The Holocaust: Ideas and Their Consequences

Former Probe staffer Ray Cotton examines two conflicting worldviews in Nazi Germany, the Christian church and atheistic naturalism.

"Schindler's List," Steven Spielberg's award-winning film based on a novel by Thomas Keneally, brings us a story of great moral courage in the midst of a culture of fear and hate. Set in World War II Europe, during the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust, the movie chronicles the fanatical determination of the Nazi regime to eliminate the Jews from the face of the earth. Along the way, the movie teaches a lesson about the power of a single individual to do good, in spite of the circumstances and in the face of unbelievable difficulties.

The movie allows us to observe the moral growth that took place in the life of Oskar Schindler as he matured from a greedy war profiteer to a rescuer of Jewish people. Mr. Schindler went from amassing a personal fortune to draining that fortune and risking his life in the process. He saved 1,300 Jews from the Nazi death camps. But he could only save a small percentage of the persecuted Jewish people, and the movie re-emphasizes the horror of this tragedy.

Six million Jews (and five million non-Jews) went to their deaths under the hands of the Nazi exterminators. This means that half of all the Jews in Europe and a third of all the Jewish people on earth perished in the Holocaust. This historical lesson of man's inhumanity to man must never be forgotten and today, thanks to Holocaust museums in cities around the world and movies like "Schindler's List," the message is being kept alive.

1994 marked the 50th anniversary of the D-day invasion of Europe; it also marked the liberation of the first death camp, Majdanek, where 360,000 people, most of them Jews, were exterminated. The liberations continued as the Allied forces advanced during the next six months.

Auschwitz, the most infamous death camp, was liberated on January 27, 1945.{1} The stories of that came forth from those who liberated the camps were at first dismissed as too horrible to be true. But as each succeeding camp was liberated, it became impossible to deny the reality of it all. To this day the world continues to ask, how could such things happen in modern times? Even more frightening is the realization that the same forces which gave rise to the Holocaust are operating in our world today.{2}

Adolf Hitler, on the last day of his life, April 29, 1945, in the Berlin bunker, dictated these final words to the German people: Above all I charge the leaders of the nation and those under them to scrupulous observance of the laws of race and to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry.{3}

What was the overpowering idea that brought forth the paradigm that allowed Hitler and the Nazi party to come into power? Was it the anti-Semitism of the church or was it the ever growing idea of atheistic naturalism?

It has been asserted that the early church said the Jews may not live among them as Jews, that the secular society followed by saying the Jews could not live among them, and the Nazis ultimately said the Jews may not live. Is this a valid view of the progression of ideas that led to the Holocaust and, if so, how did this progression develop and what, if any, leaps of logic or inconsistencies took place during the process?

Accounting for the Holocaust

Accounting for the Holocaust, deciphering and explaining the social and moral conditions that led up to it, has prompted all sorts of theories. It is more than an academic question for if the same conditions occur again will we be able to forestall another Holocaust? Also, how could one of the world's most advanced nations become the seat of such cruelty and depravity? What ideas were in place in the German culture that led to this tragedy? How did these ideas gain enough of a following among the European people to produce such a hideous atrocity? These are important questions. They deserve serious answers, and we will now attempt to shed some light on the issues.

The Church and Anti-Semitism

First, we need to look at the record of the early Christian church. The early church was zealous in its efforts to convert both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were a major stumbling block because of their resistance to conversion, their unwillingness to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah. The first anti-Jewish policy started in the fourth century A.D. in Rome under Constantine. Comparing the anti-Jewish measures of the early Catholic Church canonical law with the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazi regime in the 1930s and early forties reveals a striking similarity. As soon as Christianity became the state religion of Rome, in the fourth century A.D., Jewish equality of citizenship was ended. Over the centuries this eventually led to expulsion of the Jews and the establishment of ghettos in Rome in the 1800s in which the Jews were incarcerated.{4}

The Roman Catholic church deviated greatly from the teachings of Jesus Christ as demonstrated in the parable of the good Samaritan and other lessons from the life and ministry of Christ found in the gospels of the New Testament. Christ's teaching was the ethic of love and the only individuals He

dealt with severely were those Jewish Pharisees and Scribes who were hypocrites. The attacks of the Apostle Paul were directed at the Judaizers (Phil. 3:2) who were trying to oppose the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles. The Judaizers often described the gentiles as dogs, so Paul called the Judaizers dogs. Paul was not attacking all Jews, but only those actively opposing the teachings of Christ.

But all the blame does not fall upon the Catholic church. Martin Luther and some other reformers in Germany were guilty of communicating an ever increasing anti-Jewish perspective.{5} Clearly, Jews were perceived as enemies of Christendom by many church leaders, but it is a huge leap from considering someone an enemy of your cause to seeing them as a non-person whom you are free to dispose of at will.

In today's culture, you may consider yourself to be anti-Nazi or anti-skinheads. This means you avidly oppose all that they stand for, but it does not mean you would actively pursue their physical demise, except in just retribution for their personal actions. In fact, if you saw one of them in physical danger, you would probably take action to protect them, possibly at your own personal risk. The Catholic church and many fathers of the reformation may be guilty of anti-Semitism, but that does not provide the foundation necessary to set the stage for the events to follow. The far greater question is how one arrives at the Nazi position of annihilation or "the final solution" to the "Jewish Problem"? That is, how did the German people come to the point of seeing the Jews as non-persons whom they could dispose of at will? What ideas came in to corrupt the thinking of a people steeped in church culture?

The Real Culprit: Atheistic Naturalism

At this point we must bring in a completely different world view, that of atheistic naturalism. Atheism is the doctrine that denies or disbelieves the existence of God or divine

beings. Naturalism, which goes hand in hand with atheism, is the belief that all truth is derived from a study of natural processes. All action is based on natural instincts and desires. Only the natural elements of the world are taken into account, the supernatural or spiritual is excluded.

Machiavelli's Evil Influence

To set the stage for a naturalistic worldview, one could go all the way back to Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), a great voice in the revival of the ancient view of political naturalism or power ethics, long suppressed in the Western world by the impact of the early Christian church. Machiavelli's most influential work, *The Prince*, was significant because it helped to mold modern minds and, in turn, modern history. His theme was plain: the ruler "who wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires."{6} In other words, do what you need to do to preserve your position and don't concern yourself with what is the ethical thing to do.

The Downward Spiral Continues

The ethical stance that whatever strengthens the state is right had a great influence on the thinking of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Hobbes, although heavily influenced by the ideas of Machiavelli, was also influenced by the revived Epicurean ideas of pleasure. Epicurean philosophy is centered around the goal of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Thomas Hobbes developed the idea of good being what we like and evil what we dislike, as well as the idea that self-preservation is achieved through the sovereign state. In Hobbes we can trace the merging of Machiavelli's power ethics philosophy with the Epicurean philosophy of pleasure.

The teaching of Hobbes influenced others such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Marx (1819-1883), and Friedrich

Engels (1820-1895). From this group came the power politics of men like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. In fact, Hitler personally presented a copy of Nietzsche's works to Benito Mussolini, and Mussolini submitted a thesis on Machiavelli for his doctor's degree.

From Neitzsche to Auschwitz (and the Gulag)

There is a need to take a much closer look at the ideas espoused by Nietzsche, since he became the primary influencer of two divergent worldviews or paradigms, both antagonistic toward the Jews and both responsible for the murder of countless millions of innocent people. One line leads to the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini, while the other leads to the communism of Lenin and Stalin. Nietzsche had a profound impact upon Hitler and subsequent politicians of power.

Although atheism has never lacked a spokesman, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche shines forth as the one who changed the flow of history with his eloquent presentations leading to the "death of God."

"There will be wars," Nietzsche had written, "such as have never been waged on earth. I foresee something terrible. Chaos everywhere. Nothing left which is of any value, nothing which commands: 'Thou shalt!'" Nietzsche and others prefigured and predicted the moral nihilism of the twentieth century, the revolt against reason and the limitless pursuit of the irrational. Nazi Germany materialized the progression toward this chaos.{7} "Nietzsche despised religion in general, and Christianity in particular. So profound and operative was Nietzsche's philosophy upon Hitler, that it provided the conceptual framework for his demogogical onslaught to obliterate the weak and inferior of this world."{8} Hitler's hatred of Christians was second only to his hatred of Jews and Gypsies.

Nietzsche was quick to attack the ethics of love as taught by Christ in the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. He believed that if mankind sought to show responsibility toward the poor and weak, then the losers would be in control. He predicted that the twentieth century would become the bloodiest century in history and that universal madness would break out. Hitler and Stalin brought forth the reality of his predictions.

In Nietzschean terms, the cause—atheism, and the result—violence and hedonism, are as logically connected as the chronological connection between Hitler's announcement of his intent in *Mein Kampf*, and the hell ushered in by the Third Reich.{9} Hitler took Nietzsche's logic and drove the atheistic worldview to its legitimate conclusion.

Even though there was anti-Semitism both in the Catholic church and expressed by reformation leaders, it was atheistic naturalism that provided the real power behind the Holocaust. In seeking to blame both the church and atheistic naturalism for providing the ideas that led to the Holocaust, how does one reconcile the huge antithesis between the two totally opposing worldviews?

One cannot, except to say that the weakness, or failure of the church to maintain biblical standards allowed for the inroads of anti-Semitism. The biblical position is totally at odds with the actions of the Holocaust. As we address the church, we can say the Holocaust may not have happened if the church had maintained obedience to biblical teaching, for love is the ultimate norm of the Christian ethic (Matt. 22:37-40).

But to the atheistic naturalists, we must say, you have faithfully followed out both the ideology and logical conclusions of your position.

The mass murder of the Jews was the consummation of his (Hitler's) fundamental beliefs and ideological position.{10}

There is a world of difference in the lessons to be learned from the two positions. The naturalist's hope is in man and looks at the world accordingly. The Christian's hope is in God and sees man as sinful. History bears witness to both the sinfulness and failure of man, i.e., history validates the Christian position and destroys the naturalist's position. The naturalist's only hope is in education. What hope does education give us for preventing another Holocaust? We will examine the hope of education and the true nature of man.

Is Education Really Our Best Hope?

The philosophy of atheistic naturalism can logically lead to the excesses of the Nazi and Communist regimes. Since this is true, howare we to prevent such horrors from happening again?

Many today believe the answer lies in education. Education does an excellent job of teaching us how to best do what we already believe in, but it does a dismal job of helping us see what it is that we should believe. It is at this very point that we realize the need for transcendent truth.

Man's Greatest Need

Man's greatest need is for a redemptive truth beyond himself. The murder of millions has been perpetuated by some of the most educated, cultured people in the world. While up to 12,000 people a day were being obliterated at the Auschwitz camps, the builders of those state of the art camps were enthralled by the music of Wagner. They had the best of education and of culture. The Bible tells us that the nature of man is flawed and that without help from beyond ourselves we are doomed to eternal death. Even Bernard Shaw recognized this problem as sin when he wrote:

The first prison I ever saw had inscribed over it "Cease to do evil, learn to do well": but as the inscription was on the outside, the prisoners could not read it. It should have been

addressed to the self-righteous free spectator in the street, and should have read, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”{11}

We all stand naked and guilty before God. Romans 3:10 says that “There is none righteous, no not one.” If the Holocaust did nothing else, it did strip away all illusions about the refined nature of man. Only when we are prepared to come humbly before God and confess our sin and ask for forgiveness and deliverance can we have a hope for the future. Speaking to the Jewish people, God said in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” This is a promise that all those who belong to the kingdom of God can apply and claim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are drawn to say that the Nazi’s “final solution” was the untimely child of the union of Christian anti- Semitism and German nationalism,{12} but Christian anti-Semitism is an oxymoron and is the product of an disobedient church, be it Catholic or Protestant. Jesus Christ, the One we adore was a Jew, the Apostles from whom we have the New Testament Scriptures were Jews, and all the teaching of the New Testament is built upon the foundation of Jewish Old Testament Scriptures. In contrast, the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany was the logical conclusion to the ideology that German nationalism was built upon, that of atheistic naturalism.

Therefore, the anti-Semitism of the church became the convenient, albeit invalid, excuse while the real reason for the Holocaust was the atheistic anti-Semitism of German nationalism based on a naturalistic worldview.

Notes

1. John Conroy, “Beyond One Man’s Heroism,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 10 July 1994, Section G, page 1.

2. Pauline B. Yearwood, “Reminders from a `Schindler Jew,'” *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 10 July 1994, Section G, page 1.

3. Adolf Hitler, “My Political Testament,” NCA, 6, Doc. 3569-PS, pp. 258-63.

4. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 5-6.

5. Peter J. Haas, *Morality After Auschwitz* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 20.

6. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1977), p. 44.

7. Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry* 1933-1945 (New York: Schoken Books, 1973), p. xiii.

8. Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1990), p. 17.

9. Ibid., p. 26.

10. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), p. 3.

11. Bernard Shaw, Preface to “Imprisonment” in *English Local Government* quoted in *Making Moral Decisions*, ed. D. M. MacKinnon (London: SPCK, 1969), p. 67.

12. Dawidowicz, p. 23.

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