

Was Jewish ‘Holocaust Theology’ Ever Really About the Holocaust? Assessing the Roots and Implications of a Recurring Critique.

Abstract

Jewish ‘Holocaust Theology’, a body of texts produced by North American and British religious thinkers since the 1960s, has been repeatedly accused of using the Holocaust to lend moral leverage to separate debates. This article examines the history of this recurring critique and considers its relationship with wider features of Holocaust Theology as a mode of writing. It is suggested that Holocaust Theology’s habitual appeal to notions of transformative horror both encourages this critique to recur and, in turn, raises questions regarding the future of the discourse.

Introduction

2014, the year that would see the centenary of the First World War’s outbreak, began with a public argument among British politicians concerning the legacy of the war. On 2nd January Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, published an article in the *Daily Mail* newspaper accusing the Left of distorting history to suit its own needs. This was followed two days later by Tristram Hunt, his shadow counterpart, publishing a rebuttal in *The Guardian*.¹ Amidst the following media commentary on competing visions of history and the perceived dangers of politicising the war’s centenary, Frank Furedi, a sociologist at the University of Kent, entered the fray to suggest that the entire Gove-Hunt argument should really be seen as unrelated to the war itself. Writing under the title ‘This row isn’t really about the First World War’, he argued that ‘[t]his looks and sounds like a debate about the past – but actually, its main drivers are contemporary conflicts over cultural values and political opinions’.² For Furedi, January 2014’s public debates were only superficially connected to the 1914-1918 war and were at their heart related to issues deriving from fissures within contemporary British society.

In this article I will focus on accusations very similar to Furedi’s that have been levelled repeatedly against the body of writing commonly described as ‘Holocaust Theology’. Jewish Holocaust Theology is a discourse that has, so the argument runs, merely borrowed the event’s moral authority to engage more persuasively in other areas of debate. Examples of such a critique first arose in the 1970s and have since recurred several times. For various reasons the existence of this particular critique has, to my knowledge, gone relatively unexamined. This is perhaps because it is articulated across a range of texts, often without any obvious dependency upon one another, and also because it forms only one of a number of other criticisms that have been levelled against Holocaust Theology. The second half of this article will propose, however, that examining this specific critique helps draw into focus some of Holocaust Theology’s particular traits as a discourse and the consequently difficult future it may face.

The Meaning of ‘Holocaust Theology’ in this Article

Before going any further it seems prudent to clarify how I am using ‘Holocaust Theology’ given that it can be a somewhat slippery term. A reader of Dan Cohn-Sherbok’s large and diverse 2002 collection *Holocaust Theology* might easily take it to refer to a great swathe of writers and perspectives. I will, however, follow the practice of a number of other commentators by viewing Jewish Holocaust Theology as a body of writings produced by a more specific group of thinkers in Britain and North America originating in the mid-1960s onwards.³ Holocaust Theology, by such an understanding, is not to be confused with religious responses to the Holocaust in a more general sense (that may include visual art, liturgy, literature, etc.). Melissa Raphael and, more recently, Daniel Langton have referred to a narrower ‘canon’ of Holocaust Theology (though they do subtly vary with regard to what

they include).⁴ In the following discussion I will consider Holocaust Theology as most associated with Richard Rubenstein, Eliezer Berkovits, Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, Arthur Cohen, David Blumenthal and Melissa Raphael. While I am well aware that one could make a case for constructing a slightly different list, this understanding of ‘Holocaust Theology’ is not dramatically out of keeping with secondary literature on the topic. What unites the Holocaust Theologians is a belief that the death of around six million Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe demands a bold religious response, potentially a reformulation of Jewish religious tradition and even a reconsideration of some traditional understandings of God’s relationship with the Jewish people. Holocaust Theologies vary considerably, and the thinkers named above sometimes disagree with one another quite markedly, but for none of them is it wholly the case that the Holocaust can be absorbed into wider Jewish tradition as simply one more example of severe collective suffering.⁵

The ‘Not Really About the Holocaust’ Critique

Holocaust Theologians have faced a variety of criticisms during the last half-century, including accusations of making philosophically unconvincing arguments⁶, of holding problematic views regarding Middle Eastern politics⁷, of weakening the vitality of ongoing Jewish culture⁸, of overemphasising the Holocaust’s uniqueness⁹, and of failing to uphold their own anti-theodic commitments¹⁰. Added to this list, and of particular importance for this article, has been the repeated suggestion that Holocaust Theology is at its heart not even truly about the Holocaust at all. In this article attention will be given to the validity of this particular critique, as well as its relationship with broader questions about Holocaust Theology as a discourse. But it is vital to first spend some time unpacking the history and variations of this claim.

The earliest version of this critique I am familiar with is made in a 1973 article by the American Talmud scholar and Conservative rabbi Jacob Neusner. Reflecting on the Holocaust Theologies that had begun to emerge in the mid-1960s, he suggests that they had appeared ‘in response not to the events of which they speak [i.e. the Holocaust], but, through those events, to a quite different situation’.¹¹ The ‘different situation’ Neusner refers to concerns unsettling developments of American history that lay in the background of the earliest Holocaust theologies:

What happened, I think, was the assassination of President Kennedy, the disheartening war in South East Asia, and a renewed questioning of the foundations of religious and social polity. ‘Auschwitz’ became a Jewish codeword for all the things everyone was talking about, a kind of Judaic key word for the common malaise. That – and nothing more.¹²

In Neusner’s view the early Holocaust Theologians, notably Richard Rubenstein and Emil Fackenheim, were, at heart, not really responding to the Holocaust at all. Their writings, though superficially concerned with the Holocaust, in fact relate to the cultural turbulence of their own time. ‘[T]hat’, Neusner makes clear, ‘and nothing more’.

A later and more influential variation of this argument was articulated in 1988 by the British Orthodox rabbi Norman Solomon in an address to the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith and the Polish Bishops’ Conference. The way he frames this critique is slightly different in that, rather than suggesting that Holocaust Theology is *really* about post-Holocaust factors (as Neusner proposes), Solomon looks instead to *pre*-Holocaust beliefs and ideas. In the closing section of the address he remarks that Holocaust Theology undermines ‘beliefs [that] have been under attack in modern times for reasons which have *nothing to do with* the Shoah’.¹³ This comment (in which the emphatic italics are original) reflects

Solomon's conviction that the reason for Holocaust Theology's emergence is the existence of older doubts about tradition, specifically the rational possibility of life after death and the inerrancy of scripture. These doubts are not related to the Holocaust, but instead rooted in the influence of Enlightenment rationalism:

[I]t is not a question of a new challenge posed to theology by the Shoah, but rather that the Shoah came at a time when theology was already in greater ferment than ever before in its history, but a ferment occasioned by the intellectual movements of the modern world. This explains why earlier tragedies, for instance the Expulsion from Spain, occasioned not the abandonment but the development of traditional modes of response to suffering.¹⁴

According to Solomon Holocaust Theology should not, therefore, be understood as a response to a radically unique event in Jewish history, but rather a side-effect of religious doubts caused by intellectual developments quite independent of the Holocaust.

The very similar proposal was made in a 2005 essay by the Ultra-Orthodox rabbi Shmuel Jakobovits. Again, the real cause of Holocaust Theology is identified as the Enlightenment and its influence rather than the events of the Nazi-period:

We hear talk of 'a new Jewish theology', or 'a Holocaust theology'. My friends, don't buy it. [...] [I]ts connection with the Shoah is coincidental at best. In its essence, it was already around in the days of the Haskalah [Enlightenment] and early Reform which, quite simply, compromised with the prevailing, agnostic European culture.¹⁵

As with Solomon, for Jakobovits the underlying cause of Holocaust Theology's emergence is the broader religious scepticism that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. The notion that the Holocaust *itself* is a transformative event that has independently shattered pre-existing tradition is firmly denied.

A more subtle version of the same basic position occurs in the then British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' 1992 book *Crisis and Covenant*. In a chapter addressing Holocaust Theology he remarks that '[t]he fundamental divide is between those who see the Holocaust as an unprecedented event which shatters our previous understanding of the covenant, and those who insist that the covenant survives intact'.¹⁶ The former, we are to understand, refers to the Holocaust Theologians with the latter describing their traditionalist opponents. An interesting turn in Sacks' analysis comes when he suggests that this very division itself reflects tensions within Judaism that predate the Holocaust:

It is important to understand that the ambiguity of the Holocaust is not a feature of the event itself. It is a feature of the pre-understandings that different thinkers bring to it. For many centuries, from the destruction of the second Temple to the threshold of the European enlightenment, Jews shared a broad framework of belief [...] that finally collapsed in the nineteenth century. [...] The multiplicity of responses to the Holocaust testifies to the still fragmented nature of Jewish consciousness, which lacks a common language through which a people might reflect on its fate. This preceded the Holocaust itself and has persisted since.¹⁷

Sacks is not overtly stating that Holocaust Theology is a direct intellectual descendent of the Enlightenment, rather that the diversity of Jewish responses to 20th century trauma reflect the fragmentation of Jewish beliefs that took place in the preceding century. Nonetheless, this still denies the Holocaust itself status as *the* transformative event. The radicalism of

Holocaust Theology and its challenges to tradition are here ultimately to be seen as a side-effect of the older upheavals in Jewish thought that took place in the 19th century.

A more recent form of this critique, and the last that I raise here, appeared in *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* in 2011.¹⁸ Influenced by and expanding upon the concerns raised in Solomon's 1988 address, Daniel Langton considers the suggestions different Holocaust Theologians make for reforming Judaism, concluding that they make basic sense without recourse to discussion of the Holocaust. In other words, the variously demythologised, feminist, Zionist or voluntaristic visions of Judaism proposed by certain thinkers amount, Langton suggests, to coherent models of Jewish life even without addressing the traumas of the Nazi period.¹⁹ Moreover, they existed as ideas for revising Judaism *prior* to the emergence of the Holocaust Theologies that cite them as solutions to the challenges posed by the Holocaust. He remarks that:

[The] theological positions held by these theologians are not only coherent and attainable without reference to the Holocaust, but, on occasion, were even proposed beforehand by the same thinkers [i.e. before they started writing about the Holocaust]. It seems that despite the impression given, the Holocaust frequently functions merely as a rhetorical device. Its moral authority and power make it attractive as a peg upon which to hang one's ideology, one's existing theological reformulations of Judaism.²⁰

The proposal here is that Holocaust Theologians have frequently *used* the event as a tool for lending authority to outlooks that can be formulated independently of the event. It is suggested that their various articulations of Holocaust Theology were not instigated by the persecution and murder of Jews during the Nazi era, but rather that these events are 'attractive as a peg upon which to hang one's ideology'.

From this short survey it can be seen that soon after the beginnings of Holocaust Theology in the 1960s there have been repeated suggestions that it is a discourse, at its core, not truly motivated by the Holocaust. The range of commentators discussed above is not intended to be exhaustive, but does hopefully highlight the extent to which this line of critique has emerged repeatedly over recent decades. But it should also be acknowledged that these arguments do vary somewhat in their details and motivations. Solomon and Neusner, for example, might share doubts about Holocaust Theology's true root causes, but they differ considerably in regard to their conclusions. For Solomon, Holocaust Theology is *really* a response to the religious turmoil provoked by the Enlightenment, while for Neusner, Holocaust Theology is *really* a reflection of the malaise in US culture caused by the assassination of Kennedy and the war in Vietnam. While these critics are united in their suspicion that Holocaust Theology is not *really* about the Holocaust, they do differ a little in what they think it *is* really about.

They also differ with regard to their possible motivations. Solomon, Sacks, Jakobovits and Neusner are all what we might (fairly loosely) describe as religious traditionalists, already unlikely to be sympathetic to Holocaust Theology's sometimes radical suggestions about Jewish tradition in the aftermath of tragedy. Langton, in contrast, is writing from a secular perspective and is instead analysing Holocaust Theology in terms of its place within the history of modern Jewish thought.²¹

Nonetheless, the unifying point in all of this is that each of these thinkers has voiced doubts about whether Holocaust Theology has, despite its appearances, been in essence truly about the Holocaust. The issue to now address is how well this type of criticism levelled against Holocaust Theology ultimately works.

Weighing up This Argument Against Holocaust Theology

I propose that this mode of undermining Holocaust Theology's status as a direct response to the Holocaust requires a degree of caution. It would be unfeasible, I will suggest, to declare a blanket position that Holocaust Theologians have been consciously and manipulatively using the traumas of the Nazi period to prop up their responses to other, independent, concerns.

To enter into this discussion it is helpful to initially return to a passage from Langton's *Holocaust Studies* article I quoted earlier. Instead of reproducing it directly (as above), it is here broken up into two main propositions:

[1] Theological positions held by these theologians are not only coherent and attainable without reference to the Holocaust, but, on occasion, were even proposed beforehand by the same thinkers.

[2] It seems that, despite the impression given, the Holocaust frequently functions merely as a rhetorical device. Its moral authority and power make it attractive as a peg upon which to hang one's ideology, one's existing theological reformulations of Judaism.²²

My query here concerns the progression from proposition 1 to proposition 2. Just because an individual holds an ideological position prior to entering into consideration of the Holocaust that is then later reflected in these considerations of the Holocaust, is it the case that they have simply *used* the Holocaust as a rhetorical device? It is not clear that this must necessarily be so.

To further this point let us consider what, to my knowledge, is a hypothetical scenario. Imagine that there exists a rabbi in the 1950s known to exhibit quasi-Marxist leanings. In the 1960s, with the attention on the Holocaust provoked by the trial of Eichmann and the Six-Day War, this rabbi begins to put pen to paper regarding the Holocaust's implications for Judaism. The result is a work of Holocaust Theology demanding that Judaism be purged of any sympathies with the capitalism present in both Nazi Germany and the contemporary West, and aligned toward a hope for a future messianic age tinged with the language of socialist utopianism. Should we conclude that the Holocaust has been merely used as a peg upon which to hang this rabbi's pre-existing ideology? I am not sure that the answer is unequivocally 'yes'. This is because our hypothetical rabbi, like the real-world Holocaust Theologians, is naturally forced to engage with the event via the categories already present in his mind. Indeed, *any* given Holocaust Theology is very likely to reflect the intellectual and religious predilections of its maker.

This is an issue that has close analogies to already much-discussed examples in other fields within Holocaust Studies. Over twenty years ago, in his 1993 book *Texture of Memory*, James Young highlighted the extent to which Holocaust memorials inevitably reflect the political and cultural context of their creation. 'Memory', he reflects, 'is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure'.²³ Were we to demand that all 'impure' memorials were removed, and only those untouched by the context of their location should remain, we would likely have to remove most, if not all memorials. In a similar way, were we to downgrade all Holocaust Theologies that could be shown to have been influenced by the wider cultural and political conditions of their composition, it is likely that *all* works within the genre would fall into this downgraded category.

I make this point not to argue entirely against the analyses put forward by the commentators addressed in the preceding section of this article, but rather to stress that their arguments could be taken to unfeasible extremes. And I am willing to concede that, firstly, it is of course *possible* that some Holocaust Theologians have been consciously and manipulatively using the event merely as a rhetorical device. It is a scenario impossible to

disprove. But without peering into the inner motivations of those constructing Holocaust Theologies it is hard to see how it can be routinely feasible to distinguish between occasions when the Holocaust has been superficially cited as moral leverage in support of a prior concern, and occasions when substantial, even heartfelt, response to the event simply reflects the worldview of its author.

It is true that, very occasionally, we can find representations of Holocaust Theology that *do* appear to be using the Holocaust to address quite separate concerns. One such instance is the 2008 BBC film *God on Trial*, a drama which, though written by a Roman Catholic, is traceably influenced by Jewish Holocaust Theology.²⁴ The press releases demonstrate that, though set in Auschwitz, it was prompted by the September 11th attacks in 2001 and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004.²⁵ Consciously aiming for the film to be a *general* treatment of contemporary theological issues that is merely set in Auschwitz for dramatic purposes, its writer, Frank Cottrell Boyce, recalls that when appealing for funding he stressed ‘it’s not about the Holocaust, it’s about God’.²⁶ *God on Trial* is thus a rare instance in which we can confidently conclude that the Holocaust has, to a reasonable extent, been used as a tool for addressing separate concerns. While the surface of the film – its setting, and characters and plot – may make it seem like a direct religious response to the Holocaust it is in fact something else.

However, *God on Trial* is more the exception than the norm. With regard to the major texts of Jewish Holocaust Theology it seems safer to conclude that the motivations that lie behind them are too opaque for us to be able to usefully separate, on the one hand, merely rhetorical, and on the other, meaningfully substantial responses to the Holocaust. Thus the criticism of Holocaust Theology presented in varying forms by commentators discussed in the preceding section of this article requires a degree of caution. To assert with conviction that the Holocaust Theologians as a whole are fundamentally not addressing the Holocaust is problematic. It is instead that they simply bring considerable ideological baggage to the equation. To answer the question that begins this article’s title, ‘Was Jewish Holocaust Theology ever really about the Holocaust?’, the answer I propose is ‘yes, it probably was’. It is simply that it has *also* been about a lot of other things, such as Zionism, feminism, as well as broader doubts about religious tradition developing from the Enlightenment.

Contemplation of Horror and the Shattering of Pre-Holocaust Thought

While this may appear a resolution of sorts, considering the history of this critique nonetheless opens the door to a broader set of issues concerning Holocaust Theology’s very character as a mode of discourse.

The initial question to consider is why this repeated line of criticism has emerged at all. For religious traditionalists such as Solomon, Sacks, Jakobovits and Neusner, the accusation that Holocaust Theology is not *really* about the Holocaust of course offers a supplementary line of attack against a body of writings to which they are likely to be instinctively opposed. But I suspect that there may be more going on.

I propose that one key cause for this critique to have been repeatedly articulated may lie with the way in which Holocaust Theologians express themselves, namely their tendency to use language that deflects attention away from the likely role of factors independent of the Holocaust. I suggest that this ironically ends up leaving the Holocaust Theologians especially open to the type of criticisms noted above. But to outline that point it is necessary to first grapple with this issue of expression, namely Holocaust Theology’s propensity to lay considerable stress upon the notion that the Holocaust represents an unfathomable horror, true contemplation of which unsettles prior patterns of thought.

It is an approach that orientates the reader toward essentially staring in awe at the Holocaust's darkness. Consider, for example, the following two passages, taken in turn from Emil Fackenheim's *To Mend the World* (1982) and Arthur Cohen's *The Tremendum* (1981):

[W]e confront in the Holocaust world a *whole of horror*. We cannot comprehend it but only comprehend its incomprehensibility. We cannot transcend it but only be struck by the brutal truth that it cannot be transcended. Here the very attempt to see a meaning, or do a placing-in-perspective, would *already* constitute a dissipation, not only blasphemous but also untruthful.²⁷

The death camps cannot be transcended. There is no way of obliterating their historicity by overleaping them. Quite the contrary. If there is no transcendence beyond the abyss, the abyss must be inspected further. The descent deeper into the abyss must take place; in a word, the abyss must be *sub-scended*, penetrated to its perceivable depths.²⁸

Both Fackenheim and Cohen here describe their tasks in terms of viewing an abyss that cannot be transcended. Such imagery grants the Holocaust a totalising, transformative status as an event that, taken seriously, demands some manner of immersion into a novel and grim mode of contemplation. This language of abyss is not unique to Fackenheim and Cohen, with David Blumenthal, for example, declaring at the outset of *Facing the Abusing God* (1993), that '[a]t some points, the reader will feel close to an internal abyss [...] It took many years to write this book, and I too approached the abyss more than once'.²⁹

Another type of vivid metaphorical language is found in Blumenthal's appeals to images of fragmentation and disruption:

[B]rokenness, fragmentation are all we have to express the disjunction of normal discourse with the reality of the holocaust. Dissociation, rupture, a sudden veering away are all we have to preserve the holocaust in the midst of normal speech. Thought itself must be broken, shattered, fragmented – like a nightmare; for writing theology after the holocaust is living in a nightmare with its sudden turns, its flashbacks.³⁰

Reminiscent of the architecture of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington or the broken, ruined landscapes painted by Samuel Bak, Blumenthal's appeal to fragmented theology implies an understanding of the Holocaust as an event which uniquely shatters tradition.³¹ Amidst an oft-cited passage from his seminal *After Auschwitz* (1966) Richard Rubenstein describes the Holocaust's power to break down established forms of Judaism with similar imagery, referring to it as 'the most demonic, antihuman *explosion* in all history'.³² In one passage from a 1970 article Rubenstein manages to bring together the language of abyss and fragmentation when describing the extent to which the Holocaust would have been beyond the imagination of pre-modern thinkers:

Never in their worst nightmares could they have imagined a descent into hell so total yet so banal, rationalized, and bureaucratic as the twentieth century death camp. The experience of our times has exploded our ancient categories of the meaning and dimension of both human suffering and human evil.³³

Such language of abyss and fragmentation, shared across a number of Holocaust Theologians, reflects the genre's tendency to eschew dry, analytical language in favour of rich imagery and undisguised emotion.

A slightly different manifestation of this language appears in the writings of Orthodox rabbi Eliezer Berkovits. On several occasions the ascending heroism of Jewish defiance is emphasised as directly proportionate to the unique and horrifying abyss. In *With God in Hell* (1979) he writes the following:

The ghettos and concentration camps that saw so much demoralization and human degradation were also the holy of holies on this earth. In those long and dark years, when mankind was silently standing by as the most barbarous crime in all human history was wilfully perpetrated by one of the technologically most advanced nations of the world, it was in the ghettos and the concentration camps that the dignity of man was safeguarded, where the faith of man reached its highest manifestation, commensurate in its greatness to the abysmal depths of the moral bankruptcy of Western civilization.³⁴

In *Faith After the Holocaust* (1973) Berkovits similarly reflects that at ‘Auschwitz and Treblinka, in the camps and the ghettos, man sank to his lowest level yet, but there too he was exalted to his highest dignity’.³⁵ The Holocaust’s horror is invoked here as a rhetorical counterweight. It is the uniquely dark backdrop by which the light of resistance is thrown into dramatic focus.

But perhaps nowhere is emphasis upon the outright contemplation of horror better seen than in Orthodox rabbi Irving Greenberg’s famous ‘working principle’ that ‘no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children’.³⁶ This phrase, first delivered as part of an address in New York in 1973, has over subsequent decades struck a chord with many religious commentators, both Jewish and Christian. In *Facing the Abusing God*, Blumenthal approvingly cites and numerically magnifies the working principle, asking ‘[h]ow can one do theology in the presence of one million burning children?’³⁷ In an essay published in 2011 the Christian theologian Henry Knight explains that he has now integrated Greenberg’s working principle into his prayers, regularly asking God’s help that his utterances ‘be credible in the presence of the burning children’.³⁸ Peter Vardy’s 1992 book *The Puzzle of Evil*, significant in Britain because of its widespread use as an A-level textbook, concludes one chapter by describing Greenberg’s working principle as ‘a reasonable test for any theodicy’.³⁹ Greenberg’s vivid and horrifying statement of method seems to have captured the idea that post-Holocaust theologising is both profoundly difficult and requires a hardened resolve to face the worst atrocities.

Highlighting such language across this range of thinkers of course involves a degree of generalisation, and the differences between various Holocaust Theologies should not be lightly diminished. However, these expressions of horror, abyss and fragmentation reflect a rhetorical tendency, a tendency that I will suggest both plays a key role in encouraging the criticism that Holocaust Theology does not *truly* respond to the Holocaust and, in turn, raises difficult questions about the discourse’s future.

Reading Against the Grain

To consider these points it is useful to pick up the discussion of Greenberg’s oft-cited ‘working principle’. The principle has been sometimes vividly criticised, and the criticisms are worth engaging with because of how they lead us back to the broader question of why Holocaust Theology may be especially open to accusations that it is not, at heart, truly a response to the Holocaust.

One criticism of Greenberg’s formulation is that if you are able to go beyond your emotional response to being asked to envision doing theology in the presence of burning children, in practical terms it is not very clear what would or would not actually be ‘credible’ in such a context. Steven Katz has complained that the answer would be very subjective,

ultimately reflecting the outlook of the individual or community attempting to follow Greenberg's working principle. He remarks that 'what is "credible" depends on one's prior theological commitments, the very issue at stake'.⁴⁰ Another line of complaint, offered by Gary Weissman, is simply that we are not in the presence of burning children, and to *imagine* otherwise is just that – an act of contemporary imagination. In a passionate condemnation of Greenberg's working principle Weissman writes that:

[N]o statement better captures the sanctimonious veneration of horror that so often serves to curtail rather than encourage critical thinking about our present-day relationship to the Holocaust. Such statements, it seems to me, promote a kind of dishonesty under the guise of virtuousness. [... Being in the presence of burning children] is precisely not the context in which we make statements about the Holocaust, and pretending that it is limits and distorts understanding of how present concerns shape the historical past'.⁴¹

For Weissman, the working principle is misleading in its attempt to place you in the context of horror rather than encouraging you to engage critically with the influences your post-Holocaust location.

Looking at Greenberg and his critics more broadly, it seems that the 'working principle' attempts to focus the gaze of readers upon one of the most distressing elements of the Holocaust, while the critics, here Katz and Weissman, in varying ways seek to break this dark spell by highlighting the contemporary role of post-Holocaust agency in shaping perception.

Viewed as a whole, Holocaust Theology's language of horror, abyss and fragmentation reflect a discourse simply not well suited to measured consideration of how various aspects of its authors' ideological locations might shape its contours. This, I propose, makes Holocaust Theologians particularly susceptible to the accusation that their writings are actually not really about the Holocaust at all. As Zachary Braiterman has highlighted, as a genre of writing Holocaust Theology has leanings toward what he describes as 'hyperbolic slogans, polemical overkill, [and] rhetorical overstatement'.⁴² Responding specifically to Rubenstein, but doing so in terms that could arguably be applied to several Holocaust Theologians, Katz similarly suggests that '[m]uch of Rubenstein's "success" is generated by the powerful appeal of his "style". On first reading it possesses an exciting, even compelling, quality. However, close perusal reveals that he is guilty of using evocative and emotional language to obfuscate rather than clarify, to arouse rather than illuminate'.⁴³ For Katz, Rubenstein's language, though initially persuasive, is ultimately counter-productive, actively pushing him to read suspiciously *against* the grain of the text.

Across Holocaust Theology as a whole its tendencies to place intense emphasis upon staring into a radically unique and transformative abyss may, for some readers, lead to a similar outcome. By focusing so feverishly upon stark contemplation of the Holocaust, such discourse risks inadvertently *encouraging* critics to cut through the rhetoric and expose the role of factors independent of the event.

Yet as I have already suggested, the critics' analyses can be taken too far if led to a conclusion that the Holocaust Theologians do not really respond to the Holocaust *at all*. The notion that a commentator *either* fully addresses the Holocaust, putting aside all other concerns *or* they merely use the Holocaust as a rhetorical device, sets up a false dichotomy. I propose that it is a false dichotomy that sometimes both Holocaust Theologians *and* their critics appear to have entertained. The very language of Holocaust Theology, in which you either face the transformative abyss or do not, may have itself encouraged such a distinction to emerge. It is, however, ultimately unhelpful in trying to understand the nature of Holocaust Theology as a movement within modern Jewish thought.

On the Future of Holocaust Theology

What now of the future of such issues? One difficulty is the nature of Holocaust Theology as a discourse. As a genre it is hard to pin down, being part philosophical analysis, part artistic, emotional and confessional response. To demand that its practitioners switch to a pattern of painstakingly weighing up the role of pre-existing views amidst their responses to the Holocaust is perhaps to misunderstand the genre.

And yet, probably the most recent major work in this field, Melissa Raphael's *Female Face of God in Auschwitz* (2003), is clear in highlighting its own relationship with earlier Jewish feminist theology.⁴⁴ On the first page of her preface she specifically highlights her generation's 'increasing historical and critical distance from the Holocaust'.⁴⁵ Looking forward, perhaps such critical distance will foster a Holocaust Theology more at ease with its roots in varying contexts and ideologies, some directly resultant of the Holocaust and others less so. Such a discourse would, I speculate, be better protected from accusations that it merely borrows the Holocaust's moral authority to buttress pre-existing views. It would do so by confronting the issue head on and highlighting that it is both a response to the Holocaust *and* the conditions of its own post-Holocaust location.

As with the Holocaust Theologians noted above, Raphael's work does involve an element of contemplating the horrors of the Holocaust. Her own specific argument indeed demands such an act because (in a manner loosely comparable to Berkovits, and indeed also Fackenheim) she stresses the horrors of the Holocaust so that, in turn, even partial moments of spiritual resistance can be elevated to the level of the holy.⁴⁶ Raphael focuses at length on the appalling conditions encountered by women in Auschwitz so that 'the purificatory acts of some women in Auschwitz can be read as attempts to maintain the reflective quality of the face: the mark of personhood, both human and divine'.⁴⁷ Only by orienting the reader toward the full horror of degradation does the emphasis upon resisting degradation then have depth. However, it is noticeable how careful Raphael is in setting out her task. She observes that many women were not in a position to spiritually resist in the manner she describes and remarks near the outset of *Female Face of God in Auschwitz* that she is writing 'an imaginative work of constructive theology' rather than a direct and unmediated response to the Holocaust's horrors.⁴⁸

It is possible that in coming years Holocaust Theology will grow more measured in its language and be consequently harder to dismiss as a discourse characterised by, as Braiterman puts it, 'hyperbolic slogans, polemical overkill, [and] rhetorical overstatement'.⁴⁹ And yet, with *Female Face of God in Auschwitz* being well over ten years old, it is also possible that, despite secondary works continuing to appear, the most productive period of Holocaust Theology is over.⁵⁰

If it is indeed the case that it was a discourse at its core always powered by what Weissman terms the 'veneration of horror' perhaps the increased 'critical distance' Raphael describes and a decline in Holocaust Theology may in fact go hand in hand.⁵¹ Perhaps without a pervading feeling of awe in the face of an unmediated 'transformative abyss', the main driver behind Holocaust Theology dissipates. For it seems unlikely that horror can be invoked indefinitely.

The situation brings to mind a scene from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in which we see Art listening to a recording of his father's recollections. Describing a scene heavy with emotional distress, the voice from the tape-player reads, 'And she said, "No! I will not go in the gas chambers and my children will not..."'. Simultaneously Art's wife interrupts, asking whether he wants coffee. 'You bet!' is his reply.⁵² The scene comments on the way in which trivial present-day concerns can cut through the contemplation of past horror, and the manner in which, whether inappropriately or not, the requisite sense of dread is hard to maintain. If

Holocaust Theology can be described as a discourse powered by dread and awe its future is decidedly uncertain.

¹ Gove, 'Why Does the Left Insist', and Hunt, 'Michael Gove, Using History'.

² Furedi, 'This Row Isn't Really'.

³ For an introduction to Holocaust Theology in a Christian context see Haynes, 'Christian Holocaust Theology'.

⁴ Raphael, *The Female Face of God*, 20, and Langton, 'Theology', 78.

⁵ I agree with both Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz*, 120 and Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 115 that Berkovits' view of the Holocaust is too complex to be neatly identified as traditionalist. During some parts of *Faith After the Holocaust* Berkovits acknowledges the similarity of problems raised by the Holocaust and other instances of the undeserved suffering, but during others considers the Holocaust radically unique.

⁶ Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 168.

⁷ Santa Ana, 'The Holocaust and Liberation', 49.

⁸ Wyschogrod, 'Faith and the Holocaust', 260.

⁹ Solomon, *Jewish Responses to the Holocaust*, 22.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz*, 9-18.

¹¹ Neusner, 'The Implications of the Holocaust', 306.

¹² *Ibid.*, 306.

¹³ Solomon, *Jewish Responses to the Holocaust*, 22. Emphasis original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ Jakobovits, 'A Call to Humility', 204.

¹⁶ Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 49

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁸ A slightly different attestation to this overall argument that Holocaust Theology has not, at its heart, amounted to a direct response to the Holocaust can be found in a recent essay published by Gershon Greenberg. Focused on religious views formed during the period of the Holocaust itself, Greenberg proposes that we should not even think of the writings commonly described as 'Holocaust Theology' under that term at all. He remarks that 'Holocaust theology could not have been written after the Holocaust, because whatever religious thought came thereafter was composed through, and mediated by, the lens of reality following the event'. It is a brief and subsequently undeveloped comment, but appears to deny the very possibility that genuine Holocaust Theology could have developed after 1945. Any such theology, this short passage appears to suggest, is concerned with a different reality to that of the Holocaust itself. Greenberg, 'Real-time Themes', 66.

¹⁹ The Holocaust Theologians alluded to here are, in turn, Richard Rubenstein, Melissa Raphael, Emil Fackenheim and Irving Greenberg.

²⁰ Langton, 'God, the Past and Auschwitz', 55.

²¹ See *Ibid.*, 30.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

²³ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 2.

²⁴ Scriptwriter Frank Cottrell-Boyce recalls that 'we went to see Dan Cohn Sherbok who has made a specialism of Holocaust theology [...] He was fantastically useful and inspiring; he's lived with these questions for a long time and was really generous with his time and expertise'. BBC, 'God On Trial: a new 90-minute drama for BBC Two – Writer Frank Cottrell Boyce'. Dan Cohn-Sherbok has written two introductory works on Holocaust Theology: *Holocaust Theology* and *Holocaust Theology: A Reader*.

²⁵ See, for example, BBC, 'God On Trial: a new 90-minute drama for BBC Two – Executive Producer Mark Redhead'. For broader commentary on this point see David Tollerton, 'Holocaust Representation and Judicial Proceedings Against God'.

²⁶ Frank Cottrell Boyce, 'Losing My Religion'. In the BBC press release he similarly remarks, 'I can't stress strongly enough that God on Trial isn't just about the Holocaust; this is really a question about God'. Frank Cottrell Boyce, 'God On Trial: a new 90-minute drama for BBC Two – Writer Frank Cottrell Boyce'. For more detail, again see Tollerton, 'Holocaust Representation'.

²⁷ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 238-239. Emphasis original.

²⁸ Cohen, *The Tremendum*, 22. Emphasis original.

²⁹ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, xxi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

³¹ On the USHMM see Young, 'Memorials and Museums', 504. On Samuel Bak see Fewell, Phillips and Sherwood, *Representing the Irreparable*.

³² Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 153. Emphasis added.

³³ Rubenstein, 'Job and Auschwitz', 434. On the same page Rubenstein acknowledges the debt to Hannah Arendt clearly identifiable through his references to banality and bureaucracy.

³⁴ Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 25.

- ³⁵ Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 76.
- ³⁶ Greenberg, 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire', 23.
- ³⁷ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 9.
- ³⁸ Knight, 'Before Whom Do We Stand?', 319-320.
- ³⁹ Vardy, *The Puzzle of Evil*, 80. Earlier references to Greenberg's working principle appear on pages 74 and 76. For an example of *Puzzle of Evil*'s use as an A-Level textbook see AQA, 'Teacher Resource Bank'.
- ⁴⁰ Katz, 'The Issue of Confirmation', 52. In a related manner Isabel Wollaston asks 'who is to judge what would or would not be credible in such a context?', noting that the working principle itself appears to imply, impossibly, that such a judgement can only be made by the burning children themselves. *A War Against Memory?*, 30.
- ⁴¹ Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 215-216.
- ⁴² Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 11.
- ⁴³ Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 198.
- ⁴⁴ Raphael, *The Female Face of God*, 20.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.
- ⁴⁶ In *To Mend the World*, Emil Fackenheim places considerable emphasis upon the figure of the *Muselmann* as the 'most characteristic, most original' product of Nazism (100) so that he is then later able to turn the argument around, asking '[h]ow did even one [inmate] not become a *Muselmann*? The logic of destruction was irresistible: then how was it, nevertheless, resisted?' (217). The final turn of phrase in this quotation itself reveals the extent to which we are dealing with highly rhetorical language. It is so clearly paradoxical (for surely, if there was resistance, the 'logic of destruction' was not wholly irresistible) that most readers will be aware that Fackenheim's words are not meant to be read as purely rational.
- ⁴⁷ Raphael, *The Female Face of God*, 67. On the need to contemplate horror she remarks that '[t]he sheer scale and quantity of impurity beneath which the victims struggled and died is not to be dismissed if only because to underestimate the power of the demonic profane is also to underestimate the power of the holy to resist and thereby transform it', 80.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70 and 14.
- ⁴⁹ Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 11.
- ⁵⁰ In terms of recent secondary works see, for example, Garner, *Antitheodicy, Atheodicy, and Jewish Mysticism*, Langton, 'God, the Past and Auschwitz', Tollerton, *The Book of Job*.
- ⁵¹ Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 216.
- ⁵² Spiegelman, *Maus*, 280.

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