

Jesus' Cross in Elie Wiesel's *Night*

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In 1997, Norman G. Finkelstein impugned Elie Wiesel's integrity about the truth of what is written in his 1960 memoir, *Night* (84). Earlier, Alfred Kazin also questioned the truth of the experiences recounted in Wiesel's memoir. Kazin wrote that he would not be surprised to find that the episode describing the inmates who were hanged had been invented (Zesmer 1). Wiesel responded in his autobiography, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1995), by naming the Jewish victims. In his anguished statement the author did not hide the hurt feelings inflicted by Kazin's questioning of his honesty. Wiesel added, perhaps unwisely, that those, like Alfred Kazin, who question the truth of his memoir join the ranks of Holocaust deniers (335-37).

The controversy between Kazin and Wiesel, one attacking and the other counter-attacking, continues. Meanwhile, readers are left with the memorable scene recounted in *Night* of the three hanged Jews, one of them a boy:

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on

the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. . . .

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

“Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

“Cover your heads!”

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive. . . .

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.”

(75-76)

Is the scene fact or fiction? Did Wiesel consciously (or unconsciously) employ the image of Christ’s cross in it?

The Holocaust *ought* to make a difference to Christians in their fundamental beliefs about sin and redemption and Jesus Christ. The soteriological significance of the Christian religion is sharpened to a deadly point when one admits the historical evolution of traditional Christian anti-Judaism into modern racial anti-Semitism, an evolution of which the consequence ultimately and finally was the Holocaust.

Of course, it could be argued that anti-Semitism attaches not to Christian faith *per se* but rather to a group of individuals who, lacking love and derelict in their duty *as Christians*, proved faithless to their lord, Jesus Christ. But this argument can be taken only so far. If Christianity possesses integrity of faith, an inner unity of belief and practice, then the Christian, precisely *as a Christian*, is morally and intellectually obligated to answer the question: what difference does the Holocaust make to one's faith in Jesus Christ? When in the first century Paul carried the message of Jesus out of Jerusalem to the gentile peoples of Asia Minor, he, as a Jew, was convinced of its truth and believed that if his fellow Jews did not then accept that truth, they would eventually do so. Now, almost two thousand years after Paul, Christians should reflect on the truth of the gospel, not in spite of, but because of Auschwitz.

This is more easily said than done, however. The trouble is that with few exceptions the Holocaust is seen by Christians as a particularly Jewish subject, not just because so many Jews were involved in the event, but in a deeper more troubling sense: whatever questions the Holocaust raises, whatever institutions, values, beliefs are to be re-examined in its aftermath are matters about which only Jews should concern themselves. Given this attitude, one should recognize the ordinary, inescapable element of human indifference; one really does not weep over the suffering and death that only touch others. But such indifference also suggests the deep difficulty Christianity meets in confronting the worst disaster in Jewish history, indeed the worst disaster in universal human history.

Paul in his letter to the Romans writes that "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and concludes, "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him" (5:8-9). Paul was among the first followers of the Nazarene to proclaim the conquest of sin in and through Jesus Christ. Unquestionably, his statement of belief here defined subsequent Christian thinking. The Passion narratives of the Synoptic Gospels were decisively influenced by Paul's view of the cross's victory over sin and death, and this theme of victory is raised to a majes-

tic level in the prologue to the Gospel of John where Jesus Christ is equated with the Word of God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (1:1-5)

The Christian's belief that God was in Christ means that the world's sinful downfall was overcome even before the world began, for "the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness" has never quenched it.

The triumph of the cross over sin and death is sealed by the evidence of the empty tomb, faith's expression of God's miraculous resurrection of the crucified Jesus. For this reason the Gospel narratives became *evangelion*, the "good news."

However differently the various theological traditions of Christianity have interpreted the victory of the cross, it is this message of accomplished redemption that gives essential and abiding form to the Christian faith. And with that message Christian theologians are confronted with extraordinarily painful questions: how could sin appear in the world after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; why has human history occurred as it has; and how should one bring the sin, suffering, and evil of the past two thousand years in line with one's theological commitment to the victorious cross? Before searching for answers to these terrifying questions, consider how some great modern Christian thinkers have struggled to provide their own responses.

First, Henry Nelson Wieman, the distinguished American philosopher of religion who taught for many years at the University of Chicago Divinity School, sought to reconcile his own keen sense of the brutality of history with the message of accomplished redemption. He discovered what he believed to be an appropriate analogy from World War II, arguing in *The Source of Human Good* (1946) that

Christ's defeat of sin was like the Russians' defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad: there would be more fighting, but the decisive battle had been won, the tide of history had turned. Would that it were true! It would be good to believe that history is a great war where Christ can and did win the decisive battle over sin. But if history shows anything, it shows that Christ did not win but rather lost the decisive battle, not once, but over and over again.

Karl Löwith, the German existentialist philosopher, in his brilliant study, *Meaning in History* (1949), makes this point in detail:

As a history of the world, the empirical history after Christ is qualitatively not different from the history before Christ if judged from either a strictly empirical or a strictly Christian viewpoint. History is, through all the ages, a story of action and suffering, of power and pride, of sin and death. In its profane appearance it is a continuous repetition of painful miscarriages and costly achievement which end in ordinary failure—from Hannibal to Napoleon and the contemporary leaders.

He adds:

There never has been and never will be an immanent solution of the problem of history, for man's historical experience is one of steady failure. Christianity, too, as a historical *world* religion, is a complete failure. The world is still as it was in the time of Alaric; only our means of oppression and destruction (as well as of reconstruction) are considerably improved and are adorned with hypocrisy. (190)

But if the coming of Christ and the work of Christianity have not materially reduced the world's sinfulness, what can one make of Paul's faith in Christ's victory over sin? Löwith senses the problem. Like Wieman, Löwith also wants to interpret the appearance of Jesus Christ as an actual revelation of grace, which historically anticipates the complete redemption of man awaited in the End-Time. He re-

gards the relationship between the good that Christ brings and its failure to defeat the powers of evil as paradoxical, ambiguous, a spiritual-cosmic struggle, both visible and invisible. Löwith writes:

Since Christ these (evil) powers are already subjected and broken, but nevertheless remain powerfully alive. Invisibly, history has fundamentally changed; visibly, it is still the same, for the Kingdom of God is already at hand, and yet, as an *eschaton*, still to come. This ambiguity is essential to all history after Christ: the time is already fulfilled and yet not consummated. (191)

Löwith solves the problem presented by a Christ who came to redeem a history that remains manifestly unredeemed by appeal to a God who, when he chooses, will replace history with a transcendent Kingdom. Thus, what begins in his thinking with a realistic perception of the tragedy of human history ends with the conventional rhetoric of special Christian pleading: what sense does it make to speak of “(evil) powers . . . subjected and broken, but [still] . . . powerfully alive”? If they are broken, then why alive? If they are alive, then they are not broken. Löwith speaks of the “ambiguity . . . essential to all history after Christ.” But does the ambiguity lie in history or in the struggles of Christian theology to find meaning in the wretchedness of human history in relation to belief in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death.

The conclusion necessarily reached is that Christian belief in the victory of Christ’s cross is *a priori* truth, a formal, not empirical truth, a truth established independently of history, faithfully adhered to as “true belief” apart from the factual evidence of history. Holding to such “true belief” leads Christians to a homogenized picture of sin, a flattening out of the experience of guilt. When it is claimed that Christ died for all human beings, whatever their sins, however great or small, then little attention is paid to sins themselves; no degree is allowed in human culpability, no perception of the magnitude of guilt. How very different the medieval symbol of purgatory, which was an insightful, if

vengeful, acknowledgment of the differences in wickedness. Martin Luther and the Reformers allowed for no degree of sinfulness. Led by Paul's words, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), they did away with differences. The liberalization and secularization of modern western culture completed the process begun in the sixteenth century by going one step further and doing away with sin itself.

Against this brief overview, is the scene of the hanged boy in Wiesel's *Night* fact or fiction? Whether Wiesel consciously employed images from the story of Christ's crucifixion to tell his own story perhaps does not matter. The same formal elements are there: three Jews, each accused of crimes, one a youth and the symbol of innocence—all forsaken by God. Some Christian theologians interpret this story as a Jewish vindication of the Christian belief in salvation through Christ's cross; it also may be a parody of the Christian teaching of the cross. Christians do not teach the cross without also teaching the empty tomb. The Christian story of the cross ends not in defeat but in victory, in resurrection. But there is no empty tomb in Wiesel's story, no resurrection; the story of his cross ends not in new life but with more death.

Christians are exhorted to fashion their faith after Paul's words to the Christian converts of Corinth: "if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). But what should the Christian believe about Christ when in the twentieth century millions of Jews are put to death and not one rises again? There is an elementary question of justice here. The real problem with Christian teaching of the resurrection is not scientific—"Can it happen?"—but rather moral—"What difference has it made?" Indeed, if one turns Paul's statement around and begins with the ineffectuality of Christian faith through history, one must conclude that men and women are still very much in sin, and Christ did not defeat death. Few can read *Night* without feeling that the time has long since passed when one could accept the cross as the symbol of healing through sacrifice, of restoring the order of things by the shedding of innocent blood. After Auschwitz the meaning of sacrificial atonement for Christians has lost its credibility. One recognizes that the

experience of suffering can reveal a truth that is otherwise hidden. But when suffering, as in the destruction of European Jewry, vastly exceeds the human limit, then darkness replaces light, and truth is swallowed up by emptiness.

What Wiesel's story teaches is that if God and man wait to be reconciled and the world made whole by the blood of a young innocent Jew in the twentieth century, as in the first century, perhaps salvation is not worth the cost. Dostoevsky understood this: in *The Brothers Karamozov* (1880), Ivan says to his younger brother Alyosha, "I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of . . . one tortured child" (290).

If Wiesel's story is a parody of the Christian theology of the victorious cross, it is also a penetrating insight into the perennial truth of the cross, for each day of the earth's history countless, unnamed human beings suffer their crosses unwillingly and die without hope. The New Testament Evangelists wrote of the empty tomb because they sincerely believed that Jesus was the Messiah, who upon his death rose to heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father. But in telling their story they did not overlook the deepest, most human episodes in Christ's Passion. They describe the scene in Gethsemane where, as the hour of tribulation approaches, Jesus' faith is for the first time crossed with desperation, and he implores the Lord, "Abba, Father, all things *are* possible unto thee; take away this cup from me" (Mark 14:36; cf. Matt. 26:39 and Luke 22:42). Here is a powerful symbol of the common truth that no human being chooses his cross gladly but rather suffers it in humiliation and defeat. The Gospel writers knew that every cross is suffered alone. Peter, who was closest to Jesus, denies his master three times, and all the disciples flee the scene of Jesus' arrest in mortal fear for their own lives. Finally, Jesus on the cross speaks the words of universal human dereliction taken from Psalm 22 (vs. 1): "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 23:46; cf. Mark 15: 34).

No Christian artist expressed this truth of dereliction more powerfully than Matthias Gruenewald, the sixteenth-century German painter, in two depictions of Christ on the cross: his *Crucifixion* for the Isenheim Altarpiece and a second painting, also titled *Crucifixion*, for the

Tauberbischofsheim Altarpiece. The ashen, bruised, dislocated bones, the open mouth of pain, the elongated, skeletal fingers supplicating the silent heaven force one to see a pitiful, broken man alone on the cross, subjected to final punishment, a true picture of innocent, unredeemed suffering. Emil Fackenheim suggests that it was precisely this true picture of Jesus' torment that aroused Christian animosity against Jews as "Christ-killers," not the idealized pictures of the cross where the body of Christ is transfigured, glorified in the imagery of the resurrection.¹ To appreciate Fackenheim's point within the tradition of crucifixion art, one has only to compare the terrifying Gruenewald pictures with Salvador Dali's *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, a masterpiece in its style, in which the Christian belief in the victory of the cross is fueled by the sight of Christ's body, full and sensuous, luminous with promise of new life, fixed on a cross which towers majestically over the world.

The terrible paradox in Jewish-Christian relations throughout history is that often the false story of the cross had to be told to safeguard Jews from the contempt of Christians. The true story is that of human dereliction. The same common human cry of dereliction is expressed in Wiesel's story of the hanged boy who symbolizes each Holocaust victim. Thus, Wiesel expresses a truth of the New Testament seldom seen by its Christian readers—that the Jew who died on a cross in Roman Palestine portended the fate of Jews and countless other human beings in succeeding centuries. Paul employs the language of Temple sacrifice when he states his belief in the redemption Jesus wrought through the shedding of his blood: "Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood" (Rom. 3:24–25). But if, as Wiesel's story suggests, the sacrifice was in vain, if Christ's blood produces not new human life but more Jewish blood, has any redemption taken place? And if no redemption, no reconciliation between God and man, has occurred, what price in truth do Christians pay to sustain their religion?

¹Fackenheim asserted this in the discussion following my presentation of "Was the Cross Triumphant over Sin at Death? The Question for Christians after the Holocaust," given at "Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of

This is the question Christians are bidden to ponder in their faith, both for themselves and for their different churches, now in this day the light of which continues to be shed by the fires of the Holocaust.

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