows that the replacement value reached more than two million dollars in the cash equivalent at the time. The onslaught was far more devastating than that. A great many Germans, their religious heritage and identity overwhelmingly Christian, were involved and implicated in the widespread carnage. As their friends and neighbors watched, the perpetrators looted and wrecked Jewish homes and businesses, torched hundreds of synagogues while intentionally inactive fire brigades stood by, desecrated cemeteries, killed scores of Jews, and terrorized virtually every Jew in the Third Reich. In the aftermath, some thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. The November pogroms of 1938 showed that no Jew could ever expect to live a normal life in Nazi Germany.

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<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 1-2, 11-25, and Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>3</sup> See Berachot 28b.

<sup>4</sup> For insightful discussion of the significance of the Torah ark at USHMM, one that helped to inform the reflections here, see Henry F. Knight, “Before Whom Do We Stand?” *Shofar* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 116-34. One of the contributors to *Encountering the Stranger*, Knight particularly called attention to the Torah ark at USHMM when our trialogue took place there.

<sup>5</sup> For a sampling of recent books and websites devoted to Jewish-Christian-Muslim trialogue see the bibliography in *Encountering the Stranger: A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue*, ed. Leonard Grob and John K. Roth (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 263-66.