

WHAT DOES THE U.S. HOLOCAUST MUSEUM SAY?

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Listening to the dedicatory speeches yesterday (the President's was a masterpiece), I had to conclude they they did not say it all. A helicopter view helped me to see what was missing, viz what the building itself is saying. I'll let its messages tumble out of me, since the structure is mute & cannot speak for itself. Do you hear it saying the same things?

1 In America's central public square, the temple area of our civil religion, the H.M. is a jarring presence. Unlike the Jefferson & Lincoln Memorials, it's not a (Greek-style) temple. Unlike the Washington Monument, it's not a phallic stele to our country's greatness. Unlike heroic statuary here & there, it's not a statement of our military prowess. Unlike the Vietnam Wall, it doesn't bespeak our military folly & grief. And it's saying some things obviously other than those of the Congressional complex, the White House, the Supreme Court, & the Treasury. It speaks **radically other** words. And it has a right to be heard. We need to listen.

2 It speaks of the **ambiguity** of human achievements. Managerially & technically, the Holocaust was a high achievement. The Somalis are living in hell because they can't organize anything: those Nazis organized the hell out of everything. "Civilization" at its highest showed its potential for humanity at its lowest. This grim building of stone & exposed steel is a chilling warning that the worst may come when we think we're aiming at the best.

3 The building talks like a Jew. Why shouldn't it? It was a **Jewish** project, as yesterday's speeches affirmed. We aren't to expect much attention to the non-Jewish half of the concentration camps' dead, or of the thousands of Christian clergy who died there for refusal to go along with Hitler. I fear the antijewish consequences of Jews' calling public attention to their sufferings: on balance, it fails to function as a dissuasive against persecution of Jews. Holocaust Week has witnessed scores of minor antijewish outbursts all across the country....I would, for those reasons, have preferred a Death Camps Museum, or a H.M. explicitly re-defining "Holocaust" as Hitler's systematic destruction of all who did not meet his racial or political standards. (But expanding the word would be difficult: "the Holocaust" is [eg, in RHD²] strictly Jewish.)

4 I rather like the building for saying that the "**separation of church & state**" is only a guiding principle, not an unbreachable wall. The U.S.G. gave public land for this Jewish project, which is being operated by taxpayers' money. On the other hand, it's a highly visible breach in the wall & stands as a possible argument for other breaches, eg a mosque to symbolize improved Arab/U.S. relations.

5 The building says, "Believe in **original sin!**" That's a great comfort to me, as are all confirmations of my theology. Daily we Christians pray the Lord's Prayer, which ends, "rescue us from the evil one" (Mt.6.13 NRSV; fn., "Or *from evil*"; the text form bespeaks the belief in the ominous, looming presence of the dark powers in the universe, including humanity's actual & potential evil). A bright view of humanity--such as the "human potential movement" aiming at actualizing innate general & individual capacities (Fromm, Maslow, Perls, Rogers)--can make no sense of the Christian doctrine of atonement centering in God's own pain in Jesus' crucifixion to "rescue us from the evil one," for developmentalism (salvation by education) is not a bloody business. But the H.M. is an architectural rebuke to this Enlightenment-sunshine teaching, a rebuke blurting out the truth that self-actualization schemes fail to account for, & deal with, humanity's dark side, our potential for evil (albeit conjoint with our potential for good).

Freud was clear & biblical on human beings' tendency to be evil as well as good. I say we are fundamentally good (as parts of God's good creation) & basically evil (as "fallen"): Freud said we are fundamentally both but need to think more about our evil than about our good--so biblical religion places "a stronger emphasis on what is evil...because...people disavow it and thereby make the human mind not better but incomprehensible" (Standard Ed. 15:146; qtd. by Ernest Wall-

work, Winter/93 CRITERION, p.31). Elsewhere, Freud speculates that our self-regarding, aggressive side may be stronger than our others-regarding, altruistic side. Beware of humanity! Beware of yourself & your "interests" (gender, class, race, ethnicity, nation)! Beware of your neighbor! (The balancing message is: Trust! When in doubt, be vulnerable! Love your neighbor! Love your enemy!) Knowing your evil potential, practice self-scrutiny! Exercise the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1970) on your own & others' motives, intentions, behavior.

6 The H.M. says, "Go **violent** benevolently when other forms of benevolence fail." By bombing the rails into the death camps, the Allies could have slowed the mass-murdering. Now, by some military action against Serbia, the U.N. (or the U.S., with or without allies) might slow down or stop the "ethnic cleansing." Though Elie Wiesel got a Nobel Prize for Peace, yesterday at the H.M. dedication he looked Clinton in the eye & said, "You must do something to stop this [Serbian ethnic cleansing]." Irony: On McNeil-Lehrer this evening I saw the most horrible ethnic-cleansing footage I've ever seen, & it wasn't by the Serbs but by the Croats. We should maybe drop $\frac{1}{2}$ our bombloads on the Serbs & the other half on the Croats?

The H.M. is an invalid but powerful pressure on Clinton to go violent in ex-Yugoslavia. The country's experiencing a righteous (?) rush of adrenaline on this, & the President's almost certain to do something foolish within the next few days.

Oddly, perversely, another push for us to go violent abroad is the fact that a few days ago we went violent at home & removed a pest, David Koresh, who'd been bugging the Feds for 51 days. What happened--according to six Davidian witnesses giving separate accounts--is that the U.S.G. holocausted about 90, including 27 chn., thus: a tank went through the compound's front door & flattened a propane tank, spurting fuel in all directions. Then a lamp (the compound had had its electricity turned off) ignited the propane & the flimsy structures went whoosh. Unwitting government killings, no mass suicide....Americans easily rush to aggressive behavior (said Freud, all humans do).

Paradoxically, the H.M. is both a warning against, & an invitation to, violence. The museum's motto, carved in stone, is from Elie Wiesel: "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." Yes, but witness against/for whom/what? Good poetry, but what's its politics? I want to weep when I consider the pathetic liberal assumption that keeping horrible memories alive has a beneficent-proscriptive effect. "Lest We Forget...In Flanders' Fields," a great poem from WWI, certainly had no depressant effect on the forces exploding into WWII. And when has an old persecution of Jews delayed new persecutions of them? But though the H.M. is wrong-headed, thank God it's stunningly righted-hearted, & I pray for good effects.

7 Set among Federal architecture inviting to pride, the H.M. invites to **penitential memory**. It's a visibilization of the Lord's words to Cain (Gn.4.10 NRSV), "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" And your father's & your mother's & your sister's. It is truly & deeply human to remember the dead in general & the victim dead in particular. And it is profoundly Jewish to believe that some good will come of martyrs' blood (else we Christians would not have our doctrine of atonement through the blood of Martyr Jesus). Here, then, is a word of thanks to all who made the H.M. possible: it is a statement of **faith** that God's goodness will not suffer ultimate defeat, & of **hope** that in God all suffering humanity can sing "We shall overcome!" If asked to speak about the H.M., these (in boldface) are the three theological bells I'd peal.

In my daily reading of the Reform Jewish prayerbook GATES OF PRAYER, I've just arrived at the section (pp.407-11) titled "In Remembrance of Jewish Suffering." As I'm not a Jew, I cannot enter directly into the words. But as a Christian, I can indirectly--through these word's applied in the NT to Jesus--enter into these words. Memory is a duty, forgetfulness is a sin. As editor Chaim Stern put it in the text, "How many stood...unconcerned, forgetting the divine command: 'You shall not stand idle while your neighbor bleeds' [a rendering of Lev.19.16]...Let there be no forgetfulness before the Throne of Glory....We look back, knowing that the past cannot be undone; but it can be redeemed....We look ahead. Is not hope better than despair?"Thousands of communion tables have carved into them Jesus' words, "This Do in Remembrance of Me."