

Perhaps the Analogy is Auschwitz Rather than Vietnam

Colleagues,

Since last week's posting Marie and I have seen two plays. That's sometimes our quota for a full year. One was "Heartbreak House," G.B. Shaw's icepick-jabbing—for two and a half hours—into the banality and blindness of the English pleasure class as World War I is coming over the horizon, and actually terminates the third act when the Zeppelin-dropped shells explode around their crazy house, into their lush way of life.

But blindness and banality still win. When the shells finally cease falling, one of them wishes they could have a replay of the show tomorrow night. "They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away." To which Jesus adds: "But you must keep awake" [Matt. 24]

The other play was "Hana's Suitcase." It's a genius piece of work. Not all fiction either. A suitcase, modest sized, with the German words "Hana Brady Waisenkind" [Hana Brady, Orphan] from the Tokyo Holocaust Museum is on loan to the teacher, Fumiko Ishioka, of a grade school class in Japan. She's teaching a unit on the holocaust. And she's committed to get her class committed to "Never Again." The girl and boy representative students are receptive learners. They are fascinated by this suitcase. Who was Hana? What's her story? What can we learn about HER? Which sends Fumiko, doggedly persistent and charismatically ingenious, on a yellow-brick-road adventure that finally brings answers.

Hana has a surviving brother George in Canada. He's the one who can and does tell the Japanese kids Hana's story. Hana's

suitcase was the one ("Only one!") the Gestapo allowed when they took the Jewish kids. Pa and Ma had been taken earlier. Hana and George got separated. He survived. The gas chambers at Auschwitz consumed Hana, 12 yrs old.

The play is aimed at kids—especially the "Never Again" at the finale. Dozens of St. Louis schools brought their pupils to the performances. Ditto for our own congregation's parochial school. But did they get the message? Possibly about anti-semitic prejudice, I think.

But what about the kids' own current prejudices, OUR "anti" prejudices today? The list of dirty-word labels keeps growing: militants, insurgents, sectarians, terrorists, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Taliban.

It's sounding more and more like Auschwitz. "The militants will have no place to hide," we heard on this morning's news as the newly-appointed US commander predicted how the Surge will finally bring peace in Baghdad. "No place to hide"—that sounds like the Diary of Anne Frank, like Hana's Suitcase.

And it's not simply the logistics of having no hiding place. It's the mindset—like Hitler's toward the Jews—that people whom we put under these labels DESERVE no place to hide. They need to be nabbed and done away with. WE need them nabbed and done away with. They are a threat to our way of life, just by being who they are. We've put that yellow star of David on their jackets. They are (Hitler's horrific formulation) "Unwertes Leben." Life with no value. Not deserving to live.

Is that Auschwitz or what?

Former President Jimmy Carter is getting lots of flak these days by calling Israeli policy and the Israelis' ever-lengthening Wall against the Palestinians "Apartheid." And, of course,

everybody knows that Israel couldn't do that if the USA were not agreeing to it and (even worse) paying for it. So it's America's policy of Apartheid too.

But Auschwitz is even worse. And the point here is not in the day-in-day-out death numbers coming from Baghdad. The point is that our American mindset about those dirty-word people is the same as Hitler's (and many many Germans then too) about Jews. Unwertes Leben. So they die. Or if they die, no big deal.

That jolted me again as we drove home from seeing Hana's Suitcase. How could it have been possible for so many Germans to have been involved in the huge operation, the millions-of-marks logistics, the engineering to create deathcamps, the Europe-wide network to make it work—to get Hana to the gas chamber at Auschwitz? And 20th century Germans? The folks who brought us the Enlightenment? The folks who pay attention to Goethe, Schiller, Mozart, Beethoven, Kant, Bach? Catholic and Lutheran Germans?

There is no a-b-c formula for comprehending Auschwitz. You need a theology of evil—which also doesn't “explain” it, but puts the “mystery of wickedness” into the equation. Mysteries are not comprehended. You either assent or deny. I went to sleep (finally) that evening with my head rattling.

Not just about the Germans of 70 years ago, but rattling about the Auschwitz analog for Iraq. How can it be possible for America—America!—to be doing this and thinking we are doing right? It's not just the 4 years of chaos inflicted on a people one-twelfth the size of our populace, whose only guilt is that they had leaders whom we designated “Unwertes Leben,” and so we opted for regime change. And now Saddam is dead.

It seemed so right, and STILL does for the majority of us in the US, even if our president's SURGE is judged to be just plain

dumb. It's still SO right because they are militants, insurgents, sectarians, terrorists, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Taliban.

Unwertes Leben—all of them.

But, of course, God disagrees. Not only about our evaluation, but also about the righteousness of our national hybris in exterminating them. Our commitment to making sure that “they will have no place to hide.”

And one day we too will get our comeuppance. It's all in Psalm 2. Check it out. We too are on track to have no place to hide. To hide from God. Ironically enough, no place to hide from the “hidden” God, whose absconditus character is NOT that there is no evidence of him, no encounter with him, but that in that encounter God's grace and mercy are in total eclipse.

You've heard this here before, namely, Luther's claim that the terrorist “Turks” of his day (in no way “nice guys”), Muslims all, were the “rod of God's anger.” For the moment they served as God's actual agents, in rendering rightful retribution to a phony righteous, better, self-righteous, “Christian” Europe. The phrase came from Isaiah 10. The “rod” was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Assyria, tyranny personified, but for the moment the rod in God's own hand and faithless, blind, banal Israel slotted to receive the blows.

Here's the full quote: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.” [And Nebuchadnezzar lived just a tad north of today's Baghdad.]

Linking this conviction about our nation's impending future to

the Promise of Christ may be impossible. Step one for redemption is always repentance. Do nations ever repent? Can they? might be a better question. Lincoln called for just that in the hellish midst of the Civil War. The US Congress even passed a repentance resolution. But did it actually happen? Hard to tell. Possibly not, since God did not relent in letting the carnage continue until worn-out, burned-out, it ground to a halt at Appomattox. There is no signal in our nation today—from the president on through the supposedly “new” Congress—and even worse, no palpable voices from churches—that anyone has antenna for repentance, for even thinking of such a nationwide call.

If someone in authority in our nation—either in church or in state—is indeed thinking about it, he/she is surely not talking very loudly. FROGBA, the folk religion of God Bless America, still supports the national consensus: We are fundamentally a righteous nation that does not do wrong. Axes of evil are made up of other nations. Our president may have made some mistakes, we may have consented in these mistakes. But it’s nothing so serious as to be an affront to God. So no remorse, no repentance. And without repentance there’ll be no redemption. That’s a Biblical axiom. In Biblical language it’s called blindness. Jesus in John 9 is even more drastic: “But since you say ‘we see,’ your sin remains.”

In thinking through the Turkish military onslaught in 1529 Luther called for repentance on the part of even just the remnant, remembering that God would have saved Sodom if only ten faithful had been there. No one can tell if even ten did so in Luther’s day, but Suleiman did stop outside the gates of Vienna, turned around and went back home to Istanbul.

There is only one case (that I know of) in the scriptures where nation-repentance actually happened. Surprisingly, it was actually Assyria that repented in the Jonah parable. It was

triggered when the unnamed King—could it even have been villainous Nebuchadnezzar?—donned sackcloth and ashes. But that's the exception, and if the exception, it proves the rule: nations don't repent and so they don't get redeemed.

In Biblical reckoning that makes sense. Nation-states don't have "hearts" that could either trust or distrust God's promise. Their human citizens, however, do. These citizens are candidates to hear God's promise. Such promise-trusters survive even as their nation-state crumbles. That nation-states will crumble is a foregone conclusion. They are the stuff of the "heaven and earth that passes away." Only those clinging to the Promissory Word that does not pass away are the survivors.

I shudder to draw the Auschwitz analogy. In earlier ThTh postings about our war in Iraq, the Manichaen heresy of "us good guys, them evil guys" has focused my attention. Since Hana's Suitcase the Nazi predicate of unwertes Leben is added to the blueprint. Apart from Christ we all finally qualify, of course, as unwertes Leben. On our own no one is "good enough" to live forever. That all humans are mortal is Biblical evidence for this.

But to make it a national policy! First of all that we don't come under that rubric of "unwert" ourselves, and then that we decide who is UNwert, and subsequently go for the jugular to make sure they have "no place to hide" – isn't that the Gestapo story line of Hana's Suitcase?

Americans who say "never again" to the holocaust and its demonic ideology have a fresh case before us today. Isn't it the same demonic ideology? Some human life is "worthy to continue" and some not, and we decide who is which and take action to eliminate the unworthies. Most Germans were blind to it in Hitler's day. Are we Americans any different? "They were eating

and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away.” That’s what G.B.Shaw’s play showed. Not specific moral turpitude, “just” blindness and banality.

But Hana’s Suitcase comes with judgment on blindness, when it is moral blindness. As did Jesus to the folks who denied their deep blindness in John 9. Not only, says John’s gospel, “your sin remains,” but, he says, when sin remains, “the wrath of God remains.”

Our nation-state’s political ideology and current praxis is way on the other side of God’s left-hand regime for world affairs, and that puts us even further away from . . .Christ’s peace and joy.

Therefore Jesus adds: “But you must keep awake” His grace promise goes with that grace imperative.

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