

The Potential Inhumanity of Humanity is Universal

On the grounds of the Dachau concentration camp a sign is inscribed with the familiar words of George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

These words suggest there is a lesson to be learned from what we have come to call the Holocaust. But, ironically, there are many who regard the Holocaust event as so unique and unrepeatable that one must ask, What lesson, then, can it teach?

At the same time, sadly, there are many who invoke the Holocaust, and Nazi Germany under Hitler, to express the depth of their fury and condemnation of political leaders and policies with which they disagree. Some assert that the continuing practice of abortion is a holocaust. Some smear the President as another Hitler. Some contend the United States has become a fascist state.

Such rhetoric may be politically incorrect, but that’s not why I find it objectionable. I object because it is intemperate and extreme and, more precisely, because it does not inform public discourse or help us discern what lessons might actually be learned from the Holocaust.

What I find most distinctive about the Holocaust is also what makes it imperative that it be remembered. The Holocaust is not exceptional in terms of the scale of the slaughter. More were slaughtered in Stalinist USSR. It is not exceptional as an organized program of genocide. Remember Armenia, Kampuchea, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur. The Holocaust is in some ways distinctive because it was directed principally against the Jews, but all programs of genocide target some group that possesses a particular ethnic, religious, or other identity.

What makes the Holocaust so distinctive is that it was carried out in what was one of the most culturally rich, highly educated, and supposedly advanced societies in the world. The lesson to be learned is that no people are exempt from such barbarism. All human beings, no matter how educated, or cultured, or advanced, are capable of truly enormous evil when they become unduly possessed of fear and enamored of propaganda, and allow themselves to demonize the “other”.

It is utter conceit for us or citizens of any society to say, “It can’t happen here!” We don’t know much about ourselves or those we countenance to lead us if we fail to recognize that, whatever our presumed intentions and accomplishments as individuals, as a society we are also capable of monstrous acts.

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