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## Introduction: The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity

There are some deeds that cry out to heaven. These deeds are not only an outrage to our moral sense, they seem to violate a fundamental awareness of the constitution of humanity.

Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (1970).

So if you want to stay within the religious, you must struggle.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (1998).

For the most part, those who think about the capacity of human beings to commit acts of spectacular cruelty against each other have puzzled over the question: why? The problem of evil has been a central concern of theologians and philosophers and has also increasingly concerned social scientists and historians who have tried to explain the mass atrocities of the twentieth century. There is, of course, no consensus as to how to explain mass atrocity or even on the question of whether or not it can be explained. For some, the pessimistic conclusion, *vide* Hegel, is that “history is a slaughterbench” and modernity has only intensified its bloody toll. History appears to be a progression of events, some of them quite atrocious, the causes of which are multifarious, but one thing we observe is that in the face of mass atrocity, human societies have developed various ways of coming to terms with the horrific events that so often punctuate their existence. So, in addition to looking for the causes of such events, we must also address the question of how societies respond to them. We do know that there is a whole range of collective responses to mass atrocity. For some societies, there is repression of memory, since the weight and intensity of the experience of atrocity makes it virtually impossible to “go on” knowing that such things have happened and could happen again. Other societies, embrace their experiences more actively, realizing that the weight of the past can cripple the present and future

if it is not addressed head-on with specific and determinate collective responses.

In the past two decades, there has been a proliferation of collective forms of response to mass atrocities. War crimes trials, truth and reconciliation commissions, amnesty programs, reparations policies, collective apologies, and religiously inspired programs of forgiveness have appeared all over the world, wherever we have seen societies struggle with the memory of past atrocity. Indeed, it might be said that the collective attempt to come to terms with mass atrocity is in itself as much a part of the study of mass atrocity as the search for its causes. There has been a global proliferation of research and publications addressing the question of how to respond to ongoing or past atrocities. Most of this research is policy-driven, not so much interested in the simple analytical question of how societies *do* respond, but how they *ought to* respond. It is guided by the idea that we must harness the power of our reason precisely to deal with the products of our unreason to guide traumatized societies through the harsh waters of their stormy memories. The establishment of research and policy institutes such as the Center for Transitional Justice in New York and the introduction of a United Nations Peacebuilding Commission are examples of such institutional efforts. Many studies have been focused on particular instruments or mechanisms of accountability in themselves or as parts of a broader agendas aimed at coming to terms with the past, often focusing on hard choices between justice and truth or on the tensions between national sovereignty and international legal norms. The aim of *this* book is to explore one particular but insufficiently studied aspect of many responses to mass atrocities: the role of the religious in responses to mass atrocity. More precisely, the chapters assembled herein focus on two major themes: the roles that religious language, ideas, and actors objectively play in responses to atrocities and the normative assessments of what role religious language, ideas, and actions should or should not play in responses to crimes that shock the conscience of mankind. Our aim is to concentrate on the use and influence of religious language, ideas, or perspectives beyond the confines of particular religious traditions, communities, and institutions. One of the most significant aspects of responses to mass atrocity in the modern age is that religious discourse and practices have seeped out into broader, public, and secular discourse and contexts. As Ian Buruma put it in a critique of the British Holocaust Memorial Day, such official commemorations calls for piety and encourages politicians to act like clerics: “This is not what politicians are elected to do. Sermons belong in places of worship. But more

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and more [...] religion, or religious posturing is seeping into areas where it should not be" (Buruma, 2002). Yet, even granted this, it might be prudent not to guard the borderline of the secular realm too categorically as we seek to understand or articulate the implications of "unspeakable" evils. As Jürgen Habermas suggested in "Faith and Knowledge," the "secular side" might do well by not ignoring or closing its mind to the powers of religious language and perspectives (Habermas, 2005).

Confronted with massive and heinous violations of human rights – the Holocaust and other genocides of the twentieth century – witnesses, judges, philosophers, artists, and others have often used religious vocabulary in attempts to deal with the questions arising in the aftermath of such mass atrocities. For example, the photographs taken by the Allies at the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps are often referred to as "icons" and Susan Sontag (2001, p. 19) famously described her first look at them as a "modern revelation" and a "negative epiphany." Likewise, testimonies about the camps themselves have invoked the idea of Hell, and discussions about artistic representations have drawn on notions of the so-called ineffable as well as invocation of philosophical and religious taboos against representations of the enormity of mass atrocity, in particular the Holocaust (Berstein, 1994; Cohen, 1988; Lanzmann, 1994). In the modern world, committees responsible for the organization of Holocaust museums and memorial days find themselves enveloped in questions about the place for despair and redemption in the design of exhibitions and commemorations (Linenthal, 2001). Public state-sponsored events like the perennial European Holocaust memorial days are clearly products of secular societies, but they tend to "sacralize" remembrance (Eschebach, 2005) of suffering and commemorate what sociological theorist Jeffrey Alexander (2002) has referred to as "sacred evil."

The idea for this volume emerged from our interest in the many and remarkable ways in which public and scholarly discourse about mass atrocities in recent times is shaped by religious – mainly Christian – terminology and ideas. Indeed, it might be argued that fragments of Christian ideas and imagery have shaped Western postwar representations of the Holocaust (Lawson, 2007). More generally, within recent years religious actors have become increasingly visible and influential in worldwide contexts of transitional justice or the so-called politics of dealing with the past – a story, most often, of atrocious mass violence. In countries like South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Northern Ireland, religious leaders and organizations have been related to state-sponsored truth commissions

and faith-based diplomacy, and ideals and practices of forgiveness, reconciliation and commemoration have become part of current political discourse and practice (Auerbach, 2005; Levy and Sznajder, 2006; Philpott, 2007). On the basis of his influence in the South African truth commission, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has become a global icon of the potential of religious leaders and religious language and values in relation to societal endeavors to civilize the barbarous space that exists after atrocity.

The use of religious discourse and ideas in responses to mass atrocities is fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, there seems to be an almost functional imperative toward the use of religious language and ideas to attempt to understand what, in an existential sense, cannot be understood. The overwhelming and horrible nature of mass atrocities throws into relief the limits of language, human justice, and our moral understanding. As noted by several contributors to this volume, we are placed in an insoluble double bind where the sense of a need to respond – to witness, to repair, or to do justice – is intimately accompanied by the discomfiting sense that any response we offer will be inadequate. Perhaps this is part of the reason why people – whether religious or not – frequently employ religious language and ideas when trying to articulate a response to atrocity. Given the function of religion as a means for understanding what appears to be beyond the reach of our understanding, the use of religious reservoirs of meaning and value may seem to make eminent sense. On the other hand, the importation and use of religious ideas is fraught with problems and open to questioning. Is it, for example, really appropriate to speak of the photographs from the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps as secular “icons”? In what sense, if any, is it possible to trace analogies between the religious meaning of an icon and the stark objectivity of photographs of human cruelty and suffering? (Brink, 2000). The same uncertainty applies, for example, to the use of the image of Hell in testimonies about the Nazi camps. According to Hannah Arendt, a description of the Nazi camps as “Hell on earth is more ‘objective,’ that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature” (1953, p. 79). Others have rejected or cautioned against hasty incorporation of the extraordinary into given religious frameworks. According to Holocaust-scholar Lawrence L. Langer (1998), the use of traditional religious language and concepts like atonement and expiation, repentance can become a *barrier* against an open encounter with the atrocity of mass murder. What he calls the “surfeit of piety” pays “homage to familiar vocabulary at the expense of the crimes themselves, that recede into the

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shadows of forgetfulness” (Langer, 1998, p. 174). With specific regard to the above-mentioned use of the image of “Hell on earth,” also consider this poem on the arrival to Auschwitz by Charlotte Delbo:

In hell  
You do not see your comrades dying  
in hell  
death is not threat  
you no longer feel hunger or thirst in hell  
you no longer await anything  
in hell  
there is no more hope  
and hope is anguish  
in the heart of empty blood.  
Why then do you say that it is hell,  
here.  
– “Morning of Arrival” (Delbo, 1995, p. 134).

The frequent use of religious language and ideas in responses to mass atrocities represents a genuinely ambivalent and fascinating topic that raises a host of questions: In trying to respond to massive and heinous crimes like genocide, does it help to import religious ideas or frameworks? Do some crimes, as suggested by Peter Berger (1970), “cry out to heaven” in the sense that we somehow need to draw on ideas and perspectives from religious frameworks in order to deal with them and their moral implications? Do we need some kind of religious underpinning or framework in order to make sense of questions about guilt and memory or practices like forgiveness and punishment in relation to people responsible for the most horrible international crimes?

In recent years several theologians and other scholars have claimed that religious perspectives and values have an essential and valuable role to play in relation to efforts to understand and deal with mass atrocity. The general arguments are that without such perspectives we cannot grasp the nature of evil or make sense of the idea of human rights; that without a notion of eschatological hope, we risk giving in to despair; that without a devotion to the value and virtue of forgiveness there is no future; that religion is a key to preserve our sense of evildoers as fellow human beings and as something apart from their deeds. There is, however, a need for a critical assessment of the possibilities and problems pertaining to attempts to bring religious or quasi-religious allegiances and perspectives to bear in responses to mass atrocities of our time: When and how can religious language or religious beliefs and practices be either necessary or helpful? And what are the

problems and reasons for caution or critique? These are the questions that the chapters in this volume seek to address.

### Clarification of Terms

In order to set out more clearly what is within the scope of this volume, here follows an elaboration of the terms that constitute the title of this collection. We proceed in the most logical way by explaining what we mean by “mass atrocities,” the meaning of the term “responses” and then, finally, why we have chosen the broad term “the religious” as the most important rubric under which to describe responses to mass atrocity.

“Mass atrocities” is a concept that is so broad that it can include phenomena of a quite disparate nature. In this book, one will find references to the Holocaust and other genocides, to crimes against humanity such as slavery and apartheid, and to large-scale, deliberate, and systematic violations of human rights. Other books have been written to carve out what is peculiar about genocide or how to differentiate between, say, war crimes and crimes against humanity (May, 2005; Vetlesen, 2005). For our purposes in this book, what these crimes or violations share is more important than what makes them differ. They are, as David Scheffer (2006, p. 239) has suggested all “atrocity crimes”: high-impact crimes of severe gravity that are of an orchestrated character and that result in a significant number of victims and merit an international response. Yet, what arguably matters most in this book is what gives these crimes their name, namely their *atrocious* or morally horrifying aspect. They “shock the conscience of humankind” as Scheffer writes, using an evidently problematic, but ultimately appropriate phrase from the human rights declaration and several other international legal documents. The philosopher Claudia Card has argued that most well-known examples of atrocity are also central paradigms of evil (Card, 2002). Like evil, or indeed “radical” evil, talk about mass atrocities is saturated with terms expressive of a certain sense of moral horror or extraordinary transgression. The acts and events in question are decried as “unimaginable,” as “heinous,” “abhorrent,” “cruel,” and “inhuman.” The perception of the transgressive nature of mass atrocities finds expression in statements that no response to them can be adequate. As Martha Minow writes in the introduction to her widely read book on legal responses to mass atrocity, the book is “a fractured meditation on the incompleteness and inescapable inadequacy of each possible response to collective atrocities” (1998, p. 5). From this sense of limits, the distance to the realm of religion is not far. Consider for example Hannah Arendt’s famous statement that some evils can neither be punished nor be forgiven and that

they therefore “transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power” (Arendt, 1989, p. 241).

Thus we are led directly to the second central term in the title, namely “responses.” The chapters cover the range of most debated responses in current literature on transitional justice. That is, they include discussions of the role of religious ideas and actors in relation to trial and punishment, truth-recovery and reconciliation, official apologies, reparations, and forgiveness. At the same time, this is more than a volume on transitional justice mechanisms, and in so far as talk about “responses to mass atrocities” mainly brings to mind the range of just mentioned institutions and practices, it is important to stress that our use of the terminology represents a more capacious category. For example, we draw attention to responses to ongoing atrocities such as humanitarian intervention and the doctrine of just war, but also focus on forms of response lying well outside the domains of institutions and public policy. These include the very attempt to speak or give testimony about moral horrors, the cultivation of cosmopolitan ideals, and the reflections of philosophers on humanity, history, and God in the face of mass atrocity. To deal with the question of the religious in responses to atrocity without attention to such phenomena and reflections beyond the kinds of response usually discussed in the literature on transitional justice would be quite unsatisfactory.

The reference to “the religious” constitutes the last and probably the most challenging part of the title. What is meant by “the religious” here and why use this problematic term? Let us immediately say that we are not positing the existence a universal Platonic Form or even any kind of clear and distinct idea of “the religious” in itself. To the contrary, behind the choice of title lies a wish to explore a truly human – malleable, historical, and social – phenomenon: The many ways in which religious concepts, values, practices, and rhetoric are brought into play as people – secular as well as religious – try to respond to morally horrifying mass crimes. Thus, for our purposes, “the religious” can be viewed as a modality of language and belief as well as action and practice. Of course, throughout history, religious communities, and institutions have been central to societies’ attempts to respond to massive and heinous violations of human rights. Most observers have approached this subject from the perspective of how specific forms of organized religion – Judaism, Christianity, Islam for instance – and their institutions have responded to mass atrocity. While this is a valuable approach, our focus is intentionally more eclectic and less tied to an interest in established religions or traditions and their development. What originally caught our interest was precisely such instances where various aspects of religious discourse, life, and practice are used in otherwise non-religious contexts, where religious leaders chair secular institutions and



pull religious gestures and language into public settings, or where otherwise secular thinkers draw on the images and rhetorical figures from known religious traditions. What is interesting is precisely that religious concepts, rhetoric, and actors are active beyond traditional religious realms. In relation to such cases, a title referring more simply to “religious responses” would be misleading. Although terminologically a bit innovative, the chosen title has the advantage of making space for such cases where otherwise secular responses contain or perhaps incorporate some religious dimension. Moreover, to talk of “the religious in responses to mass atrocities” prompts us to acknowledge precisely what it is so easy to ignore, namely the question what makes something or someone “religious.”

Although the book as a whole is not committed to any specific interpretation of religion and religiosity, it is born of an idea that it is possible and promising to investigate dimensions of “the religious” in responses to atrocity without much attention, if any, to specific religions. Accordingly, several of the chapters in this volume outline the religious features of secular responses to mass atrocity, for example, in the political discourse of Abraham Lincoln on the issues of slavery in America and in the apologies for genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia by the secular world leaders Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan. The distinction between “the religious” and specific religions is absolutely essential, both empirically and conceptually. The religious is not contained within the sphere of religion, but actively intrudes across the social and cultural spheres and boundaries of modernity. Apart from breaking with any substantive definition of religion as something contained only within the mirage of clearly delimited religious traditions and communities, the book as a whole does not illustrate or apply a particular theoretical understanding of “the religious.” The term can refer to certain kinds of social actors and organizations as well as to particular modes of discourse or uses of language. It can be tied to specific metaphysical beliefs, experiences, or ritual practices, to particular rationales, or worldviews. The religious can manifest itself purely at the level of individual subjectivity, as when a witness experiences and attempts to process or make meaning of extreme phenomena. Usually, however, social actors do not suffer in silence; they share and communicate their experiences of atrocity and in doing so attempt to make collective meaning of them, to classify them in collective consciousness, and to render similar private apprehension of the extreme into a public category of “evil” (Kleinman et al., 1997). Thus, “the religious,” as we use it here and as it figures in the title, is deliberately the most generalized classificatory rubric, meant not to foreclose prematurely any potentially interesting example of the phenomenon in the context of response to mass atrocity. It is a pragmatic concept, brought into play to “catch” a wide range of positions and possibilities



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in the ways that individual human beings and societies deal with traumatic experience. As Aristotle once put it, it “precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions” (Aristotle, 1991, p. 3) and our title is adequate to its subject matter in so far as the overall aim of the book is truly to explore a malleable and diverse dimension of many responses to mass atrocities.

### Overview of the Chapters

The 10 chapters included in this volume are revised and expanded versions of papers presented at the international conference “The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity,” held at the Danish Institute for International Studies in May 2006. In accordance with the original concept of the conference, each author has been free to develop her or his original perspective on a particular aspect of the unifying topic. This collection is not meant to articulate any partisan perspective on the religious in responses to mass atrocity. It contains several chapters that are quite cautious and critical about religious responses (Duff, Brudholm, Torpey, Cushman). There are also some that are decidedly ambivalent or analytically indifferent (Geddes, Grøn, Dews, Turner), and some that are more inclined to a positive evaluation of the role or intervention of religious ideas and actors (Biggar, Philpott). The book is divided into three parts, moving from more abstract theological and philosophical reflections on the use and role of religious language and perspectives in the face of atrocity, to more specific and empirical examinations of particular moral, political, and legal responses to atrocity. As indicated by the subtitle of the volume, the group of authors is interdisciplinary. Not all disciplines are represented (we doubt whether that would be fruitful), but the volume represents a remarkably eclectic and ecumenical collection of thinkers from philosophy, sociology, theology, political science, and religious studies.

Part I includes three chapters on some of the most fundamental ethical and philosophical problems arising from the use of religious language and perspectives in responses to mass atrocities. Running through all three chapters is a concern with the apparently intractable tensions and limits of any response to mass atrocity. The first chapter by Jennifer. Geddes explores the very use of religious language – “from the borrowing of the words in the vocabularies of religious traditions to the language of prayer” – in order to understand better its moral dangers as well as its peculiar powers of articulation. The chapter introduces the idea of a “double bind,” that is, the sense that it is necessary to respond in some way, but at the same time, that it is impossible to do so adequately. This is, according to Geddes, a significant reason why some individuals borrow or use the words of religious traditions in their

attempts to provide some rejoinder to atrocity. However, as Geddes shows through a carefully balanced presentation, religious language can serve both to help and hinder our efforts to respond to mass atrocity. On the one hand, religious language can draw our attention to the extremity of the events of atrocity, the necessity for response, and the proper stance to take as listeners to the testimonies of those who have suffered. On the other hand, the use of religious rhetoric can also serve to obfuscate – and even collaborate with – the atrocity to which it seeks to respond, to demonize perpetrators, and to gloss over or even justify atrocity. Because religious language can be used in such different ways, there is a need for critical sensitivity, but not for a wholesale rejection that would leave us stuttering as we seek to respond to atrocity. Religious rhetoric in responses to atrocity can, as Geddes concludes: “be used to open up the double bind of speaking about atrocity, allowing something to be said, or can be used to dissolve that double bind, by making the atrocity fit within a scheme that makes sense of it and that makes it unnecessary to say anything more about it.”

Chapter 2, by Arne Grøn, provides a phenomenological account of the nature and role of the religious in relation to the problem of responding ethically to mass atrocities. Grøn tries to bring out what is most basically at stake when we confront a morally horrifying history. Like Geddes, Grøn argues that we are placed in a double bind or, as he puts it, an aporetic situation. We sense the need to provide an ethical response, but at the same time it seems that there can be no adequate ethical response to mass atrocities. The morally horrifying appears to have an infinite – and thus unmasterable – significance. Whether one thinks of forgiveness or resentment as possible ethical responses to atrocity, they both (as Grøn shows) seem to bring us to the limits of ethics or into a dimension of infinity. Drawing on the continental tradition in the philosophy of religion, Grøn argues that it is precisely the peculiar function or potential of religion to deal with infinite significances that we cannot master. “The religious,” in this perspective, is about the ways in which human beings deal with the limits of their lives, actions and thinking, in articulating, and reflecting on, what is beyond our human powers and imagination and what pertains to our existence as a whole. According to Grøn, religion does not offer an underpinning for any specific moral response, but it offers a certain perspective with which we can reflect on ethical problems that exceed what we can deal with in ethics. And this is exactly what is needed when we face morally horrible atrocities.

The third and final chapter in Part I is by Peter Dews. The chapter begins by taking notice of the increasing concern of Jürgen Habermas that the