

# *Remembering the Shoah without Jewish Voices: We Remember<sup>1</sup> as a Failure of Memory*

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The process of how, why, and what we remember is rooted in ethics,<sup>2</sup> especially when such memory goes beyond the commemorative and seeks restoration or reform. The same elements are entailed in how, why, and what we forget. Biblically, memory is rooted in God’s reminder and invitation to the Jewish people to recall and uphold the various biblical covenants,<sup>3</sup> and for Christians, the story of the Last Supper celebrates the Eucharist and Liturgy as a sacrament and sign of Christian discipleship. Remembering and forgetting are entwined on both separate and coinciding scales; sometimes the best forgetting is a partial or manipulated memory; sometimes the most powerful memories include a very powerful forgetting. Too often, though, unconscious or unintended forgetting or biased memory can go unrecognized without outside intervention—especially without listening to those victimized or injured. This is why a victim-centered approach to justice, reconciliation, and reformation is essential; and for our purposes, remembering. Note also that ethical memory can be “multidirectional”—in this case, memory of the Shoah reinforces and complements memories—and responsibility—regarding other genocidal atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, regarding Christian assessments of Christian action or inaction towards and during the Nazi implementation of the destruction of the Jews, moral

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<sup>1</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” Issued March 16, 1998. Available here: [https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/We\\_Remember.htm](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/We_Remember.htm).

<sup>2</sup> As John K. Roth writes: “If ethics is to be a safeguard against its own failures, the people who try to be ethical have to acknowledge their failures, own them when they should, and protest against them” (*The Failures of Ethics: Confronting the Holocaust, Genocide, and Other Mass Atrocities* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 7). The field of ethics and remembering is vast, but see Jeffrey M. Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance: Remembering Wrongdoing in Personal and Public Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Museum* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 17-19.

gaps and amnesia predominate.<sup>5</sup> The 1998 Vatican document, *We Remember*, while a tentative step in the direction of what I call an interfaith and liberatory memory, is nevertheless stymied by a failure in robust humility and moral vision. While critiques of *We Remember* have a long history,<sup>6</sup> my main aim, is a simple one: a call and reminder to let Shoah testimonies and witnesses, especially from Jews, be Christians' leading teachers, challengers, and guides when trying to remember the Shoah. My understanding here of remembering also entails working to prevent and halt such horrors and never be complicit or indifferent to them.

In essence, if there was to be another *We Remember*, the main text and footnotes should be replete with testimonies from those like Sara Nomborg-Przytyk and Primo Levi, and historians like Raul Hilberg or Christopher Browning. The 1998 document predominantly cites papal and Vatican texts.

### **The Church, Interfaith Memory, and Testimonies of Mass Atrocity**

*We Remember* was a much anticipated but unenviable document to be produced, as mere words could never undo, justify, or fully heal the catastrophic loss of Jewish life, not to mention restoring Christian and Church credibility. Obstacles (and there were many) included a differing Jewish versus Christian understanding of repentance<sup>7</sup> and a misunderstanding in Jewish (and Christian) circles on what constitutes the Church regarding moral responsibility for Christian anti-Semitism and genocidal participation.<sup>8</sup> For some, Christians in the Shoah were predominately victims and have little need to apologize for the moral failures of Nazis (some of

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<sup>5</sup> Taking Rothberg's idea, I would speak of "multidirectional" forgetting as similar characteristics are noticeable in Church views towards indigenous peoples and the negative impact of the Church on indigenous life and history in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia. The forgetting in one area reinforces forgetting in another.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, "Response to Vatican Document 'We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,'" in *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, ed. Franklin Sherman (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011); Robert Wistrich, "The Vatican and the Shoah," in *Modern Judaism* 21.2, (May, 2001): 83-107; Randolph L. Braham, "Remembering and Forgetting: The Vatican, the German Catholic Hierarchy, and the Holocaust." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13.2 (Fall 1999): 222-251, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/13.2.222>; and Kevin Madigan, "A Survey of Jewish Reaction to the Vatican Statement on the Holocaust" in *Cross Currents* 50.4 (2001): 488-505.

<sup>7</sup> A good place for Christians to start is Maimonides, "Laws of Repentance." In *Maimonides-Essential Teachings on Jewish Faith and Ethics: The Book of Knowledge and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*, edited and translated by Marc D. Angel (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Note that for non-theologians especially, "the Church" is a pliable and vague term. It is muddled by intra-Christian spats (confer the CDF contending certain Protestant Churches are not really churches); a separation of what is deemed (often negatively) the Institutional Church and the people of God; or a mystical, theological notion of the Church as the Body of Christ, who being God Incarnate and thus sinless, renders a sinful Church a contradiction and impossibility. In this mystagogical notion, while the Church is composed of sinful people, this reality has no bearing on the ultimate and inherent purity of the Church instituted and in-spirited by Christ. How these strands form a unified term, especially to Jews who look to The Church for apologies and repentance, is noteworthy.

whom believed in a perverted Christianity) while others want structural and ecclesial reform and repentance.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to note how the Vatican constructed *We Remember* in a perceived place of power and societal relevance. While the Catholic Church in Asia has always known what it is like to be marginalized as a minority religion, the Church in the West has still not accepted its new status with grace. Benedict XVI saw a Church remnant under siege, but instead of responding with isolation, bitterness or unhealthy nostalgia, this humbled place can become a site of greater interfaith listening, partnership, and learning. If *We Remember* were written today, especially under the example and leadership of Pope Francis, the tone, structure, and content would be radically different because the Church and its place in the world are different. The process of remembering the Shoah is also different, with all, if not most perpetrators dead, and few living witnesses. The document would also benefit from a further twenty-five years of Jewish-Christian dialogue and so a more robust interfaith memory.<sup>10</sup>

Tragically, in its fear of facing the moral failure and many deaths of the Church in the Shoah, the Vatican (emblematic in *We Remember*) inordinately focuses on Nazi persecution of Christians (which should not be overlooked<sup>11</sup>) or the inspiring (but still rare) stories of “Righteous Gentiles.”<sup>12</sup> This slanted memory and intentional forgetting paint a picture of most Christians as co-sufferers with Jews or Christians and Christianity as the saviors of Jews, when six million Jews would not have perished if either, let alone both, claims, were more abundantly true.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>9</sup> In hindsight, I would also add the Catholic Church had not yet been fully humbled, or made almost irrelevant in some circles: these are strong words but seem far truer today after the child abuse scandal and a differing cultural and religious landscape in much of the West. As an aside, with Peter Phan, I would promote a kenotic Church, which minimizes and constricts to leave moral space for the other—not the reality of a shrinking Church in the West because of ecclesial failures to address the child abuse scandal or to speak to the many burning issues of our day (or to do so “too late,” after the damage has been done). In Ireland, where I write, the Church is now an afterthought in most people’s minds. Also note that a Church made irrelevant need not be an irrelevant Church if it continues to speak for the most marginalized, poor, and forgotten. An “irrelevant” Church, if deemed so because it questions society’s inordinate focus on wealth or its hypocrisy regarding inequality, war, or ecological destruction, provides an essential and indispensable voice. Here I contend a Church on the margins is a more potent Church simply because history shows that a Church linked with power fails everyone, especially the most vulnerable.

<sup>10</sup> See also Barbara Meyer’s explanation of the “interreligious dimension of Christian memory” in terms of the Jewishness of Jesus. See Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 27.

<sup>11</sup> See Joseph M. Malham, *By Fire into Light: Four Catholic Martyrs of the Nazi Camps* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Note that diversity in Shoah memoirs will also give instances of Christians (or Nazis) who do kind or heroic deeds or Jewish survivors who praise Christians. Philip Bialowitz, a survivor of the Sobibor Uprising, includes an amazing story of an SS Officer named Fritz who was actually Jewish and sought to save Jewish lives and an extended passage praising the work of John Paul II (see Philip Bialowitz, with Joseph Bialowitz, *A Promise at Sobibor: A Jewish Boy’s Story of Revolt and Survival in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 40–42 and 182, respectively).

position need not and does not remove the spiritual richness and inspiring testimonies of a Christianity rooted in the following of Christ and so truly embodying love of neighbor and enemy. But such a turn must be prepared to hear difficult truths from non-Christians on Christian failures and complicity. Here is where the turn to witness testimonies are especially important, what I have called elsewhere, testimonies of mass atrocity.<sup>14</sup>

### Era of the Witness

Annette Wierviorka coined the term era of the witness<sup>15</sup>; and in the wake of a disparagement of witness testimony in early judicial and historical records in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah, the status and role of witness testimonies in both Shoah studies and all genocidal investigations are now beyond dispute. As Wendy Lower writes:

The historian Saul Friedländer observed that scholars had failed for decades to write an integrated history of the Holocaust because they privileged Nazi documentation over other testimony. These academics were skeptical of the factual reliability of victims' accounts and those of other non-German witnesses speaking after the war.<sup>16</sup>

While there have been notable instances of fraud like the Benjamin Wilkomirski case, and historians and scholars should always investigate and examine witness testimony from the evidence available, sometimes all we have are the voices and words of survivors and the bodies of victims.

We know regimes seek to bury and hide the horrors they inflict.<sup>17</sup> In theological circles, however, the turn to testimonies of mass atrocity remains too infrequent, despite the reality that such individuals or groups experienced the horrors firsthand. Survivors' words, not surprisingly, can be frightening, shocking, and sickening: who wants to hear about babies burned alive or grandmothers sexually tortured? And yet, if the Church really seeks to remember the Shoah, to uphold the memory of the victims, and harness that memory to prevent its similar recurrence, shielding Christians from these harsh truths perpetuates both amnesia and superficial memory. If the memory of the Shoah does not rattle one's faith and hijack

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Admirand, *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Lower, *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed* (London: Head of Zeus, 2021), 63. See also Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. and Norton Company, 2011), 9; and Dan Stone, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (Dublin: Pelican Books, 2023), xx.

<sup>17</sup> For state-sponsored, systemic attempts to erase people's memory of State Sponsored atrocity, see Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

one's thoughts with despair and emptiness, then what is being remembered is not the Shoah.

The most potent way to remember the Shoah is to turn to the words, stories, and in some cases, mass graves, of the victims, and in particular, Jewish victims. Theology, including Vatican reflections, are not irrelevant, but become so if not formulated in what Irving Greenberg's creed famously notes, "in the presence of the burning children."<sup>18</sup> *We Remember* seemed too far removed from such a holy site.

In the next section, I will highlight a few examples of witness testimony and how their inclusion in a document like *We Remember* would have been morally cathartic and theologically illuminating for Christians.

### **Including Testimonies of Mass Atrocity in *We Remember***

For the overwhelming majority of the six million Jews murdered in the Shoah, there was no possibility for testimony, and for many of those victims, no trace remains of their last days or of their physical remains. We have some pieces of paper desperately tossed from cattle cars or diaries buried—but only the survivors were able to speak, and even then, not every survivor could do so, especially in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah. Once Holocaust oral testimonies and archives were finally established and publishers finally supported books on the Shoah, there is now more individual testimony than one person can read or listen to—especially if not conversant in the many languages of the survivors.<sup>19</sup> The examples below, then, are selective and could easily be interchanged or supplemented with thousands of others. What matters is the overall point that Shoah testimony, especially from Jews and other non-Christians, should fill *We Remember* and related Vatican documents if the aim is really to remember the Shoah and face Christian failures and complicity.

I first turn to *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Jewish social historian Emmanuel Ringelblum's courageous project to document and preserve Jewish life in the ghetto.<sup>20</sup> In one entry, for example, we read: "Death lies in every street. The children are no longer afraid of death. In one courtyard, the children played a game tickling a corpse."<sup>21</sup> Despite the severity and desperation of the situation, in a later

<sup>18</sup> Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust." In *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, edited by Eva Fleischner, 7–55 (New York: Ktav, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> For an argument on the need for testimony in local contexts with local languages (spoken and unspoken), see Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 266.

<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Ringelblum, along with his wife, born *Yehudit Herman*, and their son, Uri, were murdered in March 1944 (scholars believe March 10) amid the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. The hidden *Notes* were found in 1946 and later 1950.

<sup>21</sup> *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 174 (May 11, 1941 entry). Playing among corpses was a sadly common experience during the war, though it does not belie the trauma that could later result upon reflection. For another example, see Tomi Reichental, *I Was a Boy in Belsen* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2013), 160.

entry from December 14, 1942, Jewish leaders seeking a plan to rescue Jews from the Ghetto, worried about “soul snatching. The Catholic Religious leaders have always exploited such difficult moments in Jewish life as programs, deportations, etc;”<sup>22</sup> and further on: “Until now, the Polish Christian spiritual leaders have done very little to save Jews from massacre and ‘resettlement,’ to use their euphemism.”

While a document like *We Remember* highlights the Christians who saved Jews, deeper readings of memoirs reveal many cases of betrayal or an uneasy financial arrangement between the Christian protector and the desperately hiding Jews.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, just as Jewish leaders in the Warsaw Ghetto pointed to a pattern of Christian leadership seeking to convert Jews in moments of crisis, consider this other testimony though not from a Jewish witness, but a nineteen-year-old German POW, navy midshipman named Karl Völker. He and other German POWs had their interrogations and conversations secretly recorded by British intelligence. For our purposes, Völker’s words below point to the on-the-ground results of what Jules Isaac called “the teaching of contempt.” Just as many Christians erroneously believed Jews killed Christians for blood and that all Jews everywhere (and not the Roman Empire) executed Jesus (whom some Christians also forgot was Jewish), we hear Völker maintain:

I know what the Jews did. About 1928 or 1929 they carried off the (Christian) women and raped them and cut them up and the blood—I know of many cases—every Sunday in their synagogues they sacrificed human blood, Christian blood... Never in my life have I enjoyed anything more than the time when we smashed up the synagogues.

And after speaking of the German soldiers (presumably also himself) undressing and raping five Jewish women brought to the synagogue: he continues:

We shot them all mercilessly. There certainly will have been some innocent ones amongst them, but there were some guilty ones, too. It doesn’t matter how much good you do, if you’ve got Jewish blood, that’s enough!<sup>24</sup>

Note that while I contend such testimony could be part of a Christian liturgy and event commemorating the Shoah, I would hesitate to have this included above, not because of the horrific image of killing by the Christian German soldiers, but because I would fear the slander against Jews might not be seen as pure lies in some contexts.

As a second example, I turn to Charlotte Delbo, a French author imprisoned in Auschwitz because of her political resistance to the Nazis. She was not Jewish but

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<sup>22</sup> *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 336.

<sup>23</sup> This is not to say these Christians were not taking risks as harboring Jews in some contexts could have severe consequences, but the financial arrangement was often a strong factor.

<sup>24</sup> Sönke Neitel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying: The Secret WWII Transcripts of German POWs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 233.

was a member of the French Resistance. In her celebrated *Auschwitz and After*, we read:

I came back from the dead  
and believed  
this gave me the right  
to speak to others  
but when I found myself face to face with them  
I had nothing to say.  
because  
I learned  
over there  
that you cannot speak to others.<sup>25</sup>

Like other survivors, Delbo is haunted by this sense of still being alive while feeling she died in the camps, and has learned that talking to others (and here I see others as principally non-political Christians) is impossible because of the lies and violence. What is there to say to such perpetrators or bystanders now that can be believed? Silence and non-dialogue make any theological decrees challenging and a document like *We Remember* has to stay and linger with this uncomfortable silence.

And why such silence? In *We Remember*, we are given no story or testimony, but for Delbo such hellish scenes cannot be forgotten:

One morning before roll call, little Simone, who had gone to the latrines behind block 25, returned all shaken. “Alice’s leg is over there. Come see.” Behind Block 25 was the morgue, a wooden hut where they piled up the dead hauled from the charnel house. Stacked one on top of the other, the corpses awaited the truck that would carry them to the crematorium. Through the doorless opening one could see the heap of naked corpses and the glittering eyes of the rats darting to and fro. When there were too many of them, they were piled up outside.<sup>26</sup>

Weeks go by and Alice’s leg remains in the snow. Each day Delbo and her companions would look for the leg, thinking of Alice alone and dead. Delbo continues: “One day it was not there anymore. Someone must have filched it to make a fire. A gypsy woman surely, no one else would have dared.”<sup>27</sup>

Testimony is messy. Here we have both the witnessing and memory of an individual murdered—Alice—but then also this comment about a “Gypsy,” whom we instead refer to as the Roma, a group also decimated in what they call the Porajmos. Including such a line, i.e., not sanitizing the witness testimony, is deeply

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41.

important to uncover parallel or competing injustices—here those against the Roma.<sup>28</sup>

Returning to the scale and absurdity of the genocide against the Jews, an absurdity that was not clearly displayed or heard in *We Remember*, I turn to Hungarian-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, Olga Lengyel, who writes:

On December 31, 1944, the S.S. High Command asked the camp of Birkenau for a general report on the interned children... The Germans decided that they must disappear—and that it must be done quickly and cheaply.

Should the children be thrown into a concrete pit with gasoline poured over them and a firebrand applied, as always before? No, gasoline was scarce. And munitions were needed at the front.

But the Germans never lacked resourcefulness. We received the order to “bathe” the children. At Birkenau one did not discuss an order. One carried it out no matter how revolting it might be.

On the endless Lagerstrasse, the road to Calvary of so many millions of martyrs, the little prisoners started out in a long procession. Their hair was cropped short. They trampled barefoot, in rags. The snow had melted underfoot, and the camp road was coated with ice. Some of the youngsters fell. Each fall brought a slashing blow from a cruel whip.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the plan was to lead the children to the showers where other prisoners would “bathe” the children in icy water and then without drying them, lead them outside to stand in the freezing winter weather for hours for roll call. “‘Little Jesus will come for you presently,’ sneered a German guard at one child who was waiting with blue lips, utterly benumbed...”<sup>30</sup>

How would these words from the German soldier be inserted in a document like *We Remember*? How disturbing to think someone could involve the infant Jesus so coldly and ironically in the act of literally killing children? Note, I read “German soldier” as a “Christian,” if not an actual or still practicing Christian, then one likely reared by Christianity. Words like Nazi or German or Polish or Ukrainian (when meant to distinguish them from Jews who may have been German, Polish, or Ukrainian) belie the fact that most of these perpetrators were Christian. This, too, is important, because *We Remember* wants to paint a picture of Christian victims or a minority of perpetrators who might have been nominally Christian, but not really Christian.

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<sup>28</sup> It is also a reminder that witness testimony needs to be scrutinized and carefully critiqued.

<sup>29</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 226-227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.



**Conclusion: “The bad memories have erased the good.”<sup>31</sup>**

Beyond the mere inclusion of testimony, deeply critical and trenchant testimonies regarding Christianity should also play a prominent role in any Christian remembering of the Shoah. The turn is thus selective and intentional, highlighting, or at least being unafraid to include, difficult, offensive, and disturbing voices. Part of this turn to Jewish testimony is rooted in the recognition of a fractured Christian community, often split under liberal or conservative lenses, that will seemingly always stand opposed on issues like Pius XII; the teaching of contempt and its role or responsibility in the Shoah; gospel passages like Matthew 27:25; the salvation of Jews through Jewish ways; whether the Church and not just some Christians morally failed during the Shoah; and so on. It is hoped that greater use of witness testimony can help to move the discussions away from some inter-Christian disagreements and towards deeper repentance.

Klara Frelich, a Shoah survivor, hidden in a bunker while the Germans and local Ukrainians liquidated her village in Bolechow, replied with those words above when asked about her best memories before the Germans came—“the bad memories have erased the good.” *We Remember*, failing to rely upon and focus their act of remembering with Jewish voices, seems to do the opposite: erasing the bad memories with the good, or at least avoiding the bad memories with vague notions of complicity and a conflation of minority acts of Christian goodness with a majority of Christians’ inaction or complicity in the genocide against Jewish people, life, and culture. As touched upon below, the acts of memory and forgetting, while complex and nuanced, are rooted in the ethical, and for Jews and Christians, in the biblical call to remember what God has done for God’s people and a clear sense of love of God and love of neighbor. Testimony itself may not automatically lead Christians to right remembering about the Shoah. Testimonies still need to be heard and interpreted. Whether one uses a soft supersessionist lens or a humble and pluralist lens, for example, may lead to different analysis and responses. But keeping the Jewish voices front and center is not only an intentional practice of ethical and interfaith remembering but reminds Christians about three core truths:

1. The Shoah was a rupture in Jewish life and a genocide perpetrated in a predominantly Christian setting.
2. Individual testimonial voices will conflict or overlap at times, but such is the messiness of genocides that cannot be tidied up by theological statements or decrees.<sup>32</sup> and
3. If Christians really want to remember the Shoah they need to grapple a lot more with what they too often forget (see truths one and two).

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 372.

<sup>32</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*. In *The Night Trilogy*. Trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 72.

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