

Reflections on the Holocaust: UU Sermon 6/30/19

Thank you for inviting me back for, wow . . . the fifth time. I love being with you. In the last decade, I've been friends with four of your ministers and many of you. In that time, I've been blessed to witness you grow into this holy community and into this gorgeous space.

When Rev. Duffy invited me to speak a few weeks ago, we had just observed Holocaust Memorial Day. So, he suggested that I share with you my reflections on the Holocaust this year, and with your indulgence, I'll do that today.

'The million dollar question, of course, is how could an enlightened Germany have coldly marched millions of human beings to their deaths in gas chambers, disposing of bodies in ovens and mass graves? How could ordinary Germans have *so deeply* demonized anyone who was different -- immigrants, homosexuals, gypsies -- as to ultimately murder sixteen million people, including six million Jews? And *if* we can even begin to grasp the magnitude of what happened, what *must* we learn from it? These are the big questions on my mind this year.

How the Holocaust happened isn't hard to articulate: Several ideologies converged to create fertile ground for Nazism to thrive: extreme nationalism, racism, and the fusion of State and religion. These ideologies fed on one another to form a lethal combination. But, abstract ideologies alone couldn't cause this. They needed a demagogue who could manipulate the fears and anxieties of Germans to drive those ideologies.

Enter Hitler, who appealed to a German people that felt economically and culturally besieged following the First World War. He manipulated their sense of themselves as victims losing their culture: their Germanness, their race, their religion. And he pointed at the persecutors who were stealing their culture: Jews and other minorities. In his demagoguery, wealthy Jews were global elites controlling the economy, while poor immigrant Jews were leeches on German jobs and resources. And all Jews in their denial of Christ were a centuries old threat to Christian religious dogma. Hitler promised to make Germany great again by ridding Germany of these threats to Aryan Christian German culture and prosperity.

Hitler did this through several sinister strategies designed to drive nationalism to a frenzy by demonizing minorities. Foremost among them was the relentless use of lies as political tools, waging war on the idea of objective truth to persuade Germans of the Leader's distorted version of reality. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, would famously say that "A lie told once remains a lie, but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth." And: "In the big lie, there is always a certain force of credibility." Hitler sold his lies by reaching people directly through the mass distribution of free radios, tuned only to the station broadcasting his rants [\[BL1\]](#) .

Another strategy involved systematic attacks on the press, called *Luggenpresse* -- meaning the lying press -- except for publications deemed friendly to the Nazis. A third strategy was to strategically re-name opponents with slanderous slurs, regularly accusing the alleged persecutors and his political opponents of treason and encouraging violence against them.

Still another contributing strategy involved the removal of checks that were built into the system. For example, the "Enabling Act" gave Hitler power to declare emergencies and render the Reichstag -- Germany's Congress -- powerless. Eventually, the Reichstag was nullified entirely when it burned to the ground. Gradually, all civil institutions were co-opted to serve the regime's single-minded fascist ideology. We all know how it ended up.

Let's fast forward to the Holocaust's aftermath. An international order wary of nationalism and racism promoted cooperation and human rights [\[BL2\]](#) . The Geneva Convention outlawed war crimes for the first time. But, like a deadly cancer in remission, nationalism and racism remained dormant, waiting to strike again.

Today, that cancer is awakening, being revived by the same strategies. Americans feeling besieged by economic and cultural changes have rallied around "make us great again" nationalism, imbued with disdain for those "others" who are accused of taking jobs and white Christian European culture. Our Leader effectively

uses lies, attacks the press, bypasses Congress with so-called “emergencies,” and co-opts our institutions, all the while demonizing Muslims and people of color. Sound familiar?

At a Holocaust Memorial Day event in Arkansas this year, protesters carrying Nazi flags and blowing up pictures of Jesus, chanted “Six Million More.” A Tennessee judge posted on Facebook that “Jews should get the f over the Holocaust.” Marchers in Charlottesville chanted “Jews will not replace us.” We’ve seen synagogue shootings in California and Pittsburgh, and hundreds of anti-semitic acts around the country.

Thank God, we’re nowhere near government sponsored mass murder. However, we tear immigrant children from their parents, we prosecute those who give water to immigrants fleeing death, and we currently imprison 40,000 immigrants in grossly inhumane and unsafe conditions, in what the LA Times and many others call concentration camps. Our government argues that children held there are not entitled to beds, soap, or toothbrushes. It’s no wonder that so many of us suffer outrage fatigue.

Most of you are well aware of the parallels between today’s America and the lead up to the Holocaust. So, I want to focus on just one critical factor which gets less attention: the way that religion was and is being co-opted to serve the government’s goals.

In 1930s Germany, the three main Protestant churches -- Lutheran, Reformed, and United -- joined together to form the German Christian movement. They combined Christianity and National Socialism to exclude all those deemed impure, and to embrace all ‘true Germans’ in a spiritual homeland for the Third Reich. They called themselves “storm troopers of Jesus Christ,” and claimed a central place for Christianity in the Nazi regime. In a national vote by Protestants in 1933, they overwhelmingly elected pastor Ludwig Müller to lead them. Hitler then appointed Müller as Reich bishop. Just as the church became Nazi, Hitler latched on to the church, saying that with respect to the Jews, the only difference between Martin Luther and him was that he -- Hitler -- had the courage to carry out his convictions.

Even those Protestants who opposed the German Christian movement -- called the Confessing church -- ultimately offered unconditional loyalty to Hitler, with just a few dissenters.

Thankfully, today, most mainline Protestants have renounced their church’s role in the Holocaust. But the phenomenon of the fusion of governments and their majority religions to empower an autocrat and persecute minorities is growing rapidly. In a recent [Pew study of religious persecution by country](#), Christians were deemed the most persecuted faith community in the world, targeted in 144 countries. Muslims are a close second, targeted in 142 countries. We Jews came in third, persecuted in just 87 countries, but that’s probably because there aren’t enough of us to persecute!

While we focus on sensational outbursts carried out in the name of religion at churches, synagogues, and mosques, relatively little attention is paid to this pervasive worldwide religious harassment and persecution. The response of religious leaders to sensational outbursts is that these are a few extremists who don’t really represent Islam, or Judaism, or Christianity, religions which all preach love. And, for sure, they do not represent the ideals of our traditions, but a closer look suggests that religious extremism is far more mainstream than we want to admit and is empowered by the growing fusions between religion and government.

Examples abound. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and other Muslim majority countries regularly persecute minority Christians. In Israel, the marriage of nationalism, racism, and government infused Judaism has resulted in the recent re-election of a far right government which has imprisoned 50,000 Palestinian children. In Hindu majority India, Prime Minister Modi just won re-election, appealing to Hindu nationalism -- called Hindutva -- an ideology which mainstreams anti-Muslim hatred. Last year, Buddhist majority Myanmar saw mass killings of Muslims, and in China, there are now a million Muslims in internment camps.

In Hungary, Poland, and other parts of Europe, a racist “Christian” nationalism is on the rise, most prominently with the election of vile anti-semite Victor Orban in Hungary -- who was just honored by our President with a White House visit.

That brings me to the United States, where our national identity is deeply divided between that of a white European Christian country, and a multi-cultural religiously tolerant country. White supremacists are

increasingly supporting our leaders and vice versa, with resulting increases in government-led Islamophobia and harsh policies directed at dark skinned people, such as Puerto Ricans and immigrants seeking legal asylum.

Like the Klan before them, many of today's white supremacists wear crosses, carry crosses, and have cross tattoos. Just as the cross has inspired millions of Christians to promote love and support victims of oppression, these Christians have twisted the cross into a swastika.

The Christian right populist narrative in America is that white European Christian culture is under attack by laws which promote multi-culturalism, allow equal opportunity for those of different races, religions, and genders, laws which allow women to control their bodies, or homosexuals to marry. So, they must fight back to preserve their culture. The President's spiritual adviser, Paula White, claims that the president was "anointed" by God as America's defender. She opened his re-election announcement with a prayer to stop the demonic networks aligned against him. Leading evangelist Jim Bakker says we're close to the Bible being illegal, so we must pray for Trump, while Franklin Graham led a national day of prayer for the President, who he said is "under attack." The [American Family Association](#) described this day of prayer as a type of "spiritual warfare, necessary because the president's many accomplishments make him very unpopular with the Devil and the kingdom of darkness." Some in this camp seek a Christian theocracy, our version of Saudi Arabia or Iran. Typical is Christian TV Host Rick Warren who says "Why are you imposing Judaism on me? Because that's exactly what's been done in America since 1973 with Roe v. Wade. Judaism was imposed on me, on my Christian nation and we became a Jewish nation that kills babies. That's against my Christian beliefs. Judaism became the law of the land in America. That's precisely what the courts have ruled . . . resulting in the death of millions of babies. We Christians are standing up and we're telling you that we're done with . . . your values. We are going to impose Christian values in America again, whether you like it or not. . . Christians are going to take back America from the Jews and impose Christian rule." Incidentally, the alleged Jewish killing of babies was one of the most prominent anti-Semitic memes of medieval Europe.

Today's worldwide populism is joined at the hip with this sort of right wing religious backlash, both claiming that secular elites are stealing the culture of white Christian European Americans: stealing their nation, their prosperity, their religion. The Eurasian traditionalism of Putin, the Christian-Democracy of Hungary's Orbán, the jihad of the Ayatollahs, the prosperity Pentecostalism of Brazil's Bolsonaro, the populist Catholicism of Italy's Salvini, the Hindu-nationalism of India's Modi, the fundamentalist Judaism of Netanyahu, and the fundamentalist Christianity of Trump and Pence, all represent a religiously infused reaction to secular governance, and the secular elites who propagate it. The use of religion is not about the doctrinal strength of religious life. Rather, just as Hitler used it, today's populists' use of religion offers a way of forging a new consensus. It's a tool to engage a society that many believe has lost its moral centre.

The effect has been to empower the most outrageous and extreme religious fundamentalists, relegating religious progressives to the sidelines. This has allowed fundamentalists to take over the mantle of "religion" in the public's mind. We religious progressives have not forcefully fought back by calling out fundamentalism within our own traditions, owing to a wrong-headed idea that we shouldn't be "political" or "divisive." I'm overjoyed to hear Mayor Pete say that we must bring the voice of progressive religion back into the public conversation.

Our religious leaders need to remind us of the Third of the biblical commandments, which tells us to never make wrongful use of the name of God. The deep meaning of this commandment is to never use the name of God to justify our personal hatreds. Ironically, in cooperation with some governments, that is what religion is becoming. In fact, two distinct notions of God have developed across all religious traditions. One God is who we talk about when we sit around the campfire late at night and wonder how we got here and what life is about; the second is what we talk about when we stand around a burning pyre, hurling stones and abuses at the heretics being grilled there. The latter is the God of the crusaders and the jihadists, of the inquisitors, misogynists, and homophobes. At the same time that religious leaders call us back to the Third Commandment's prohibition on using the name of God to justify personal hatreds, we need to be asking what it is deep within our respective traditions that allows our holy teachings to be twisted from a cross or a Star into a swastika.

I want to close with a small detour and a final lesson from the Holocaust that might help us move forward. I was recently doing our interfaith radio show on AM talk radio when the subject of anger and fear turned to road rage in Bozeman. Callers jammed the lines to claim that road rage is pervasive here. Now, I'm a cyclist, and I occasionally experience an angry driver. But, the overwhelming number of drivers are courteous, often giving me a wide berth when we share a road. And when I pull off the road for water, drivers often stop to ask if I'm okay.

Why are so many attached to the road rage narrative when it is a very rare phenomenon in comparison to courteous and helpful drivers? Why don't we ever hear that Bozeman drivers are overwhelming very courteous?

Pervasive road rage is a powerful narrative because it can affirm an underlying world view that I'm good, but others are bad and out to get me. The Holocaust happened because a demagogue cleverly perpetuated the lie that the "other" was persecuting good working class white Christian Germans.

Perhaps our strongest response to the Holocaust today can be to not feed that monster. We do that by continually reinforcing for ourselves and our children what 13 year old Anne Franke wrote in her diary while holed up in an Amsterdam in a time much darker than ours: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again." These words of Anne Frank inspire me every day. We must never give up on a worldview where people are basically good at heart. That worldview is the vaccine that prevents demagogues from making malignant the cancer of hate.

During the Holocaust, a great rabbi taught that the Nazi desire to exterminate Jews was at its root a desire to eliminate the human connection to the Holy One, and this insight rests heavy on my heart right now. No matter our faith path, if we live with an awareness that we all emerge from a single, sacred Source, we find ourselves in opposition to the forces that deny the inherent value of all life; and faith itself becomes a form of resistance. May all of our faiths become a form of resistance. Amen.

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