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The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism

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For the first fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, the Nazi persecution and mass murder of the Jews of Europe was rarely the subject of public debate or historical analysis. Only after the Eichmann trial did the term ?Holocaust? gain widespread acceptance. Even then, this tragedy was largely considered as a matter for the Jewish people alone. Not until after an increasing volume of criticism arose in the 1960s and 1970s did the Christian churches begin to acknowledge that their role as bystanders needed to be reexamined. In more recent years, a large number of books, usually written with a moralistic tone, have focused attention on the specific role of individual churches and church authorities. Tom Lawson?s examination of the Church of England?s attitudes is an expansion of an earlier article in *Twentieth Century British History*, 14.2 (2003), and an addition both to the history and the historiography of Holocaust studies.

Lawson rightly challenges the view that the avoidance of any discussion in the immediate postwar years of the Nazis? persecution of the Jews was the result of the preoccupation with Cold War crises and polemics. Instead he suggests that we need to understand the responses of the Church of England, throughout the whole period from 1933 onwards, from within its own earlier mentalities and preconceptions. He shows clearly that, in the 1930s, the Anglican perception of Nazism as an evil ideology, and the support given to the persecuted German churches, were primary factors in interpreting the fate of the Jews. It was perhaps

understandable that churchmen should come to regard Nazi totalitarianism as an anti-Christian relic of Teutonic barbarism. Such views were useful after 1939 to strengthen the moral justification for war. Secular British propaganda did the same. But leading members of the Church of England, especially Bishop George Bell of Chichester, made a distinction. They did not condemn all Germans as warmongers or racial murderers, but sought to preserve the image of the German churches, especially the Protestants, as being the victims of Nazi anti-Christian violence and oppression. Bishop Bell led the way in claiming that there were other Germans who were resisting Nazi totalitarian ambitions, and on whom the task of rebuilding Germany would fall once Nazism was overthrown. The persecution of the Jews was thus first seen as part of the Nazis? demonic destructiveness. There was every sympathy for these victims of the Nazi system, especially after Kristallnacht. And whereas the British government played down the Jewish persecution out of fear that they would be obliged to do something to assist them, such as opening Palestine as a haven of refuge, the Church of England led a vigorous and continuous campaign, especially in 1942 and 1943, against its own government?s narrow-mindedness.

But Lawson?s point is well taken. The Church of England was persuaded of Nazism?s evil character because Hitler had first persecuted the churches. When the most prominent Protestant pastor, Martin Niemöller, was imprisoned in 1937, he was seen by all the British churches as the symbol of Nazi oppression, and was prayed for and remembered in Anglican and other parishes across the land. The Church of England?s leaders, especially Archbishop William Temple, backed by Bell, were convinced that their vocal and repeated protests against the Nazi excesses, and their support for the Confessing Church?s stand against totalitarian control, were their contribution to rescuing Christian civilization from disaster. They were encouraged when they found at least one German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, agreeing with them. From their perspective, the fate of the Jews was not sui generic, but only a culmination of Nazi iniquity. The Church of England had a moral duty to support all these victims and did so to the best of its ability.

Before 1939 the Church had led the way in seeking support for refugees from Nazi tyranny. After the outbreak of war, the focus became more on the need to provide asylum in Britain or its empire for those few who could escape, despite the severe restrictions placed on all aliens. But by 1942 the Church?s remarkable flood of indictments and protests got nowhere, and only revealed its impotence in the face of the British government?s obduracy. Even in 1945, the revelations of the horrors of the concentration camps only reinforced this interpretation of Nazi barbarity, but did not lead to a realization that the genocide of the Jews had been something special. Instead the church leaders were determined to lead a crusade to re-Christianize Europe and thus purge their civilization of Nazism?s demonic forces. This campaign, however, had no place for Jews, except as potential converts.

The overthrow of Nazi totalitarianism aroused optimistic hopes, not only in the Church of England, but also in other churches, for a renewal of Christian civilization. The longed-for peace, disarmament, and prosperity would surely follow. But very soon the dark clouds of a new totalitarian and anti-Christian threat from the Soviet Union became apparent. The Churches were once again called to mobilize themselves for an armed defence of their heritage. And in such circumstances, the need was obvious to enlist in this new cause those Germans, especially in the Wehrmacht, who were presumed to have been anti-Nazi all along. Thus a continuity between the interpretations of the 1930s and those of the 1950s could easily be established and maintained. Nazi tyranny was seen as a temporary sickness that had afflicted only a section of the German population. But this understanding of Nazism gave no priority to its antisemitic imperative, and certainly would not have agreed that all Germans were ?antisemitic eliminationists?. The end of the war in 1945 and the onset of the Cold War?s antagonisms only confirmed this view, and led to the downplaying of Jewish suffering and its full implications.

Lawson corrects those interpretations which minimize the importance of church opinion, or suggest that a pessimistic and self-doubting community existed in those years. To the contrary, he praises the confidence of the Church of England leaders, but does suggest that their concern for German Protestantism as a bastion of anti-Nazi resistance left no room for a closer regard for Jewish concerns. And Bishop Bell, like his colleagues throughout the Anglican hierarchy, was far removed from even considering the consequences of Christian antisemitism itself, or the extent to which the majority of German churchmen had (willingly

enough) supported it. Such a self-critical examination, though promoted at the time by a maverick Church of England clergyman, James Parkes, got nowhere. Parkes?s pleas for a recasting of Christian-Jewish relations had to wait for another forty years.

Lawson?s point of view is, of course, drawn from the perspective of the twenty-first century. Like others, he engages in wishful thinking in writing history as it should have happened. Hence his verdict that Bishop Bell was myopic about the Jewish fate is itself a distortion. He appears to be promoting a more pluralistic viewpoint than was prevailing in the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps he would have been wiser to have avoided such post-hoc moralisms. Instead he might well have shown how similar the Anglican attitudes on the Jewish question were to those of the British Catholics, or indeed to the very similar views held by Pope Pius XII. He nowhere discusses the attitudes of the British Jewish community. Nor does he make any mention of the extent to which Anglican attitudes towards the Holocaust were affected by what was happening in Palestine/Israel. This could perhaps be the subject of a sequel, and thus make use of his commendable skills at research and analysis.

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