“Genocide is horrible, an abomination of our species,” says R. J. Rummel in *Death by Government*. “It is an obscenity—the evil of our time that all good people must work to eradicate” (Rummel, 1994, 31). Few would disagree. And yet, Rummel's statement contains an incongruity in the conjunction of the words *species* and *evil*. Viewed as a species, humanity can commit actions that are repugnant and appalling, but not actions that are evil. *Evil* is a *religious* category that suggests an action that is not merely repugnant and appalling but also opposes the One, who, according to biblical tradition, created the human being in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). From the standpoint of such a tradition, therefore, a human being is not one species among many. No, a human being harbors a trace of something unique. That is why genocide is *evil*, and not just unpleasant or a matter of historical curiosity.

As modern thinkers, however, we are steeped in an ontological mode of thought that is antithetical to biblically-based religion. In fact, we are so hostile toward biblical monotheism that when we ask how the genocidal horror could happen, we go looking for its “theological warrants.” Religion, it is supposed, is the cause of genocide. More often than not, the experts maintain, it is in the name of God that people engage in mass murder (see Bartov and Mack, Eds., 2001; see also Ellis, 1997). “A common characteristic of genocide,” says Leo
Kuper, “is the presence of religious difference between perpetrators and victims” (Kuper, 1990, 351). The real question, however, is not whether there are religious differences between the two parties; the question, rather, is whether among the perpetrators there is a divine, absolute prohibition against murder that would limit their actions. And, as extensions of the ontological tradition, neither modern nor post-modern thought can determine such an absolute.

The seeds of modern genocide can be found in the Enlightenment, where the self's autonomy and resolve were emphasized in such a way that it became philosophically necessary to get rid of the God of Abraham. Kant realized as much when he insisted that “the euthanasia of Judaism is the pure moral religion” (Kant, 1979, 95). If the Cartesian cogito situates being within the thinking ego, the Kantian critique deduces everything from the thinking ego, and, thus, as Franz Rosenzweig points out, “reduces the world’ to the perceiving self” (Rosenzweig, 1999, 24). Far from glorifying the human being, however, the reduction of the world to the perceiving self is radically dehumanizing. Refashioning himself after his own image, the human being loses his humanity, first by dehumanizing and then by murdering the other human being.

Like Kant, G. W. F. Hegel was a rationalist who associated freedom with autonomy. His writings “conform to the basic Kantian idealist and moralist critique of Judaism. Judaism is seen as the epitome of an unfree psyche” (Rose, 1990, 109). Unlike Kant, however, Hegel draws on the Christian notion of the Incarnation to develop a view of God that denies the otherness of the divinity. In Hegel, Emil Fackenheim explains, “divinity comes to dwell… in the same inner
space as the human self” (Fackenheim, 1993, 190-191). With Hegel the perceiving self that had appropriated the world now appropriates the divinity.

With the atheistic neo-Hegelians, such as Feuerbach and Marx, “divinity vanishes in the process of internalization, to be replaced by a humanity potentially infinite in its modern ‘freedom’” (Fackenheim, 1993, 191). Seizing this “modern freedom,” the human being may do whatever he has the will to do. Indeed, he is justified by will alone. Proceeding along these lines, then, Nietzsche determines that the will to power is a will to freedom, where freedom is understood as an autonomy beyond any law, resolute and decisive. Once Nietzsche’s will to power defines the character of beings, Heidegger’s resolve defines the authenticity of beings. Thus the struggle for power becomes the only reality and weakness the only sin. And, as history has shown, when that power struggle loses the limiting principles of religion, it becomes genocidal.

Having eliminated the commanding Voice from our thinking, then in order to be in the right, we need not become more righteous; we only have to become more dangerous. Subsequently, each of us—every culture, society, and ethnic group—is as god. What remains are “systems of belief” (Kuper, 1990, 352), rather than divine injunctions, and religion is reduced to a cultural curiosity (Glick, 1994, 44). But when a scholar appeals to systems of belief or equates religion with culture, he or she loses all grounds other than expedient grounds for objecting to genocide. Here genocide is not evil—it is merely contrary to my interests.
Emmanuel Lévinas accurately states the implications of this genocidal move when he says, “A philosophy of power, ontology is... a philosophy of injustice... . Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny” (Lévinas, 1969, 46-47). As Rummel has shown, tyranny is one of the necessary conditions for genocide (Rummel, 1994, 2). For tyranny is totalitarian and requires the total appropriation of the other human being, the most radical form of which is genocide. The terrible irony is that much of the scholarship on genocide is grounded in the categories of tyrannical thought as defined by Lévinas.

The ontological tradition is fundamentally hostility toward religion in general and toward Judaism in particular. Why Judaism? Because Judaism is the first expression of the absolute, divine prohibition against murder. One finds this hostility in the antisemitic tendencies among intellectuals who see “localized religions” as the source of the “proto-genocidal intent,” and Judaism as “the most familiar of all localized religions” (Glick, 1994, 47). Whereas Christians blamed the Jews for the murder of God, intellectuals blame the Jews for the murder of humanity. Hence the comparison of Israelis to Nazis (see Ellis, 1997, 1-5; see also ADL Press Release, 21 March 2002).

Christians cite Scripture, which they take to be truth, to prove that the Jews killed God in the person of Jesus. Similarly, intellectuals cite Scripture, which they regard as myth, to prove that the Jews are behind genocide. Glick,
for example, points out that “as the Hebrews, under Joshua’s leadership, undertake the conquest of Canaan, they massacre everyone who stands in their way” (Glick, 1994, 46). What he fails to realize is that what makes genocide not only horrible but also evil is precisely the authority of the God who prohibits murder (Exodus 20:13) and commands love for the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19)—absolutely, from beyond all cultural contexts.

When they took Jericho, however, the Hebrews did not “massacre everyone who stood in their way”: the righteous—Rachav and her family—were spared, not because of their culture or their creed but because of their loving-kindness. In keeping with the notion of the Righteous among the Nations, the Jews do not insist that everyone follow Judaism in order to have a place with God. Thus the prophet Jonah went to Nineveh to call the people to righteousness without insisting that they convert to Judaism. Had Jonah been a Christian or a Muslim, “saving” the people of Nineveh would have entailed their conversion to the so-called true religion. Here we indeed have a key to a connection between religion and genocide. Wherever a religion divides humanity into the damned and the saved, there is a potential for genocide. Contrary to the accent on the creed, Judaism does not demand that a person become a Jew in order to enter paradise, since righteousness lies not in the following a certain doctrine, but in performing a certain action.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between revealed religion and ontological thinking in their contributions to genocide. At any point during the Crusaders’ bloodbath, for example, one could remain a Christian and object to
the killing by invoking Christian teaching. With the Nazis, however, there is no going too far, and to suggest that the actions of the Party were excessive would amount to losing membership. What the megamurderers perpetrated, therefore, was not unimaginable—it was everything imaginable. For the imagination was their only limit, and power was their only reality.

As for the Muslims, I do not find in the Quran a parallel to the Christian insistence upon love for one’s enemies or the injunction to refrain from judging one’s neighbor. In modern times, at least in its Jihadist form, Islam is often engages in a discourse of exterminationist Jew-hatred. This is not to say that there are no righteous among the Muslims. To be sure, between 1987 and 1993 more than 800 Palestinian Muslims were publicly murdered by their co-religionists, often to the cheers of onlookers, for suggesting that their people might have a better future if they were to follow a path of peace with the Israelis (Associated Press report, 16 May 2002; the IDF places the figure at 1000 to 1200). If well-meaning Muslims are to avoid playing into the hands of megamurderers, then the cries of those martyrs must be heard above the cheers of those crowds.

In order for Rummel’s imperative that “all good people must work to eradicate” genocide is to be categorical, it must somehow be grounded in an absolute, divine prohibition against murder, such as we have from Mount Sinai. Without that absolute prohibition, the human being has no holiness. To harbor that holiness is to be commanded by the Holy One, so that, as the Ten Commandments are laid out on the tablets, the affirmation “I am God” parallels
the injunction “Thou shalt not murder.” It is no accident that genocidal regimes are almost always antisemitic regimes. They are antisemitic because, in order to pursue the genocidal program, they have to eliminate the divine prohibition against murder that comes to the world through the Jews. As the Chosen People, the Jewish people are chosen to attest to the chosenness of every human being. And, for every human being, to be chosen is to affirm, in word and deed, the infinite dearness of the other human being. That is what makes good people good. That is what elevates us beyond the status of species. And that is what makes genocide evil.

Sources Cited


