Repentance for the Holocaust

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The idea that “sin” and “sinner” are not to be equated has found ample expression in the postwar period—in exceptional cases, even before the war actually ended. Toward the end of World War II, as the atrocities committed at Buchenwald and Auschwitz came increasingly to light, contempt for “the Germans” grew in Allied countries. Some “turners”—many of Jewish descent—took it upon themselves to challenge a particular understanding of “collective guilt”—that is, that all the Germans should be punished as criminals. One early “turner,” Victor Gollancz, a British-Jewish publisher and writer, penned a pamphlet in April 1945, What Buchenwald Really Means,\(^1\) precisely challenging this tendency to equate crime/sin (the Buchenwald concentration camp) and the “criminals/sinners” (the Nazis/Germans), by looking more deeply

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into the nature of the crime/sin itself. “Victor’s pamphlet was directed to spelling out in precise detail how Buchenwald proved the opposite: all the Germans had not been guilty; there was ample evidence that hundreds of thousands of heroic gentiles had been persecuted for resisting the Nazis.”

Seizing on this single fact among facts, Gollancz, the champion hitherto of the cause of European Jewry, denounced any “collective punishment” being visited on the Germans, whether it be expulsion or starvation.

Also in the early postwar years, while Gollancz was standing up for the German case in Britain by using his own publishing company and the press, a young Jew in France was following suit in fighting against the sin-sinner-flattening tendency in public perception. Alfred Grosser, then a twenty-two-year-old aspiring lecturer, returned to Germany in 1947, which he, as a German Jew, and his family had fled because of Nazi persecution. He traveled through all three Western zones to witness the living conditions there. After his return, he published a series of articles in *Combat*, a French newspaper of the Resistance. Among other things, Grosser urged his French audience to reconsider the collective punishment of the Germans, especially in view of the “innocence” of German youth. Because of the unjust sufferings young Germans now faced, he said in one of these articles, “[The German youth] does not hold himself responsible for the murderous madness of the Hitler regime. And he is right. There is no collective guilt, no collective responsibility for children and adolescents.”

Plainly agreeable as Grosser’s plea might be, at least where guilt rather than responsibility is concerned, one might still object to

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3. See, for example, Gollancz’s *Let My People Go* (1943) and *Nowhere to Lay Their Heads* (1945).


this “natural” approach to guilt assignment. For if one accepts that children are not guilty, then what about the adults? Is there collective guilt for them? One might ask the similar question with regard to Gollancz’s formulation: if Buchenwald proved that not all Germans were guilty because there were those who had resisted and those who had suffered persecution, then were all those who had not resisted and/or suffered in the camps guilty, and did they therefore deserve collective condemnation? In other words, is separating “good Germans” from “bad Germans”—whether by age or affiliation—an effective expression of the biblical conception? Is this not only an “improvement” at best, in the sense that those sinners to be condemned for their sin are only the few “bad” ones?

Another Jewish “turner,” Hannah Arendt, tackled precisely this problem even earlier, in a publication that appeared in January 1945, “Organized Guilt,” in which she countered that “even the more serious discussions between the advocates of the ‘good’ Germans and the accusers of the ‘bad’ . . . [sometimes] adopt unsuspending the racial theories of the Nazis and reverse them (*kehren sie um*).” Like Gollancz, Arendt was concerned that the Germans would be collectively, indiscriminately punished for Nazi crimes: “The central thesis of this [political] warfare [of the Nazis] . . . is that there is no difference between Nazis and Germans. . . . The extermination of 70 or 80 million Germans . . . would also only mean that the ideologies of the Nazis had won.” That the Nazis or Hitler “had won” would become a recurring theme in the postwar period, as we shall see, calling the victors’ and the victims’ attention to what it really means to fight Nazism/antisemitism, or to fight sin rather than the sinner.

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10. See, for example, Eugen Kogon’s and Avraham Burg’s expressions in P10 and P9, respectively.
But still, can one now simply distinguish the Nazis from the Germans, and condemn the former while leaving the latter in peace? Here is Arendt’s answer: because the Nazis had surely seen to it that—by way of false documents and witnesses—no living German could be left with an untarnished anti-Nazi record, therefore “whether someone in Germany is a Nazi or an anti-Nazi can only be determined by one who is capable of looking into the human heart, which, as we all know, no human eye can penetrate.”

In other words, the human ability to judge sinners—rather than sin—is cast into doubt, and the prophetic message of Jeremiah that only God can fathom hearts and minds (17:9–10) is reaffirmed.

Appearing in tandem with the conceptual separation between sin and sinner in the biblical paradigm is the reaffirmation of the inherent dignity of human beings—even the most egregious sinners are included. In the postwar period, the expression of this idea is probably the most significant contribution of Victor Gollancz. His book *Our Threatened Values* first appeared in English in June 1946 and was translated into German the following year. In it he argued that Western civilization’s “central value...—the value that includes all our other values—is respect for personality,” the “real test” of which “is our attitude toward people we ‘don’t like’, toward those whom... we ‘don’t respect’, and to all whom we think of as enemies or criminals or sinners.”

If the requirement of respect for personality in “normal” circumstances is accepted with little difficulty, it is only reasonable to ask why we should still accord such respect to “abnormal” individuals, such as mass murderers, who have arguably forfeited their right to respect through their own disrespect for others. Gollancz based his argument chiefly on the “three interrelated religious doctrines [of the West]: that God created all men in His own image, that God is

11. Arendt, “Organisierte Schuld,” 336. See also a similar effort at “anonymizing the good Germans” by Max Picard in P9.


the Father of all men, and that all men are therefore brothers.”

Quoting the prophet Amos (9:7) and the Talmudic legend in which God admonished the angels for joining the human celebration of the drowning of the Egyptians—that is, those who were also his children—in the Red Sea, Gollancz exhorted his fellow Jewish readers to consider the following question and its implications: “Is not my God also the God of the Nazis?”

Mindful that he was addressing a largely Christian or “Christianized” audience in Britain, Gollancz did not refrain from adopting a Christian discourse to condemn the sin-sinner-flattening tendency. Quoting John 8:7, he repeatedly challenged his British readers who would dare “to throw the first stone” at the Germans or the so-called collaborationists.

A corollary to the affirmation of the sinner’s inherent human dignity is the rejection of his demonization by others. Hence it is no surprise that both Gollancz and Arendt came to the fore to denounce the tendency to think and speak of Nazi criminals as monsters. In her “report” on the trial, after enumerating Eichmann’s various “cardinal vices,” including vanity, bragging, self-centeredness, habitual lying, pretentiousness, and a love of clichés (i.e., the banality of evil), Arendt concluded that “despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster’.”

Gollancz, on the other hand, sought to counter a more subtle form of the dehumanization of the sinner—by “counting him out,” as if his death were not a human death. Hence in his own report on the Eichmann case (published before the proceedings ended), he

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15. Ibid., 12.
16. Ibid.
17. This verse was first used in Buchenwald, when Gollancz asked his readers to “imagine themselves as ordinary Germans.” It was used later in Our Threatened Values, in specific reference to a woman in France being mocked and shaved for supposedly having had intercourse with a German or a collaborationist. And, finally, it appeared in a proposed collective statement from the victors to the Germans, observing that “we have all sinned, and no one of us can cast stones.” See Buchenwald, 9–10; Our Threatened Values, 25, 28. See further the meaning of this self-inclusivity in P10.
concluded his analysis of the “sin” and “guilt” of Eichmann by pleading for his life: “Do not kill Adolf Eichmann. . . . If six million have been slaughtered, what can it profit to make the number six million and one?”

The drive against demonization was orchestrated not only by those who had not suffered in the Nazi concentration camps themselves, but also by those who had. Hermann Langbein, an Austrian who had survived Dachau and Auschwitz and was recognized as “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem in 1967, pointed to the erroneous trends of either demonizing the Nazis or depersonalizing them to the point where they were only small parts in a big machine. He himself preferred to call them, realistically, “people, not devils.” He quoted a fellow inmate of Auschwitz approvingly:

Grete Salus was able to avoid any demonization. . . . She writes: “I am afraid of people. I fear nothing as much as people. How good and how bad can they become? There is no measurement, no foundation, no certainty for that. . . . Here there were petty officials, craftsmen, young girls and women. Under different circumstances all the malice inside them could at most have expressed itself in gossip, cheating, tyranny in the family circle, and the like.” Those who kept the machinery of murder going in Auschwitz were not devils; they were humans.

Strong voices against demonizing the Nazi sinner could also be heard in Israel. As documented in Tom Segev’s *Seventh Million*, which was translated into German in 1995, some Jewish intellectuals living in Israel—among them Martin Buber, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, and Yehuda Bacon—were also active participants in the endeavor to turn the Jewish public from the sin-sinner-flattening

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tendency. For Bergmann, killing the sinner (even such a sinner as Eichmann) was objectionable because of the (unjustifiable) preclusion of repentance. In response to his students who were wondering why he was organizing a petition against sentencing Eichmann to death, the aged professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University explained: “Who gave them permission to take life, and in so doing to take from the defendant the possibility of doing penance for his sins while he is still in this world? Only he who creates life has the authority to take life.” Bergmann was one of the group gathered at Buber’s house that drafted the letter to Israeli president Yitzhak Ben-Zvi to ask him to commute the execution of Eichmann. Among the twenty signatories to the letter was Bacon, who was a teenager when he arrived at Auschwitz and became a witness at the Eichmann trial. Their petition was in vain, including in the court of public opinion: “The press rejected the petition with near unanimity. ‘A pardon for Eichmann?’ Maariv asked—and answered, ‘No! Six million times no!’”

But if the sinner is not sin and the perpetrator’s inherent worth is not destroyed by his crime, there is still the problem of “purifying” and “cleansing,” which, according to the biblical paradigm, can only come about when the perpetrator turns to his victim. For Gollancz, this is precisely the hope that is afforded by sparing Eichmann’s life: so that his “divine spark” may shine out from his corruption when he repents. In Arendt, the requirement to “turn to the victims” is made even more explicit. In her appreciative critique of Karl Jaspers’s Schuldfrage, which deals mainly with the assumption and differentiation of guilt and will be analyzed in the next chapter, she asserted that “the assumption of responsibility has to be more than the acceptance of defeat and the collateral consequences. . . . [It] has to come with a positive political declaration of intention (Willenserklärung) addressed to the victims,” such as constitutionally renouncing antisemitism and re-welcoming Jews

24. Ibid., 365.
25. Gollancz, Case of Eichmann, 47.
to live in the future Germany as Jews. Jaspers responded by saying that he agreed “completely” with Arendt on this requirement, but was unoptimistic about getting Germans to agree on that at the time.

This “turning” in the form of a positive, collective statement toward the Jewish people did come, albeit partially and belatedly, in 1990, when the newly reunified Germany opened itself to Jews coming from the former Soviet Union to settle there as their new homeland. And the revised legislation against “incitement to hatred” (Volksverhetzung; section 130 of the German Criminal Code), covering antisemitism, expressed in the form of assaults on “human dignity,” was also adopted in 1960—as a measure against the “new wave” of antisemitic violence in West Germany in the late 1950s—with amendments dealing with the denial of the Holocaust added in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet in the making of this piece of legislature, something unexpected happened: the victims refused to have a law specifically addressed to themselves; rather, they proposed a general law coming out of the realization of the universal damage of sin. The Social Democrat Adolf Arndt, whose father was Jewish and whose own career was hampered as a “half Jew” during the Third Reich, raised his objection in early 1960 against the proposed legislation of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) government at that time: “No special law! No special protection!” He argued that

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“the riots of antisemitism are directed in reality against the dignity of each and every human being and against the equality of rights,” which one could only “atone for (sühnen) through the use of law of the constitutional state.”

In other words, it is not only the Jewish name or the Jewish community that is at stake in antisemitism, but humanity itself; consequently, a victim-targeted measure is not enough to solve this universal—that is, all-threatening—problem. “The intellectual and ethical triumph over the racial mania can only be achieved when the equality of human beings becomes self-evident consciousness.”

Arndt’s was not the lone Jewish voice in this matter, as he could cite the support of the representatives of the Jewish communities in Germany, Heinz Galinski and Henrik G. van Dam. In fact, van Dam himself, then secretary-general of the Central Council of Jews in Germany (ZdJ), took a similar line: “No conservation park for Jews.” In response to this unexpected stand, the editor of Die Zeit, the newsweekly that published van Dam’s article, remarked: “What is odd is that the Central Council of Jews does not approve of [the proposed special law] at all.” It is difficult to understand indeed without comprehending the universalizing perspective of “sin” in viewing human wrongdoing. In Arendt’s formulation, “The differentiation between German Übermenschen and Jewish Untermenschen has turned both to Unmenschen.” Turning in such a situation requires simultaneously a specific “turning to” the victims of wrongdoing, and insight into the universal aspects of the wrongdoing in question.

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32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
37. See “repentant disagreement” in P8.