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Shoah and Theology of Suffering

Theodor Adorno observed that after Auschwitz the metaphysical capacity is paralysed. However, the present chapter is written in the conviction that some sort of talk is possible about the Shoah (Holocaust), that it is the duty of theologians and philosophers of religion to engage in such talk, and that at least part of this talk may be shared by Jews, Christians, and even by those, such as Adorno, who accept no traditional religious commitment; after all, notwithstanding his remark, Adorno himself reflected voluminously and productively on the Shoah.

We are still so close to the Shoah that if we are to talk about human suffering the Shoah must be our focus. We cannot talk of an abstract theological ‘problem of evil’ when real evil confronts us.

7.1 Uniqueness of the Shoah

I like the dedication of Julie Heifetz’s Oral History and the Holocaust: ‘With love and gratitude for my Grandfather, Joe Waltuch, whose parents died in the Holocaust, yet who maintained his faith in Man and God throughout his lifetime.’ It reminds me of a couple of German origin who were members of a Synagogue I served as rabbi over twenty years ago. They aroused my sympathy when they confided that they had lost their faith on learning of the suffering of their parents in the concentration camps. Only some time later did they reveal that their parents had actually survived, were alive and well in another country, and after their dreadful experience had become deeply religious. Those who had actually suffered, who had burned in the fire and could give authentic witness, had deepened their faith; those who had ‘heard only with the ear but seen not with the eyes’ had lost theirs. Certainly, faith can be stronger than Shoah. But it is not necessarily so. Even when it endures the fire, it may be hardened rather than changed; only

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rarely is it transformed into a profounder sense of the sadness and yet the beauty and redeemability of the world.

Was the Shoah unique? If we look at books of logic, we find discussions not of ‘uniqueness’, but rather of ‘similarity’, of which ‘truthlikeness’ is a special case. It is easy to say ‘The Shoah is unique’ without realising the consequences or range of possible meanings of such a statement; if one rephrases this as ‘The Shoah is in no way similar to any other event’ it is immediately apparent that one has made a statement in need of modification.

There is a trivial sense in which every event is unique, tied to a singularity of time and place. However, communication amongst people demands that events be classified, by considering their similarities, into general groups, for otherwise we could have no common language to talk about them. One may classify the Shoah as ‘an act of mass murder’, indicating its similarities with innumerable human atrocities of past and present; however, this broad category fails to draw attention to the most distinctive features of the Shoah. One may narrow the field by classifying it as ‘an attempted genocide’; there have been other attempted genocides (of the Armenians, for instance) and also actual genocides (for instance, of the indigenous population of Tasmania by the hand of the European settlers). Vahakn N. Dadrian has recently made an impressive attempt to sketch a theory of genocide which would incorporate the Holocaust, but it is doubtful whether even this grim classification captures the distinctive horror of the Shoah. Yehuda Bauer distinguishes between ‘genocide’, as ‘the forcible denationalization of a people, accompanied by selective mass murder of the victim people . . . the destruction of the educational, economic and religious systems of the conquered people, and their ultimate enslavement’ and the special case of ‘holocaust’, which is ‘the planned total annihilation of a whole people . . . [perhaps] for ideological reasons’.

Emil Fackenheim offers the following preliminary list of ‘basic facts’ about the Shoah which, though some may have occurred elsewhere, are in their combination unique:

Fully one-third of the Jewish people was murdered; and as this included the most Jewish of Jews – East European Jewry – Jewish survival as a whole is gravely in doubt.

This murder was quite literally ‘extermination’; not a single Jewish man, woman or child was to survive, or – except for a few