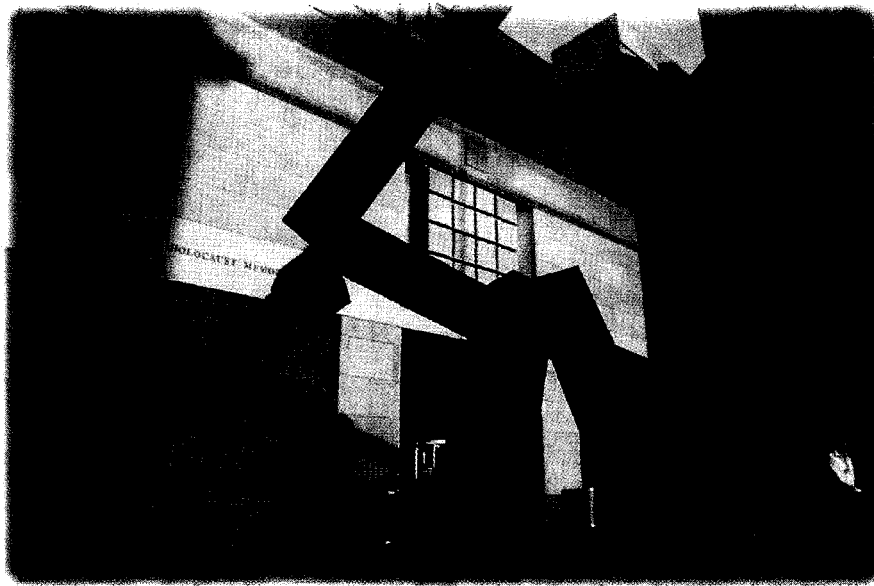


MISREPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST



IN FEBRUARY, President Clinton told the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. that "Adolf Hitler preached a perverted form of Christianity." That is patently untrue. Hitler was in fact an enemy of Christianity, and a pagan. Consider his 1933 statement that "It is through the peasantry that we shall really be able to destroy Christianity because there is in them a true religion rooted in nature and blood."

If Hitler was actually an anti-Christian, where did President Clinton get this characterization of the Führer as a kind of believing avenger? Perhaps, I am sad to say, from misrepresentations currently promoted in Holocaust museums and programs around the country.

As I find myself in the uncomfortable position of scrutinizing today's Holocaust remembrances, one obvious question is whether they actually discourage animus between people, as is their stated intent. Another question important to me as a rabbi is whether their teachings help or harm the Jewish people. And for me the answer to both of these questions is far from obvious.

Most of today's Holocaust exhibits have received funding from American taxpayers. Yet some citizens who initially supported them with good-hearted generosity now see them as promoting a hatred of Christians. I myself am concerned about presentations at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., for instance. This museum is simultaneously one of the world's most eloquent cries against prejudice and also a place which promotes anti-Christian propaganda. Although it was constructed with private funds, the museum occupies land donated by the American people, the most Christian nation on earth. Of course, the American forces who liberated the concentration

camp were composed of mostly Christians as well. Therefore it is hard for me to understand why the producers of the film shown to Holocaust Museum visitors, a copy of which I have seen, seem so determined to devote much of the short documentary to untruths which denigrate Christianity.

While the historical role of the church in anti-Semitism is undeniable, is it just to focus only upon that—and utterly exclude discussion of Hitler's own rejection of the church and Stalin's virulent atheistic anti-Semitism? Not only Stalin is purged but the film implies that Christianity caused anti-Semitism to enter the world. Pharaoh, Haman, the Roman, Greek, and Babylonian oppressions of the Jewish people are not considered by the filmmakers. For example, the video shown repeatedly to the crowds who throng to the museum leads the viewer to believe that Hitler considered himself to be acting as an agent of the Catholic church. Consider this line at the climax of the film: "Enter Adolf Hitler, Austrian born and baptized a Catholic." Imagine how we Jews would react to a Christian-presented film on the millions of victims of Communism in which the narrator solemnly intoned: "Enter Karl Marx, born a Jew." Surely Jews would be right to claim that this information, though undeniably true, was not crucial to the story and was thus intended to be hurtful. Not mentioned in the Holocaust museum's video is Hitler's all-consuming hatred of the Pope and Catholicism. Are we unintentionally causing resentment among Christians? Surely, that can be no help to Jews.

CONSIDER THESE WORDS which the above film attributes to Hitler himself: "In defending myself against the Jews, I am acting for the Lord. The difference between

© Corbis/James P. Blair

the church and me is that I am finishing the job.” Although I am a student of World War II and am very familiar with many little-known details of Hitler’s life, including his spiritual odyssey, and although I searched diligently, I was unable to locate this phrase among the records of Hitler’s writings and speeches. At this writing, I have yet to find the source of these very words. Selecting this as the only clip of Hitler’s rantings to be shown in the 15-minute film could justifiably be seen by Christians as an attack. How, exactly, is this slap supposed to help Jews?

In speaking of *Mein Kampf*, Konrad Heiden, the famed biographer of Hitler, stated that “the book may well be called a kind of satanic Bible. To the author—although he was shrewd enough not to state it explicitly himself...the belief in human equality is a kind of hypnotic spell exercised by world-conquering Judaism with the help of the Christian churches.” In other words, Hitler saw Judaism and the Christian church on the same side of the battle—opposite him. He manipulated the deep well-springs of anti-Semitism that existed in Europe, for which the church shares the blame, but he was not an agent of Christianity.

Today’s Jewish schoolchildren should be inculcated with gratitude toward those Christians who suffered during the Holocaust in order to save Jewish lives. Yet the selfless role of these Christians is largely ignored. Those who did save Jews are called “Righteous Gentiles.” I believe it is time to change that phrase for two reasons. One is that it implies an oxymoron, suggesting that we would not normally expect the two words to be found together. “Look here, I’ve found one—a real live righteous gentile!” (I wonder how we Jews might react to an annual award bestowed each year by a Christian organization on an “Honest Jewish Businessman.”) Secondly, speaking of “Righteous Gentiles” does a disservice to those many Christians who saved Jews specifically *because* of their faith. They were “Righteous Christians,” not “Righteous Gentiles.” Far too few Jews understand that Christian values were often the very reason these unheralded heroes were willing to risk their lives.

There is one famous case in which the Jewish community enthusiastically jumped on the bandwagon to acknowledge a debt. That is the case of Oskar Schindler of *Schindler’s List* fame. Gratitude is absolutely due him. But the energy expended to recognize his actions only reveals the lack of thanks to many others. Although I have declined to see the film, my understanding is that Mr. Schindler was not a particularly religious or, for that matter, a particularly moral man. Is the movie meant to suggest that religious morality is irrelevant as long as one is saving Jews? In any event, what about those who saved Jews and did so because they were driven by Christian values and morality?

IT IS IN NO WAY denigrating to Mr. Schindler, or to anyone else who risked his life to save Jews, to ask why one special book on this topic has been ignored by the Jewish community. Like many Jews of my generation, I grew up avidly reading libraries of works about the Holocaust. Imagine my surprise when, as an adult, I found a riveting, true story that I had not only never read but had never even heard of. As I began asking around, I learned that none of my Jewish friends or the thousands of Jews in my audiences had heard of this excellent book either.

Furthermore, a call to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, revealed that the book was not carried in their gift shop.

Was this an obscure and hidden volume? Not at all. The book is widely known and read in Christian homes and schools around the country. It has been made into a movie. The book is *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie ten Boom, which tells the true story of how she and her family hid Jews in the Netherlands. Both it and a follow-up book, *In My Father’s House*, are well written and unbelievably heartrending.

Why then has it been ignored in the Jewish community? Why has it been in effect censored from Jewish reading lists on the Holocaust? Why was the movie version actually picketed by Jewish groups? I can only surmise that this reaction results from *The Hiding Place* not conforming to the stereotype of religious Christians to which the Jewish community has succumbed. Unlike Herr Schindler, who saved Jews for whatever reasons he personally felt, the ten Boom family’s activities were directly motivated by their belief in Jesus. In her words: “Lord Jesus, I offer myself for Your people. In any way. Any place. Any time.”

It is clear that Corrie ten Boom and her family desired to show all people, including Jews, what they fervently believed to be the truth of Christianity. Yet their saving of Jewish lives was not predicated on the Jews’ accepting Christianity. In fact, the ten Boom family accorded great respect and effort to accommodate those Jews who wanted to keep kosher and observe the Sabbath while in hiding. Sadly, this Christian family’s kindness was discovered; the Nazis hauled them away to their infamous prison camps where all but Corrie died. Fortunately, the Jews they had hidden escaped capture. Corrie’s father, Mr. Caspar ten Boom, a revered Dutch citizen well into his eighties during the Holocaust, was told by the Nazis that they would release him if he would promise to stop his activities in sheltering Jews. His daughter recalls the scene:

The Gestapo chief leaned forward. “I’d like to send you home, old fellow,” he said. “I’ll take your word that you won’t cause any more trouble.”

I could not see Father’s face, only the erect carriage of his shoulders and the halo of white hair above them. But I heard his answer.

“If I go home today,” he said evenly and clearly, “tomorrow I will open my door again to any man in need who knocks.”

Shortly thereafter Caspar ten Boom died, isolated from his family in the Gestapo prison. This great man’s philosophy is made clear earlier in the book. When he first tried to shelter a Jewish baby, a pastor tried to warn him of the danger. Mr. ten Boom replied, “You say we could lose our lives for this child. I would consider that the greatest honor that could come to my family.” He repeated elsewhere that “In this household, God’s people are always welcome.”

Corrie herself spent years in concentration camps and lost her sister and nephew to the Nazis for their crimes of saving Jewish lives. Corrie ended her days recently in Southern California, unrecognized and unthanked by a Jewish community obsessed with *Schindler’s List*. We owe her—and her fellow Christians—an apology.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin is president of Toward Tradition. His book *America’s Real War* has just been published.

THE ROOTS OF TODAY'S EPIDEMIC OF LYING IN HIGH PLACES

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT VIRUS

By Lynne Cheney

People think that what goes on in college English departments doesn't matter much to the rest of our country. But in fact, English departments have been a primary source of the epidemic of lying currently upon us. In the late 1960s and early '70s, student radicals began moving into English departments, cultivating the idea that there is no truth—and therefore no possibility of untruth. As the radicals gained power and their views spread across the university and through society, lying came to be regarded not so much as a transgression that ought to produce guilt, but as an alternative “construction,” a “narrative” with all the legitimacy that the unenlightened attribute to “truth.”

The '60s radicals, to give them their due, became skeptics for good reason. The U.S. government had not been truthful about the defining event of their generation, the Vietnam War. Watching officials propagate versions of events designed to protect bureaucratic interests was a lesson in how information and power can be dangerously intertwined. From there, it no doubt seemed a small step to conclude that knowledge and power are always intertwined, that there is no objective truth but only—to quote Michel Foucault, one of the favorite philosophers of the '60s generation—different “regimes of truth.”

It was, of course, an immense leap they were making, one that was too much for most philosophy departments, where demand for a certain rigor of thought meant that “postmodernism,” as this new creed came to be called, was generally held in low regard. But in departments of English, history, sociology, and art history, postmodern thought was exalted, first at elite institutions like Yale and finally almost

everywhere. So much intellectual excitement did the new thinking generate that even law schools wanted to partake. Duke English professor Stanley Fish, who attacked truth with all the fervor of an old-time preacher denouncing sin, was invited to teach at Duke's law school. At Harvard, a law professor auditing a class in the English department explained that lawyers increasingly understood that law was just like literature—a matter of interpretation.

By the 1980s, it was a rare student who went through college without encountering the view that there is no such thing as truth, that the things we think are true are just the “constructs” of dominant groups. Some professors, on the grounds that there is no truth, were unabashedly using the classroom to propagate their political agendas. Some students complained. Others joked, advising, for example, that men enrolled in women's studies courses should pretend at first to be male chauvinists, then have a conversion: “You're bound to get an A.” But many students, fearing retaliation, went along. “I'm not here to philosophize my beliefs,” one told me a few years ago, “I'm here to get a decent grade.”

There has lately been a great outcry on college campuses about cheating, but when students feel compelled to represent someone else's *beliefs* as their own in order to get a good grade, should it surprise us that they have few qualms about representing someone else's *work* as their own? As they move out into the world, where truth-telling can be dull and disadvantageous, is it any wonder they construct personal versions of reality? Having heard time and again that there is no such thing as truth, why should they bother to tell it? Or to condemn others—the President, for example—who do not feel constrained by old-fashioned ideas about honesty?

Ironically, this English-department thinking, now flourishing in our culture, is no longer doing so well in English departments. The Duke English department, once the envy of postmodernists everywhere, has imploded in insult and recrim-