



## “A New Sacred Space in the Centre of London”

### The Victoria Tower Gardens Holocaust Memorial and the Religious-Secular Landscape of Contemporary Britain

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#### Abstract

This article considers the relationship between Britain’s 21<sup>st</sup> century religious-secular landscape and the current plans to build a national Holocaust memorial next to the Houses of Parliament in London. I argue that the project should be understood as the construction of a new sacred site. Architectural elements in the design competition entries and the project’s underlying ideological framing variously intersect with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, as well as narratives of British identity and history. I propose that, despite the extreme and harrowing nature of the events being memorialized, the project should be scrutinized for the interplay of religious-secular elements and contemporary nationalism. Additionally, I conclude that the outcomes of the memorial’s interface with manifestations of sacrality may be more unpredictable than its organizers anticipate.

Keywords: Holocaust, memorial, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Britain

#### Introduction

In January 2016, the UK government announced that a new Holocaust memorial would be built in Victoria Tower Gardens next to the Houses of Parliament. The government envisaged that the site would be a “striking and prominent national memorial” that “will stand beside Parliament as permanent statement of our British values” (UK Government 2016a). Twelve months later, ten designs were shortlisted for public consultation, with the winner due to be announced later in 2017. In this article, I will suggest that this endeavor represents the creation of a new sacred site at the heart of British civic space, manifested in a variety of ways:

through active reconfiguration of older religious traditions, through appeal to notions of transformative and sacred experience, and through honoring the nation as a salvific force. Despite the possible discomfort of critically scrutinizing memory of this extreme and harrowing event, I argue that discussion of these factors is morally incumbent given their interplay with issues of nationalism and contemporary social diversity. Moreover, it is also necessary to anticipate and consider some of the ways in which the sacralized narratives intended by the memorial’s organizers may ultimately prove unstable and unreliable when set in dialogue with evolving current affairs.

At the time of writing, the process of creating the memorial is still underway and much about its final form and reception remains unknown. It nonetheless makes sense to record reflections at this specific point in the memorial’s early life. During this crucial and highly active formative period, the debates, uncertainties, and tensions surrounding its construction and intended narrative are especially apparent. In the following pages, I will draw heavily on detail from the ten shortlisted designs, aiming to demonstrate the varied ways in which their visions intersect with multiform aspects of religious experience and ideology. I will then offer appraisals of the implications and uncertainties of such interconnections. First, however, it is vital to provide a little history regarding public Holocaust memory in Britain and the roots of this new memorial.

### **Public Holocaust Consciousness and the New Memorial**

“Britain came relatively late to Holocaust consciousness,” reflects historian Dan Stone (212), but in recent years memorialization of the mass-murder of European Jews during the Nazi era has grown markedly within the public sphere. Andy Pearce cites the Kosovo conflict of 2001 as a point at which Holocaust-comparisons entered the mainstream of government and media pronouncements (141-43). We may also look to a year earlier, when Britain signed the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust and, in line with the declaration’s commitments, a new annual Holocaust Memorial Day was established for 27 January (IHRA). Also in 2000, the state-funded Imperial War Museum in central London opened a permanent Holocaust exhibition, consolidating this atrocity’s place as a key element within Britain’s wider relationship with memory of the Second World War (Bardgett).

The Stockholm declaration included unequivocal pledges on Holocaust education, and this is a commitment that British governments have built upon through a range of school initiatives. Successive governments have helped fund “Lessons from Auschwitz,” a Holocaust Educational Trust initiative, and the place of Holocaust education in curriculums has grown significantly. A major landmark occurred in 2013 when the Department for Education’s new guidelines for 11-14-year-olds identified the event as the only irremovable aspect of exploring 20<sup>th</sup> century history (DoE 2013).

The following year saw the launch of the Prime Minister’s Commission on the Holocaust, and the 2015 commission report suggested both a further bolstering of education in schools and, significantly, the creation of “a striking new memorial to serve as the focal point of national commemoration of the Holocaust.” The report proposed that “[i]t should be prominently located in central London to make a bold statement about the importance Britain places on preserving the memory of the Holocaust” and should “stand as a permanent affirmation of the values of our society” (PMHC: 13). On Holocaust Memorial Day 2016, it

was confirmed that the site would be Victoria Tower Gardens, directly beside the Houses of Parliament (UK Government 2016a).

Understanding why Britain has embraced public Holocaust remembrance with such fervor over half a century since the liberation of the camps is complex. An influential 2006 article by Geoffrey White asked a similar question regarding the World War II Memorial unveiled in central Washington in 2004. He suggested that early moves to create the site during the 1990s reflected the perceived need for post-Cold War national renewal, while the period around its dedication saw appeal to past moral certainties amidst the controversies of war in Iraq (59-60).

Uncovering the motivations for why an event of many decades ago gains new resonance is not an exact science. We might point to the age of survivors, with the period of living memory gradually drawing to a close. Certainly, this was a motivation expressed by the Prime Minister’s Commission on the Holocaust, with David Cameron making the following remark at its 2014 launch at Number 10 Downing Street:

There will be a time when it won’t be possible for survivors to go into our schools and to talk about their experiences, and to make sure we learn the lessons of the dreadful events that happened. And so, the sacred task is to think, “How are we best going to remember, to commemorate and to educate future generations of children?” In 50 years’ time, in 2064, when a young British Christian child or a young British Muslim child or a young British Jewish child wants to learn about the Holocaust, and we as a country want them to learn about the Holocaust, where are they going to go? Who’re they going to listen to? What images will they see? How can we make sure in 2064 that it is as vibrant and strong a memory as it is today? (UK Government 2014).

This quotation is significant for a number of reasons and will be revisited several times below, but it is unlikely that the age of Holocaust survivors has been the underlying prompt for Britain’s 21<sup>st</sup> century rise of public memory. We note an element of circularity in this suggestion; the loss of living witnesses is a clear prompt to action only if we *already* recognize the importance of Holocaust memory for ongoing public discourse.

A further possibility is that events in Britain simply lag behind prominent developments in the United States during the 1990s. Across the Atlantic the key date is 1993, dubbed “the year of the Holocaust” by American media commentators because of the opening of major museums in Washington and Los Angeles, and the release of the movie *Schindler’s List* at a point when Steven Spielberg’s status as the preeminent Hollywood director was arguably at its height (Rothberg: 181). More broadly, the Victoria Tower Gardens initiative appears to reflect what several scholars have referred to as a “memorial mania” extending out of the United States, “a contemporary obsession with issues of memory and history” (Doss: 7; see also Silberman: 213). One could point to still other factors, for instance the idea that only with the elapse of many decades could public Holocaust memory emerge into the mainstream without getting immediately tangled up in messy recollections of Britain’s role in Mandate Palestine and the embryonic State of Israel.

With an eye to matters of religion and society, I wish to highlight an additional important possibility for this article: Holocaust memory marks a new moral singularity within an increasingly unstable religious-secular landscape. Cameron’s multireligious reference to “a young British Christian child or a young British Muslim child or a young British Jewish child” reflects recognition of this religious diversity. Nonetheless, such listing of Abrahamic affiliations arguably distracts from another crucial instability: what does “a young British Christian child” mean when rates of self-definition as “non-religious” have grown significantly at the expense of commitment to the state church (CRBPL; Lee; Woodhead). Given that the rise of the “nones” appears most pronounced among the young – that is, those most directly exposed to Holocaust education initiatives – we might conclude that remembrance of this atrocity serves as a new fixed point within (to borrow Department of Education phraseology) the “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development” of the nation (DoE 2014). Cameron’s description of Holocaust education as “sacred duty” above and beyond the specifics of religious belonging implicitly privileges such an endeavor as transcending faith community affiliations. His reference to sacrality is itself especially illuminating if we draw upon Gordon Lynch’s definition of “the sacred” as that which “people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life” (29). In 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain there is scope to wonder if there is now a requirement for elements of societal value-building that are more absolute, more non-contingent than that which traditional religious affiliations can provide, and that Holocaust memory functions as a replacement source from which to draw.

### The Ten Memorial Designs

With some of these broader historical and societal considerations provisionally in mind, it is useful to consider the plans for the new memorial in more detail. There are ten shortlisted designs:

- Adjaye Associates and Ron Arad Architects – henceforth “Adjaye” (UKHMF 2017a).
- Allied Works – henceforth “Allied” (UKHMF 2017b).
- Anish Kapoor and Zaha Hadid Architects – henceforth “Anish” (UKHMF 2017c).
- Caruso St John Architects, Marcus Taylor and Rachel Whiteread – henceforth “Caruso” (UKHMF 2017d).
- Diamond Schmitt Architects – henceforth “Diamond” (UKHMF 2017e).
- Foster + Partners and Michal Rovner – henceforth “Foster” (UKHMF 2017f).
- Heneghan peng – henceforth “Heneghan” (UKHMF 2017g).
- John McAslan + Partners and MASS Design Group – henceforth “McAslan” (UKHMF 2017h).
- Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Architects and David Morley Architects – henceforth “Lahdelma” (UKHMF 2017i).
- Studio Libeskind and Haptic Architects – henceforth “Libeskind” (UKHMF 2017j).

The designs have been publicly exhibited in London, Edinburgh, and Cardiff, but the following discussion will rely on the short overview texts, promotional videos, and still images housed on the competition website (UKHMF 2017a-j). Four ways in which the designs intersect with religiosity/sacrality will be considered.

### First Dimension: The Word “Sacred”

The first, rather simple point to make is that occasionally the word “sacred” is directly used by key parties. As noted above, Cameron described Holocaust remembrance as a “sacred duty” at the 2014 launch of the Prime Minister’s Commission on the Holocaust that would later recommend the memorial’s creation, and such language has recurred at later points. In 2016 Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis spoke of the site as the chance “to create a sacred space for reflection” and “a unique opportunity to enshrine the memory of the Shoah in British history for generations to come” (UK Government 2016b). Similarly, the Allied design remarks that “[o]ur proposal for the memorial is not an object, but the creation of a sacred space to serve the voices of survivors” (UKHMF 2017b), while the MacAslan design speaks of their ambition to create “a new sacred space in the centre of London” (UKHMF 2017h).

In none of these instances are the meanings and implications of this “sacrality” substantially unpacked. This is likely because such language already has a well-established lineage within discussion of the Holocaust, with one notable line of influence associated with the recently-deceased figure Elie Wiesel (1928-2016). He referred to Holocaust remembrance as “the domain of sacred memory” (1968: 178) or “a sacred mission” (Cargas: 158), and as first chairman of the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust he played a major role in the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington (Linenthal: 109-40). In her 2015 book, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space*, Avril Alba considers in detail the motivations of the USHMM’s creators and its functionality (as her title suggests) as a sacred location. Both the USHMM and Wiesel were influential in the origins of the London memorial, the former as collaborative partner for the Prime Minister’s Commission on the Holocaust, and the latter as the originator of an aphorism that recurs in both the commission’s 2015 report (PMCH: 14, 20) and several memorial designs. The quotation in question is “to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time,” taken from Wiesel’s influential autobiography *Night* (2006: xv). In a still image for the Adjaye memorial design, these words appear alone on the dark walls of a room described as “a contemplation court” (UKHMF 2017a). In the Diamond design, an inscription of Wiesel’s aphorism appears without accompaniment on a vast black wall that runs along the edge of a cavernous underground space into which, reminiscent of a cathedral, a thin sliver of daylight creeps in from overhead (UKHMF 2017e).

In sum, the notion of sacredness that Wiesel appealed to is evident in both the language and form of several London memorial designs, including, appropriately enough, the very spaces in which his own words appear. I will return to the notion that the designers deliberately evoke experiences of sacred physical space, but it is now useful to consider the allusions to Judaism that recur amongst the ten plans.

## Second Dimension: Redeploying Judaism

In her wide-ranging 2013 book, *Making Memory*, Alana Vincent briefly considers the relationship between selected memorials to the First World War and the Holocaust, suggesting that while the former “were originally designed to serve an existing community of mourners” the latter “have been designed to *create* a community of mourners, guiding the visitor towards a sense of sympathy for and responsibility to the victims they commemorate” (8, emphasis original). In the designs for the London memorial, one way this is reflected is via a recurring tendency to cite elements of Jewish religious life. The exact implications of this are imprecise given that they may be perceived as both referencing the traditions of the murdered people (and thereby defying the will to annihilate Jewish culture), and empowering the memorial’s additional narratives by borrowing and redeploying sacrality from Jewish religious sources.

Probably the most vivid appeal to Jewish tradition comes in the Allied design, which is constructed as a vast architectural echo of traditional devotion. The memorial, the promotional video tells us, would be “folded back on itself, as a *tallit*, as a prayer shawl, to create a place and space of protection” (UKHMF 2017b). The video shows a *tallit* being handled to explain how the shape of the memorial directly mimics the movements of the cloth.

References to Judaism in other designs are more fleeting or opaque, but they occur often enough to demand attention. In the video for the Libeskind design we see a wall adorned with glowing Hebrew script (UKHMF 2017j) which attentive viewers recognize as a passage from Moses Maimonides’ 12<sup>th</sup> century formulation the “Thirteen Principles of Faith.” The Anish design, dominated by the form of a giant bronze meteorite, states in its overview text that “[m]eteorites, mountains and stones are often at the center of places of reflection, especially in the Jewish tradition” (UKHMF 2017c), a statement that, even if the relationship between Judaism and meteorites is obscure, goes out of its way to assert the memorial’s partial continuity with Jewish culture. The Foster design features an artwork by Michal Rovner that the explanatory text informs us would “resonate with exodus or a human text that seems to go on forever like the unspoken testimonies” (UKHMF 2017f). “Exodus” is not capitalized, making it uncertain what level of biblical reference is intended, though given the accompanying phrase “or a human text” we must assume that some level of allusion to the Hebrew Bible is at play.

One of the most radical uses of Jewish tradition comes in the McAslan design, where a tradition of mourning is initially overtly cited but then thoroughly reworked. The design’s introductory text informs us that

In Jewish tradition, the laying of a stone at a grave marks a visit by relatives, remembering the deceased. This simple act binds generations together. The word for “stone” in Hebrew – אבן or eben – is a construct of א or Aleph, (Heavenly Father) and ב or Bet, (son) and so the word for stone symbolises this continuity between generations. . . [T]he ritual of placing the stone signifies a way of establishing legacy over generations (UKHMF 2017h).

In the new memorial it is envisaged that there would be a pile of 6 million stones (each representing a murdered victim of the Holocaust) and that visitors could then take a stone with them:

We’re offering people the opportunity to take one of the stones. By having this responsibility for this object we are saying we are responsible for keeping up our tolerant and free and equal society and we will stand for it. In removing these stones, the nation participates in the act of remembering. And the end result is a new sacred space in the centre of London (UKHMF 2017h).

The McAslan design competition materials do not offer reflection on the progression that has taken place here, but we should take note that the envisaged ritual innovation is dramatic. We have moved from a Jewish tradition of placing stones upon graves to taking stones *away* from a memorial site. From an act specific to the Jewish custom of mourning we have moved to celebration (even veneration) of liberal values of tolerance, freedom, and equality.

But I suggest that the McAslan design’s appropriation and revision reflects the complicated relationship with Judaism that surrounds the new London memorial. Elements of the Jewish community were actively consulted about ideas for a national memorial by the Prime Minister’s Commission on the Holocaust, and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis has also been a keen supporter of the undertaking. The rapid 21<sup>st</sup> century rise of state-led public Holocaust memory in Britain is, however, married with the fact that the UK’s Jewish community is comparatively small: 0.5% of the population of England and Wales according to the 2011 census (ONS). This makes us wonder if supportive elements of that community are, at least in part, being carried along by momentum derived from a different source. If, as suggested above, there is truth in the notion that Holocaust memory works as fixed moral singularity for a social landscape of religious-secular flux, then we might conclude that references to Jewish tradition in the London memorial designs are adornments to a mostly non-Jewish site of piety. They are powerful adornments to be sure, in that they convey one tradition’s sacrality across to a new site, with a new purpose.

I am wary of pushing this argument too far – it is likely that most, if not all, designers genuinely want to include reference to Jewish tradition as an act of respect – but the exact dynamics at play are complex.

### **Third Dimension: Transformative Experience**

It is worth flagging up a third mode of interface with sacrality and religiosity that plays a crucial part in attempting to make sense of this site: this is the role of what we might, with deliberate openness, call “transformative experience.” In her survey work, *Spatializing Culture*, Setha Low (building particularly on the work of Geoffrey White) notes the need to consider memorials as spaces that “instruct visitors how to feel”:

There are cues that shape the feeling and the emotive landscape of a built environment such that the individual comes to the culturally appropriate emotional state not just through discourse but also through the structure of the movement and the architectural and material culture details of the space (150).

One of the planning briefs given to design teams in London is that because of the various physical restrictions of the site they would be required to build downwards into the earth so that a learning center could be incorporated within the site of the memorial itself (UKHMF 2016). Whilst this may have started out as a practical matter (the gardens are not large, there

are other memorials in the gardens, and visibility of the Houses of Parliament had to be preserved) the outcome is recurring reference to a transformative journey of descent (and ascent):

Diamond design: “We want to build downwards, and create a journey” (UKHMF 2017e).

Adjaye design: “[It will be an] emotive journey. Through a careful sequencing of highly immersive spaces . . . our design envelops the visitor in the physical, intellectual and emotional experience of the Holocaust trauma. . . We wanted to do something that you can actually go into. It’s the walking through that is the memorial” (UKHMF 2017a).

Foster design: “It’s a journey, down a ramp, into the earth . . . you move through, you come to the light, to the sky, to normality” (UKHMF 2017f).

Caruso design: “[T]he underground chamber is filled with nothing and everything at the same time, it is the presence and the absence of light, the word and the silence, the singularity and the void” (UKHMF 2017d).

What we find here is not reference to specific tradition, but rather an appeal to emotion and spiritual language that is difficult to pin down. The Caruso design highlights this fluidity in a section of its promotional video in which the shots jump to unidentified photographs of caves and candles nestled in roughly-hewn niches. Alongside this, the voiceover muses “[these are] some of the things we were thinking about, things like Neolithic manmade structures, caves, the menorah (or the Jewish candelabra), the Pantheon, for example” (UKHMF 2017d). The reference points appear consciously eclectic, referring to religious experience in generalized, cross-cultural terms.

I suggest that what stabilizes these evocations of spiritual journey are specifics of the London landscape into which visitors will emerge. Consider, for example, the following section of narration from the Libeskind design video:

In the underground, we are suddenly shifted to another direction, another dimension. We are in the darkness and the luminosity of the exhibits. With the ramps and intertwining spaces, very clearly you see that most of them end in a dead end. But one of them, the path of hope, rises, and it is of course the kindertransport, 10,000 children saved by the UK, a trace of hope in a dark world. We ascend, we are in the park, we pass the Buxton memorial [to the abolition of slavery], and we’ve wound up at its destiny, destination, the river Thames, the terrace on the river Thames, looking at the beauty of London, the beauty of the river of life, and at the fact that the island character of the UK was victorious against Nazism and Fascism (UKHMF 2017j).

The redemption found at the end of this spiritual journey is, of course, Britain itself (or at least a reading of Britain and its history). The Libeskind design neatly maps onto what Avril Alba has described as a tendency for international memorial and museum sites to function as “negative epiphanies” (40), namely spiritual evocations of a sharp contrast between the Holocaust and the civil landscape into which the visitor emerges. The remarks of Michael

Berenbaum, project director during the first five years of the USHMM, are usefully illustrative of such contrasting:

Most of the museums and monuments on the national mall [in Washington] celebrate the fruits of democratic freedoms. Yet, by virtue of its contents, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reflects the opposite. . . The museum is far more than a memorial to the Jewish genocide. It stands as a testament, and perhaps a challenge, to the central issue[s] of any democratic society (233).

We may agree with Berenbaum’s reference to “*any* democratic society” to some extent, but of course the USHMM visitor is exposed to a specifically American version of this epiphany, and in turn the London memorial will provide a specifically British one.

#### **Fourth Dimension: “British Values,” Christianity, and Islam**

As noted in the quotation that opened this article, the London memorial is a site intended to embody “British values” (UK Government 2016a). As such, although international participants were involved in many of the competition entries, I suggest that national narrative and context is crucial. Before attending to the significant origins of this term “British values” it is worth noting the extent to which the designs dutifully convey a notion that exposure to Holocaust memory will be closely wedded to a renewed exposure to Britain, and its governance as materially represented in the looming form of the Houses of Parliament.

The Allied design’s architectural incorporation of a Jewish prayer shawl was noted above, but it is worth additionally bearing in mind how this is intended to interact with sight of surrounding buildings. The design video notes that with an “aperture of the *tallit*, the folding back on itself, creating that opening, the focus is back on parliament, and I think that’s a very important component of our scheme” (UKHMF 2017b). In other words, the design is such that, at a point, visitors will be invited to look through the Jewish prayer shawl into a vision of British democracy, suggesting (though the Allied design material never precisely says this) that the Houses of Parliament represent the answer to prayer raised by the horrors of genocide.

With regard to experience of transformative descent, it is notable that several designs feature a lower courtyard from which visitors are positioned to look upwards and catch sight of the architecture of British governance:

Diamond design: “As you come out of the memorial, the ramp that takes you down, it takes you up, and you’re positioned to see Victoria tower” (UKHMF 2017e).

Heneghan design: “[The] walls tilt upwards, gravitating toward Victoria tower, framing the tower of the Houses of Parliament. This view reminds us of the attendant privileges and responsibilities of the individual in a democratic society” (UKHMF 2017g).

A discordant moment occurs, however, in the video to the Adjaye design when the Israeli architect Ron Arad remarks that “we wanted something that is not trying to claim it for any kind of political purpose. We wanted to be free from that.” But he then muses “Can you be free from that?” before the video suddenly cuts away (UKHMF 2017a). Whatever the editorial

purposes of including this reflection in the video (it appears obscure), we must note that for a memorial site next to the Houses of Parliament and promoted by government as a “permanent statement of our British values” (UK Government 2016a), such hope for freedom from political purpose is highly optimistic.

I suggest that as well as asserting a specific British epiphany via appropriation of Jewish religious imagery or transcendent vision from the abyss, interface with religious issues was inevitable from the very moment at which “British values” was cited in the government announcement. A brief introduction to the roots of this specific term is required to lay out the full implications of what is at play here.

The term “British values” is comparatively recent to governmental and public discourse, its origins belonging to securitization policies aimed at tackling Islamist extremism. The 2011 Prevent Strategy (UK Government 2011) is the key landmark in this regard, but one might also point to numerous other documents and speeches. For example, then Home Secretary Theresa May’s 2015 speech, “A Stronger Britain: Built on Our Values” (UK Government 2015), makes it apparent that the perceived antithesis of “British values” is specifically identified as non-integrationist Islam (i.e., a version of Islam perceived as failing to honor “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”).

Since 2011 “British values” discourse has become heavily integrated into educational contexts, with the Department of Education *Teacher’s Standards* warning teachers “not to undermine fundamental British values” (DoE 2011). In 2014 the same department issued guidance that “Schools should promote the fundamental British values [defined as] democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” (DoE 2014). In 2015 the revised school inspection handbook defined an “outstanding” school as one in which the “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and, within this, promotion of fundamental British values, are at the heart of the school’s work” (Ofsted). Early reception of these developments has been decidedly mixed, with initial research suggesting that some teachers find the term “British values” confusingly vague (Elton-Chalcraft et al.), and one author in the *Journal of Education for Teaching* going so far as to denounce them as “racist nativism” (Smith).

A final development to bear in mind is the recurring alignment of “British values” with Christianity. David Cameron’s 2016 Easter address, a short text sprinkled liberally with references to “values,” reflected that “Christian values . . . should give us the confidence to say yes, we are a Christian country and we are proud of it,” remarking that their antithesis comes in the form of “terrorists [who] try to destroy our way of life” (UK Government 2016c). In April 2017, Theresa May’s address reflected that

This Easter I think of those values that we share – values that I learnt in my own childhood, growing up in a vicarage. Values of compassion, community, citizenship. The sense of obligation we have to one another. These are values we all hold in common, and values that are visibly lived out everyday by Christians, as well as by people of other faiths or none. . . In doing so, we should be confident about the role that Christianity has to play in the lives of people in our country (UK Government 2017).

This passage from May’s address suggests that the relationship between Christianity and other traditions (including non-belief) promotes shared core societal values, but that Christianity is *especially* exemplary. Official government documentation never overtly states that “British values” are “Christian values,” and indeed part of the utility of the term “British values” is that it can slide in and out of overlapping ideological domains. Notions that the counterpoint of “British values” is extremist Islam, and that such British values are *particularly* resonant with Christianity, should nonetheless sensitize us to the religious dynamics at play in this terminology.

How does this all add up, and what does it have to do with the new Holocaust memorial in London? The memorial, it is recalled, was announced (in the headline of the government press release) as a “permanent statement of our British values” (UK Government 2016a). In February 2017, Andrew Percy MP (Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government), addressing questions on the memorial in parliament, reasserted that it “will send out a powerful message about our values as a country. Together, we will stand up for the British values of tolerance and respect for others that I think are epitomized by this building and this Parliament” (UK Parliament). The standard definitions of “British values” (“democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” [UK Government 2015]) mean that such ideological intent is superficially uncontentious. That we cite the horrors of the Holocaust as evidence of the dark potentials of failing to uphold civil structures is essentially laudable, but my suggestion is that “British values” are more complex than this. They belong to a matrix of relationships between Christianity, the Muslim minority, contemporary British identity, and politicians for whom citing the Christianness of Britain (regardless of the complex sociological evidence) makes clear electoral sense in appealing to a socially conservative base.

Taken to its logical end, we might wonder whether a narrative of Holocaust-memory-as-purveyor-of-“British-values” amounts to a novel form of political Christianization. Accusations of Christianizing the Holocaust have a long and fraught history, not least during the lengthy “Carmelite controversy” in which a group of nuns settled in the grounds of Auschwitz concentration camp (see Berger, Cargas, and Nowak), or in reaction to Pope John Paul II’s 1979 description of the site as the “Golgotha of the modern world” (John Paul II), but the dynamics at play with the London memorial are altogether more subtle. The exact extent to which such a Christianization is intended is an open question, but I propose it is an issue worth raising, not least because one religious reference point conspicuously absent from any of the London memorial designs is overt critical reflection on the role of Christian anti-Jewish thought in the background of the Holocaust or the decidedly mixed actions of churches during the Nazi era.

### **Sacrality as Aid (and Risk) to Memorial Narrative**

Drawing several threads together, my suggestion is that the new Holocaust memorial in London should be understood against a constellation of interactions between ideas of Britishness, Jewish tradition, Christianity, Islam, and non-belief. Overlaying all of this is an evocation of a sacred, transformative spiritual experience that powerfully aids the narratives at play in the memorial visitor’s journey.

In a 1995 book the conservative American rabbi Michael Goldberg offered a searing critique of public Holocaust memory in the United States that offers a somewhat cautionary precedent. Drawing on Hebrew Bible archetypes to denounce a “Holocaust cult” in which Wiesel was high priest and the USHMM an idolatrous temple, he was concerned with what he saw as a distraction from a true vision and articulation of Judaism. In this paper my hope is to avoid repeating Goldberg’s hyperbolic excesses and the conspiratorial suggestion that the London memorial represents the intentional stamping of a dangerous new cult at the heart of British public life.

In his seminal 1993 treatment of Holocaust memorials, *The Texture of Memory*, James Young offers the more useful summarizing statement that “[m]emory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure” (2). My purpose in raising all these complications and queries is to resist a situation in which both the horrors of atrocity and evocations of sacrality combine to make critical questioning unfeasible. Such questioning is important, perhaps most urgently to unpick any suggestion that public Holocaust memory is somehow immune from nationalized narration. Writing in 1999 on prospects for establishing a new Holocaust Memorial Day, then Home Secretary Jack Straw remarked that such an endeavor was to be driven by a view that “[w]e must always remain alive to the dangers of extreme nationalism.” Public Holocaust memory, in other words, was envisaged as a counter to nationalism. While the memorial design factors noted above cannot be reasonably described as “extremism nationalism,” a risk of Straw’s logic is that it implies Holocaust memory is automatically immune from nationalisms of all hues.

Transnational memory in the form of the Stockholm declaration may have played a key role in driving the rise of public Holocaust memory in Britain but, for those who wish to do so, a specific and positive national narrative of the event’s meaning can be constructed relatively easily, not least through appeal to ideas of the nation’s salvific role in the Second World War. Reflecting just such a tendency, the executive summary of the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report remarked that “[e]nsuring that the memory and the lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten lies at the heart of Britain’s values as a nation. In commemorating the Holocaust, Britain remembers the way it proudly stood up to Hitler” (PMHC: 9). In the UK, it is worth critically thinking about the ways in which Holocaust memory, beyond disturbing images and horrifying testimonies, can ultimately be rendered into a reassuring memory. One simple test is to ask whether a British visitor is encouraged to feel more patriotic after journeying through the memorial. In visions laid out by the ten shortlisted designs, the answer would have to be “yes.” And such narrative power is bolstered, I suggest, by the dimensions of sacrality considered above.

As numerous scholars of memorialization have nonetheless observed (e.g., White: 53; Doss: 7) the later reception, meanings, and use of a memorial site cannot ultimately be fully anticipated. A key example addressed by Young in *Texture of Memory* is Nathan Rapoport’s “Warsaw Ghetto Monument,” a sculpture that, quite independently of the artist and commissioners’ intent, became variously bound up in anti-Soviet resistance and particularities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Young: 155-84). Is it the case that perceptions of the London memorial may shift, that the dimensions of sacrality may end up empowering unanticipated narratives? It is worth drawing out a few of the possibilities.

The first point to note is that Holocaust memorial sites are not always treated with piety. Leaving aside the extremes of intentional damage and disfigurement, the behavior of average visitors is not a wholly predictable business. In early 2017 the Israeli-German artist Shahak Shapira, incensed by “selfies” taken at Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, garnered international headlines by reformatting the photographs so that the errant visitors were cast smiling and waving against historic scenes of atrocity from the Nazi era. One side-effect of the story is that it opened up public debate about what is or is not appropriate behavior in such a space, with Peter Eisenman (the memorial’s designer) repeatedly insisting to journalists that “it is not a sacred place” (Gunter; Oltermann). Given the extent to which the London memorial *is* being positioned as sacred terrain we may wonder how similar debates may play out there in future years. Consider, for example, one specific aspect of the Anish design: a blank spherical interior inside a vast bronze meteorite that will be open to ground-level visitors entering from Victoria Tower Gardens. “[W]e hope it will be quiet and contemplative,” reflects designer Anish Kapoor (UKHMF 2017c), but my sense is it may be too reminiscent of a fun science museum exhibit for such ambition to be reliably realized. That visitors will consistently follow the expected emotional cues is not certain.

The potential for narrative confusion at the memorial is perhaps already built into the detail of several designs. The Lahdelma design’s introductory text states that “[t]he UK Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre summarizes the Holocaust, the persecution and systematic mass murder against not only the Jews, but also against other minorities” (UKHMF 2017i), inadvertently appearing to run directly into a debate about what the Holocaust was. In its teachers’ guide, the Holocaust Educational Trust instructs readers to “employ the term ‘Holocaust’ specifically to describe the murder of European Jews” and describes “[u]sing ‘Holocaust’ as a catch-all term for Nazi persecution” as a “common myth and misconception” (HET: 22). My point here is not to adjudicate on correct use of the term “Holocaust” (though the Trust broadly reflects academic usage) but to note that a major definitional ambiguity appears to have travelled all the way into a shortlisted design entry.

One might also point to the recurring use of railway imagery in the designs. The Foster design intends to evoke trains taking prisoners to Auschwitz, reflecting what Oren Baruch Stier, in his 2015 book *Holocaust Icons*, observes is a widespread practice across international sites of memory (32-67). The Libeskind design railway imagery is intended as reference to the kindertransports in which nearly 10,000 predominantly Jewish children were rescued from Nazi Germany by the UK (UKHMF 2017j). The Lahdelma design appears to evoke both simultaneously, describing in its explanatory text how a “visitor walks through the arcs – rust spaces – symbolically along the iron rail tracks. The destination is either a death camp or a train journey across the channel into the UK” (UKHMF 2017i). The net result of viewing these design plans together is a realization that unless these railway references are very clearly signposted there is potential for radically different (even confused) experiences of the visitor journey.

Beyond these uncertainties there is scope to consider whether the memorial site has potential to more radically and proactively undermine its intended celebration of British governance. One obvious direction this may take concerns refugee policy. On a historical level, we might observe that, despite the kindertransports, Britain’s attitude toward refugees during the Nazi era was, like many nations, decidedly problematic, a point that was briefly

acknowledged in the 2015 executive summary of the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report. The report concludes that Britain must therefore reflect on “its responsibilities in the world today” (PMHC: 9), but its authors could not have anticipated quite how quickly this would come into stark relief. In September of the same year David Cameron came under severe and high-profile pressure to allow more Syrian refugees into Britain, initially remarking “I don’t think there is an answer that can be achieved simply by taking more and more refugees” (BBC). Despite some limited policy movement, the British government has to date taken in an extremely small number of refugees, particularly in comparison to Germany. Had the London Holocaust memorial existed at the time, it might have been a ready-made focal point for criticism of refugee policy. The sacrality of the site might have empowered critique of those in government, disrupting the continuity of a narrative that celebrates British parliament. Since President Donald Trump’s announcement of a travel ban related to several Middle Eastern countries on 27 January (i.e., Holocaust Memorial Day) 2017, commentators have been increasingly willing to make overt historical comparisons, with the USHMM issuing an official statement of grave concern just a few days later. It is possible that the UK government is constructing a memorial that, despite their intentions, holds the power to channel unrest at current and future policy.

Another dimension of potential instability concerns the memorial’s relationship with British colonialism and empire; public Holocaust memory has to date remained separated from consideration of such history, a point that has on occasion been of concern to academics. Consider the following 2014 comments by historian Tom Lawson, co-editor of the journal *Holocaust Studies* and co-founder of the British Association of Holocaust Studies:

[I]n recent years in particular I have been concerned that a preoccupation with the memory of the Holocaust in contemporary Britain has become counterproductive. It has not become, as many campaigners for greater awareness of the Holocaust assumed it would, a prompt to self-reflection about the past, but instead a terrain in which some British national myths – of eternal tolerance, of the country as a haven for the persecuted, for example – are being further reinforced. Instead of undermining the stable rituals of historical memory, Holocaust memorialisation has itself become ritualised and, rather than challenging, safe. Indeed in many ways it appears that Holocaust memorialisation is being fed more and more into ideas of British national pride (xvi).

Lawson’s response has been to move more actively into study of genocide in contexts of British Empire, and we may wonder what would happen to the London memorial’s meaning if such work fed into public consciousness. The resources for such a discussion (see also Gordon; Pergher et al.) are in fact already entering public domain; the American historian Timothy Snyder published a widely-available trade book, *Black Earth*, the opening sections of which lay out the causal links between the expansionist policies and ideologies of colonial powers and later Nazi actions in Eastern Europe (14-18). If such uncomfortable connections are more widely perceived, the memorial may become a location that subverts rather than bolsters celebration of British history.

One unique aspect of the Caruso memorial design is that, whether purposefully or not, their construction would in fact encourage a counter-discourse. Their plan involves creating a translucent cast of the Buxton Memorial (to the abolition of slavery) that already stands in Victoria Tower Gardens. The promotional material remarks that “the cast form of the Buxton memorial creates reverse dialogue with the past” (UKHMF 2017d) though, remarkably perhaps, it does not indicate what kind of dialogue this would be, or even why they are intending to link slavery and the Holocaust so explicitly. Such interesting, provocative, but apparently under-theorized associations would surely open public debate beyond the control of the memorial’s organizers.

Considered more broadly, uncertainty regarding the site’s future is also bound up in the extent to which fissures in Britain’s political and social cohesion have of late become especially apparent. Rob Van Der Laarse conjectured in 2013 that a growth in skepticism regarding the European Union may lead to the breakdown of a homogenized pan-European ethics centered on Holocaust memory (86). Certainly we can already see that, despite the international influence of the 2000 Stockholm declaration, British articulation of the event’s meaning has proven amenable to more nationalized narratives. The 2016 referendum decision to leave the European Union and the inconclusive 2017 General Election that followed have, as numerous academic and media commentators have observed (e.g. Lang; Garton Ash), highlighted the dramatic extent to which understandings of the nation’s past and present are internally fractured along lines of age, class, ethnicity, education, and geography. Put simply, the place of the Holocaust in Britain’s history, and the future meanings attributed to a space of national remembrance, are contingent upon the wider story into which it is placed. At this moment in time that story is sounding jarringly inharmonious.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the plans for a new Holocaust memorial in central London intersect with fluid dimensions of religious-secular diversity and instability in contemporary Britain. Jewish tradition, Christianization, fear of extremist Islamism, unbelief, and national mythology all play their part. Drawing upon these factors is the notion of the memorial as a sacred site – a place of transformative experience in which encounter with an historic atrocity lays the foundation for new appreciations of the present. On one level, it must be recognized that there is some inherent appropriateness in appealing to language and experience of sacredness, as the grim horrors of the Holocaust are (thankfully) so radically outside most people’s daily life in Britain that a discourse of rupturing the normal and the everyday is necessarily required. However, given that public memory is also necessarily embedded in the complications of the society in which it takes place, it is incumbent on critical observers to also identify and assess the ideologies and narratives which sacrality may ultimately serve.

Much about the construction and reception of the new London memorial remains to be seen, but the current point in the process is nonetheless a crucial one in terms of recording and mapping out discussions that may easily be sidelined amidst an atmosphere of respectfulness in the face of extreme suffering. In a chapter on 1990s German public memory in his seminal *Texture of Memory*, Young reflects that the present situation may in fact represent a kind of ideal:

[T]he best memorial to the fascist era and its victims in Germany today may not be a memorial at all – but only the never-to-be-resolved debate over what kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end. Imagine, for example, a series of annual competitions, whereby the proposed designs and jury’s debate are exhibited in lieu of an installed winner. Visitors to such a memorial installation would be invited to submit their own evaluations of designs, which would in turn be added to the overall memorial text. Instead of a fixed figure for memory, the debate itself – perpetually unresolved amid ever-changing conditions – would be enshrined (81).

Most memorial construction authorities are unlikely to endorse such a project of perpetual irresolution, and the British government evidently eyes the finished memorial as a valuable resource for harnessing a narrative of the nation as salvific force. As I have aimed to show in the later parts of this article, however, the memorial being constructed may not be a wholly reliable ally. The sacrality with which the site is imbued may in some circumstances insulate it from awkward counter-readings, but in others it may empower critique of its intended narrative. It has been purposed as a “permanent statement of our British values,” but as the rapid and late rise of public Holocaust memory itself implies, perceptions of the past are not static and declarations of eternity cannot mitigate the evolving nature of society’s sensibilities.

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