What is the Holocaust?

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The controversy which arose in the summer of 1989 over the presence of a Carmelite convent adjacent to the former Nazi deathcamp at Auschwitz in Poland momentarily brought to world attention the entire field of Holocaust studies, including the theology of the Holocaust. In America, for example, various colleges and universities have established institutes for study of the Holocaust. These centres usually sponsor conferences and scholarly meetings, offer courses on various aspects of the Holocaust, and often do the important work of recording oral and video testimonies from the shrinking pool of concentration camp survivors, thereby documenting the brutality of those years. Some American states have introduced Holocaust studies components into the social studies curricula of their primary and secondary schools. In both Jewish and Christian theological circles, the Holocaust has raised anew such questions as the meaning of suffering and the existence of God, Providence and the vicissitudes of human history, and the entire Christian perspective on Jews and Judaism (including what role Christianity may have played in aiding and/or abetting anti-Semitism).

The Auschwitz convent controversy focused attention on the entire realm of Holocaust studies. But what the controversy did not do was to foster discussion about the central issue upon which the controversy turned: what is the Holocaust?

It is the ambiguity of the definition of "Holocaust" which provided fertile soil not just for the debate over the Carmelite cloister at Auschwitz but also for other disputes. During his June 1991 pilgrimage to Poland, Pope John Paul II was criticised by some Jewish organisations for speaking of abortion on demand as a "Holocaust" of the unborn. The attack on the Pope's statement was already anticipated in the fall of 1990 when Rabbi Leon Klenicki of the American Jewish Congress took Denver Archbishop Stafford to task for using the term "Holocaust" to describe legalised abortion in the United States. It is no coincidence that many of the institutes mentioned above which study this tragedy deliberately call themselves "Holocaust *and Genocide*" institutes, setting the Holocaust in a position by itself.

What is in a name? Most Jews want to define the term "Holocaust" to mean those Jews who were murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War as part of the systematic extermination of that people envisioned by the *Endlosüng der Judenfrage*. They argue that the Holocaust refers to Jews and to Jews alone, justifying this *sui generis* definition of the term by insisting that only Jews *as Jews* were marked for extermination. Other peoples might

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have been sent to slave labour, deported, been subjected to dubious "medical" experimentation, or even killed, but every Jew was a marked target precisely because he was a Jew. Not all the Nazis' victims were Jews, but all Jews were the Nazis' victims.

On the other hand, the Polish Catholics who launched plans in 1984 for a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz to do the work of prayer and of reparation did not see the Holocaust in such exclusive terms. The twin terrors of Nazism and Communism had left their marks on virtually every Polish household during World War II. Poles were being martyred at Auschwitz for eighteen months before the first major transports of Jews began arriving. Much of the Polish clergy and intelligentsia was being decimated, Polish Catholics thus saw nothing in the historical record preventing them from honouring their dead in the place of their deaths, in a manner consonant with the prescriptions of their own religious tradition. If Jews wanted to mark the memory of their dead there, they were welcome to do so. The Catholic tradition did not exclude the Jewish.

It was this Jewish tendency to read the "Holocaust" in exclusively Jewish terms that proved to be a sticking point in the controversy. Attempts to broaden the term to take cognizance of the Gentile victims of Hitler are branded "revisionism" (the same charge, for example, used against neo-Nazi groups which try to deny that the Holocaust ever took place). For various Jewish organisations in America and western Europe, the entire meaning of Auschwitz was to be found in the extermination of the Jews which occurred there. The losses of others were relegated to what historian Richard Lukas has called "the forgotten Holocaust."[1] Protests erupted in the wake of these organisations' insistence that the presence of the Carmelite nuns detracted from the Jewishness of that site of genocide and was offensive to the memory of Jews who perished at Auschwitz. The protestors demanded that the convent be removed.[2] This essay seeks to examine the Auschwitz convent controversy in the light of the agreements which were signed at Geneva and how those agreements might have contributed to the 1989 controversy, as well as to its resolution. Attention is being paid to the ambiguity of terms which permitted a plurality of readings of those agreements. It is to be hoped that this discussion will reveal how self-defeating this selective reading of the Holocaust ultimately is in terms of any lessons we hope to glean from that experience.

On 22 February 1987 an agreement[3] was signed in Geneva. The signatories included various Jewish organisations (including the European Jewish Congress, represented by Theo Klein), Franciszek Cardinal Macharski (in whose archdiocese Auschwitz lies) together with one of his auxiliary bishops and two advisors, and three other European cardinals (Danneels of Brussels-Malines, Decourtray of Lyons, and Lustiger of Paris). The agreement (which had been preceded by a declaration signed in Geneva seven months earlier by many of the same participants[4]) stipulated that an interfaith centre, to which the Auschwitz convent would be relocated, should be built and that the necessary funds should be raised by the churches in

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western Europe by February 1989.

That date came and went. Before it did Cardinal Macharski informed the Jewish representatives that, given the practical circumstances of building possibilities in Poland, compliance with the time schedule contained in the February 1987 Geneva Agreement was impossible. This delay precipitated protests from Jewish representatives, culminating in two incidents outside the Carmel.[5] On July 14 and 16, 1989 seven protestors, led by American Rabbi Avi Weiss, trespassed on to the grounds of the Carmel. In the July 14 incident, the trespassers 'banged' (the word used by the Krakow Chancery) on the convent door demanding that the nuns leave, affixed banners to the convent, and used abusive language against the nuns and the Church. On July 16 the trespassers again invaded the convent grounds and repeated their actions of two days earlier. During the second incident the trespassers interrupted entrance to and exit from the convent for five hours on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, one of the times when the cloistered sisters were permitted to receive visits from their families.

The two July incidents resulted in Cardinal Macharski suspending the Geneva Agreement;[6] a move which evoked further criticisms. The crisis reached its peak on August 26 when Jozef Cardinal Glemp, the Primate of Poland, during a sermon at the Polish national shrine in Czestochowa,[7] defended the presence of the nuns at Auschwitz. Subsequently the Polish Episcopate signalled its continuing readiness to implement the Geneva Agreement (something Cardinal Macharski had been committed to all along), some degree of Jewish financial support was obtained in western Europe, and groundbreaking for the proposed interfaith centre took place in February 1990.

Much of the controversy over the Auschwitz Carmel has centred on the various statements signed in Geneva. A critical reading of the texts of those documents might help to shed some light on the reasons for this unfortunate controversy.

The first document signed in Geneva, on 22 July 1986, is a declaration. It has no operative paragraphs. It is, rather, a statement of principles, a call to remembrance addressed to the contemporary world and to future generations. It seeks to remind people of what took place at Auschwitz and at Birkenau, and prays that in the future human rights might be better protected.

The July 22 declaration speaks of Auschwitz and Birkenau as "symbols of the Final Solution." It recalls the deaths of six million Jews in the Shoah. The declaration summons people to remember the Nazi Final Solution "in the silence of [their] . . . hearts" and "in silent prayer " to resolve better to respect "the rights of others, *of all others*, to life, liberty, and dignity" (emphasis-added). It also mentions "all of those murdered at Auschwitz—Jews, Poles, Gypsies, Russian prisoners of war" and concludes with a quotation from Zephaniah 1:15.

A careful reading of the July 22 declaration is instructive both for what it does and does not say. It does not say anything about the Carmel or about

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any sites of religious commemoration at Auschwitz, It does call to mind the heinous genocide committed at the camp. While indicating that Auschwitz and Birkenau have been identified in a special way as "symbols" of the Nazi Final Solution, the Declaration also takes note of the Gentile populations that perished there as well as calling for an increased respect for the human rights of all peoples.

Nothing in the July 22 declaration, therefore, can be construed as an explicit commitment towards removing the Carmelites from Auschwitz. Given the Draconian tragedy which befell Poland during World War II, suffering the highest losses of any of the parties involved in the war (220 per 1,000 population)[8] Poles would certainly want to perpetuate a memory of the levels to which human inhumanity could sink. There is no denying that the Jews were a special target of Nazi persecution. At the same time the July 22 declaration makes it clear that they were not the *only* targets.

At most, only certain inferences which presaged the 22 February 1987 Agreement can be drawn from the July statement. The July declaration speaks twice of silent meditation in the face of the Holocaust. Those phrases anticipated the Jewish position that there be no permanent place of Catholic worship at the camp. To draw such conclusions, however, requires reading the July declaration with the benefit of hindsight, for on the face of it the call for silence seems innocent enough: it could have been taken simply as requiring nothing more than the respectful silence accorded to the deceased and a reflective meditation on human possibilities for evil.

In the light of the relatively noncontroversial (and, at worst, ambiguous) text of the July 22 declaration, the formal Geneva-Agreement of 22 February 1987 makes several major steps. The agreement opens with three paragraphs speaking of Auschwitz as the place of the *Shoah*, calling for respect for the dead, and also remembering the persecutions undergone by the Poles. Following this are six operative paragraphs. Paragraph one commits the Catholic side to establishing "a centre for information, education, encounter, and prayer." The second stipulates that the centre will be located outside the camp and should promote discussion of the *Shoah* and the persecution of the Polish people, as well as combat "disinformation" and "revisionism" about the *Shoah* and foster Christian-Jewish dialogue. Paragraph three states that the interfaith centre "constitutes both the continuation and-the outcome of the commitments" of the July 22 1986 meeting and, thus, "implies" that the Carmelite activities really belong in this new centre. " . . . [N]o permanent place of Catholic worship within the boundaries of the camp" should exist; "Each one will be able to meditate there according to personal feelings, religion, and faith." Paragraph four entrusts Cardinal Macharski with supervision of the progress of the interfaith centre project and commits the *other* European bishops to raise the means necessary to realize this project by February 1989. Paragraph five supplies Jewish acceptance of the preceding paragraphs. The sixth paragraph states that all the parties were guided by a commitment to protecting the uniqueness of the *Shoah* and to respecting the faith of both the living and the dead,

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Even a cursory comparison of the July 1986 declaration with the February 1987 agreement indicates that the derivation of the latter's particulars from the former's principles is, at very least, a debatable proposition. The specifics of the February agreement *can*, but not necessarily *must*, be drawn from the principles in the July declaration.

To say that the *Shoah* is symbolised in a special way by Auschwitz and Birkenau does not mean to imply that it gives Auschwitz and Birkenau their *exclusive* meaning. It does not necessarily follow from recognising that these camps were the epitome of the Nazi program against European Jewry that the significance of these camps should be only Jewish. The historical record itself does not support this claim. Auschwitz received its first prisoners in May 1940: German criminals from Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Poles arrived in late May 1940, in a contingent of prisoners sent from Dachau to prepare the camp (e.g., mount barbed wire). By mid-June, 728 Polish political prisoners were interned there.[9] Jews did not begin arriving in significant numbers at Auschwitz until early 1942. By that time, St. Maximilian Kolbe had already been martyred there. In the light of these facts the February agreement distorts the historical record: it pays lipservice to the "martyrdom of the Polish people and the other peoples of Europe", but gives the lion's share of attention to the *Shoah*. Indeed, the Agreement specifies that the proposed interfaith centre must "prevent [the Shoah from] being reduced to the level of the commonplace or made a subject of revisionism." Given the preceding discussion of understanding the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish affair (as opposed to treating the Nazi racial ideology as a unitary whole targeted at various civilian populations in Europe, of which the Jewish *Shoah* was an important, but not the only part) it is arguable that this larger vision could be deemed trivialisation of the Holocaust. Given the exclusive status some would like to afford the Jewish Holocaust—"a unique, unthinkable, and indescribable undertaking" as the agreement calls it—one wonders just how effectively a discussion of the Polish "martyrdom" can be initiated in such a context.

Investing the Jewish Holocaust with such a singular status in fact runs the risk of destroying whatever lessons the Holocaust can teach. If the Jewish Holocaust is so unique, what relevance does it have for other peoples and other genocides? Indeed, if such an exclusivity is attributed to the *Shoah*, even over and against the other elements of the Nazi racial agenda, does one not foster an attitude—even unintentionally—that somehow the murder of Jews is more grievous than the murder of non-Jews? Does this then not lead to the perception, for suggestion of which in his homily at Czestochowa Cardinal Glemp was roundly attacked, that Jews are "a nation raised above all others?"[10]

This author does not want to detract from the barbarities suffered by European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis. But failing to situate that brutality firmly within the overall Nazi racial agenda reduces to "the level of the commonplace" the deaths of all those others who also perished as victims of that criminal ideology. This naturally leads to the question of a permanent

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religious commemoration at those camps. The Jewish objection to the Carmelite convent was that, according to Jewish theology, places of worship are not built in graveyards. Cemeteries are places of death and God is Lord of Life. The joyous celebration of Divine Worship is not to be commingled with death and decay. One might also surmise that Jewish concepts of the afterlife also play a role in their approach to prayer for the deceased. In this regard, Jewish theology diverges markedly from Catholicism's understanding of death, prayer for the dead, and eschatology.

The obvious response to the Jewish objection is that no Jewish places of worship need be erected at Auschwitz, but the February 1987 agreement goes much further. It bars any "permanent place of Catholic worship within the [camp] boundaries." Prescinding from the question of whether, in fact, the Carmelite convent was actually within the camp boundaries, the practical result of the agreement is that any permanent religious commemoration of Catholic victims of the Holocaust is ruled out. Not only does "respect for the [Jewish] dead" become an important value, it becomes *the* value to which all others—including respect for the memory of the Christian dead—must yield. Apparently, their memory is not of sufficient significance to allow their religious kinsmen to commemorate them in a public way according to their own traditions, whereas the memory of the Jewish dead makes the norms of their tradition as regards commemorating the dead absolute and exclusive. Paradoxically, the same paragraph of the agreement adds that "Each one will be able to meditate there according to personal feelings, religion, and faith." Assuming that "there" refers to the campsites themselves, the Agreement grants nothing: no one was prevented from privately meditating at the campsites according to the dictates of his conscience before the Agreement was signed (to the degree religious freedom existed in Marxist Poland). It is the inference of this line in the Agreement which Catholics should find offensive. Following immediately on the stipulation forbidding a permanent place of Catholic worship at Auschwitz, it leaves the suggestion that only when the sisters are removed will visitors "be able to meditate." You are free to pray, as long as there is nothing formal or public about it.

The tendency to privatise prayer found in both the July Declaration and the February Agreement is itself paradoxical. Nazism opposed religion, seeing in it a competitive principle challenging its totalitarian claim on the individual's loyalty. To the degree that churches were subservient to the omnicompetent state they were tolerated. The transcendent claims of Judaism and Christianity both contain the precise antidote for Nazism. Their institutional expressions are what is important at places like Auschwitz and Birkenau. It is the muting of those expressions, by relegating prayer to the realm of the purely private, which coincides with the Nazi desire to cultivate tame house churches. Banishing public religious expression is just what Hitler would have ordered.

Likewise, it was Poland's Marxist regime which secularised the campsites and overlaid their exhibits with a heavy dose of Soviet propaganda. One reason why the Carmelite project was launched in the first

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place was to provide a religious counterpoint to the atheistic orientation of the Auschwitz State Museum. Incredibly, as a result of the Geneva Agreement, the exclusion of permanent religious witness from the campsites themselves is, in certain respects, similar to the situation imposed by the *ancien régime*!

A Carmelite convent has stood at Dachau since 1965. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant chapels are located there. Each person is free to give public expression to his faith convictions. This is precisely what Nazism opposed: a living faith that could also transform the way people behave in this world. Those places of worship at Dachau are signs of victory: that the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is ultimately victorious over idols and ideologies made by human hands. Judaism and Christianity still stand. The thousand year Reich disappeared nearly a half century ago, and Communism finds itself in terminal crisis. If the Holocaust is to be relevant, if it is to teach us about the depths to which people can sink when they reject God, then public witness to that God in prayer needs to be found at Auschwitz, too.

1 Richard Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust* (Lexington; University.Press of Kentucky, 1986).
2 An excellent chronology of events surrounding the Carmel controversy, from its beginnings through groundbreaking ceremonies for the new Centre to which the convent is to be relocated, can be found in Waldemar Chrostowski, "Spór wokól klasztoru w Oswiecimiu" [The Controversy Surrounding the Cloister at Auschwitz], *Znak* 42 (April/May 19901, nos. 4-5: 123-43.
3 English text in *Origins*, 19 (14 September 1989), no. 15: 249–50.
4 English text in *Origins*, 19 (14 September 1989), no, 15: 249.
5 For the official statements of the Kraków Archdiocesan Chancery on these incidents, see "Komunikat kurii krakowskiej nr l" and "Komunikat kurii krakowskiej nr 2" in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 43 (30 July 1989),, no. 31 (2092), p. 7, cols. 5–6. For English translations, see "Statements issued by the Chancellery of the Archdiocese of Kraków," in Canadian Polish Congress—Viewpoint Supplement, December 1989, p. 3, cols. 4–5,
6 English text in *Origins*, 19 (14 September 1989), no. 15: 250.
7 English text as "Cardinal Glemp's August 26 Homily at Czestochowa," *Origins*, 19 (5 October 1989), no. 18: 291-94. For a commentary on the sermon see John M. Grondelski, "Cardinal Glemp's Sermon at Czestochowa: An Analysis," in *Proceedings of the First Biannual Conference on Christianity and the Holocaust* (Lawrenceville, NJ : Rider College, 1990), pp . 191–212 .
8 Jerzy Kloczowski, Lidia Müllerowa, and Jan Skarbek, *Zarys dziejów Kosciola katolickiego w Polsce* [A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Poland] (Kraków: Znak, 1986), p. 340. See also Richard Lukas, "The Polish Experience During the Holocaust," in Michael Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York University Press, 1990), pp. 88-95.
9 Oswiecim: Hitlerowski obóz masowej zaglady [Auschwitz: The Hitlerite Camp of Mass Murder], 4th ed. (Warsaw: Interpress, 1987), pp. 15–16.
10 "Cardinal Glemp's August 26 Homily," ibid., p. 294.

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