
Shabbat in Hamburg

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FOR THE SPRING SEMESTER OF 1993, THE UNIVERSITY OF HAMBURG INVITED ME TO TEACH TWO COURSES IN THE SCHOOL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY ON WHAT THEY CONSIDERED TO BE “Jewish thinking.” I had visited Germany twice before. The first visit was for a week in the 1970s when I took my teenage son to see a concentration camp (Dachau, which he never saw, but that’s another story). The second was in the 1980s for a conference on Rosenzweig sponsored by the West German Government. But this was the first time I actually lived in Germany. Like most foreigners who live abroad anywhere for an extended period of time, I had a number of distinctive experiences that have significantly affected my life. What follows is the story of one such experience.

As will become apparent, this is not just a story. It touches on many questions. The issue I will focus on here is the efficacy of communal religious ritual. My thesis is that the real value of worship is independent of (and therefore not reducible to) other kinds of value, specifically, intellectual, aesthetic and moral virtues. The model for understanding both the narrative and its commentary is taken from Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, a book that I have increasingly come to value as one of the most important works—if not *the* most important—in philosophy and theology that Western civilization has yet produced.

BY MY THIRD MONTH IN HAMBURG, MY LIFE HAD ALREADY FALLEN INTO A certain routine. I lived in the university’s guest house near the campus—in the middle of what had been before 1933 a well-to-do Jewish neighborhood. My

“touring” the area was more or less confined to Sundays. Every weekday morning I ran around the lake (the Outer-Alster, only three blocks from the guest house), sometimes together with my next door neighbor, Skuli Siggursson from Iceland. Then I went to the university to join a group of fellow foreigners (from Russia, Croatia, Turkey, South America, and the Arab world, and one, very assimilated American Jewish woman) to study German with a team of highly dedicated university instructors. The classes ran from 8 a.m. till noon. Afternoons involved lecturing, meeting with students and other faculty, and personal research. In the evenings I studied German and watched lots of German television. This routine came to an end late Friday afternoon when I moved into my special Shabbat routine.

On Friday afternoon I would cook my food for the Sabbath, which I would begin at about 6 p.m. (Hamburg is so far north that it proved impossible for me to wait for sundown to begin the Sabbath. At this time of year, sundown can be as late as 11 p.m.!) I would drink a large scotch (my one hard alcoholic indulgence for the week), which would give me a nice buzz that helped me to move from my weekday mind set into a more relaxed, less thinking Shabbat mode, and sit down to my Sabbath dinner of a glass of good wine (for kiddush), with good bread (for *motzi*), and something fairly fattening and unhealthy for dinner (like pasta). Then, after dinner (and *birkat ha-mazon*, the prayers that end every meal) I would walk downtown, give all the change I had accumulated during the week to some street musician, and top off my evening of personal indulgence with a large ice cream cone from Haagen Dazs, that I would eat, in a slightly inebriated state, on a bench facing the Inner-Alster lake.

On this particular Friday afternoon, while I was preparing my Shabbat dinner, I received a call from my colleague Tim Schramm. He said that tonight marked the first of the three days of saturation bombing fifty years ago when the allies burned most of Hamburg. I had known nothing about it. Nor did any of the students in my German class. Like most Americans, I knew about Dresden (presumably because of its art objects). But I did not know that Dresden was only one of five cities selected—the others being Hamburg (the largest in population), Kassel (Rosenzweig’s birthplace), Bremen, and Kiel.

Tim invited me to join him for the city’s most important religious celebration of the anniversary. It was a memorial service that evening at the city’s most prominent cathedral, St. Michael’s. The bishop of Hamburg would speak, and among the officiants would be the bishop of Coventry. I was reluc-

tant to go. However, Tim is sensitive to Jewish concerns, and he knew that it was the eve of the Sabbath. Generally when Tim made such a suggestion it was important, and in all probability something that should not be missed. So I said yes, but only on the condition that after the ceremonies Tim would join me at my apartment for dinner, and we would celebrate the Sabbath eve together. Tim eagerly accepted my invitation and I (less eagerly) accepted his.

I met Tim outside of the cathedral. There was a light steady rain, the kind that I, but no one who grew up anywhere in Northern Europe, would notice. Across the courtyard from the entrance a band was playing what I would call “oompah music.” The sign above the band said that they were from Hamburg’s fire department. A large crowd of middle aged and older people, well dressed for the fifties (men with short haircuts in suits and women in dresses with beauty parlor hairdos) were arriving. As they approached the narrow entrance, they passed through, trying not to notice, two rows of college-age people appropriately dressed for the sixties (long, uncombed hair, jeans and khaki combat jackets) passing out pamphlets. Above their heads was a sign that said something like, “Remember why Hamburg was bombed.”

Tim and I found seats in a pew with a good view of everything; we were joined by other faculty from the School of Theology and their wives. The church was full; there were no empty seats. During the thirty minutes before the ceremonies were scheduled to begin, I read the pamphlet I had received on the way in. Some twenty pages of text in very small print with very narrow margins said what the single line banner proclaimed: don’t forget why Hamburg was bombed. Remember that the Allies were retaliating for what Germans had done first to the British. Remember that if it were not for the Allies, the Nazis would still be running Germany; the Allies, not we Germans, got rid of them. Remember that not far from Hamburg had been a concentration camp that would still be functioning today were it not for the Allies. They, not we Germans, stopped its horror.

And finally, said the pamphlet, remember that while we sit here remembering what others, for good reason, did to us fifty years ago, there are other horrors going on right now which we are doing nothing to end. The pamphlet then listed, described (in the political rhetoric of the sixties), and equated (which was somewhat disturbing to me) horrors past and present—Neuegamme, Auschwitz, Buchenwald...Hiroshima, Viet Nam, Cambodia...Somalia, Bosnia, the Middle East...and (what may have been most

poignant) Solingen and other cities in present-day Germany where “skin-heads” were burning “foreigners.”

The ceremony began with the cathedral’s grand organ initiating a procession of the officiants, all dressed in appropriate clerical costumes—the German Lutheran clergy in black robes with white collars. The bishop of Coventry stood out because his robes were red, and the bishop of Hamburg stood out because she was a woman. As soon as all of them had assumed their proper places in the transepts, as if on cue, a large contingent of student-aged protesters carrying battery-operated bullhorns rushed down the main aisle and attempted to seize the microphones situated in the slightly raised center of the nave between the transepts. They were blocked from doing so by the cathedral’s clergy who, without any use of force, simply stood between them and the microphones, and proceeded to negotiate with the protesters, amid an increasingly restless congregation, for the next fifteen minutes.

Finally, a group of student leaders were allowed onto the speakers’ area. One of them—a beautiful young woman with a gentle, soprano voice and long, very straight blond hair—began to read a statement. After a while, the congregation—noticing that she was reading the booklet that they had received upon entering the church and that she planned to read the whole thing—lost patience. People began to yell and scream. Their shouts in no way deterred her. She simply read faster and louder. The clergy tried to persuade her and her colleagues to desist, but they refused. Then the clergy brought out their greatest weapon. To silence, or at least drown out, both the audience objectors and the student protesters, they turned off the microphones and ordered the organist to play loudly on the cathedral’s grand organ. But the young woman stood fast. She picked up a bullhorn and continued to speak, while her colleagues sounded loud sirens on other bullhorns. For a short time the audience was treated to a contest in decibels between the church’s multi-million Mark, several-hundred-years-old organ and the students’ considerably cheaper, considerably more recent bullhorns. (Alas, the antique organ is no match for the contemporary bullhorn in loudness.)

At this point congregants began streaming down the aisles of the nave towards the students, attempting to take away the bullhorns or murder the protesters. Then everyone stopped for further negotiations as the clergy played the role of peace-makers, standing between the congregation/rioters and the defiant protesters. After another ten minutes or so, to the applause of

the congregation, city policemen marched in, in a procession-like formation. A compromise was reached. The woman resumed reading, and the audience became more or less silent (but not so silent as to allow the students to think that any of them were listening). After reading about one more page, the protesters receded in an orderly line out of the cathedral followed by the police, also in an orderly recession.

Then the planned ceremony began. The music was good, and the speeches all said the right thing, particularly the main sermon delivered by the bishop of Hamburg. In fact she said, essentially, what the protesters had said. Remember why Hamburg was bombed, remember that we Germans were not able on our own to stop the Nazis, and remember all the other horrors, including Neuegamme, Bosnia, and Solingen, etc. The difference between the speakers lay underneath their words. What the students were saying was: we are young and you are not; we are moral and you are not; we have pride and you cannot. When the bishop spoke she said: we are the good Germany; we are the church.

Tim and I left shortly after. There was still a great deal more scheduled, but we had seen and heard enough for one evening. Besides, it was now late and I was anxious to begin Shabbat. We returned to the guest house where we met Skuli. I introduced him to Tim and invited him to join us for Shabbat dinner. We had some scotch and then went out to my patio where I welcomed the Sabbath and sang the kiddush. We drank wine, ate spaghetti, and discussed science in Germany in the 1930s. Mainly we spoke about Felix Auerbach. Tim and I had visited his house in Jena—a Bauhaus structure built by Auerbach’s friend Walter Gropius, a house that stood out like a defiant sore thumb on a hillside filled with the traditional architectural styles from Jena’s much proclaimed, proud past. Skuli talked about the contrast between Jewish/theoretical and German/experimental physics at the time, and told us about Auerbach’s place in the community of theoreticians. Tim shared with us the suicide note that Auerbach had written for himself and his wife in 1933. As for me, I quietly soaked it all in, thinking about what it all meant and reflecting to myself that this was one of the nicest Sabbaths I had ever spent.

IN ROSENZWEIG’S TERMS, THE COMMUNAL LIFE OF THE JEW IS AN ETERNAL act of a community that rarely (if ever) succeeds in being eternal (that is, invariable) or being communal. Then why do the Sabbath at all? Rosenzweig

himself provides the answer. He learned it from his teacher of Jewish philosophy, Hermann Cohen. The Sabbath that exists in Rosenzweig's model is just that, a model, and not a simple description of what Jews actually do. Rather it is an ideal that directs real lived-life behavior, and, because the world is not (yet) redeemed, it is never realized. At best it can only be approximated. Furthermore, again because the world is not yet redeemed, all who think that they have realized the ideal are probably wrong. In fact they may be dangerous; they may be idolaters—those who misidentify what is finite with God, who is infinite in every respect.

Just as the Jews fail to rise above the world, so the pagans and Christians fail to transform it. Both build structures in one form or another, but neither can control their ultimate use. It is not that human action in the world does not accomplish anything. Clearly it does. But rarely does it accomplish what it is intended to accomplish.

In Rosenzweig's terms, humanity and only humanity can redeem the world. God creates the world, and humanity creates its redemption. But it cannot do so when that is its goal. When different human beings turn to each other in love and respond to the imperatives that such encounters entail, when community is formed by individuals cleaving to other individuals, then the world becomes more redeemed. But when impersonal human collectives, like nations, act to redeem, they effect the opposite. Humanity alone, particularly in collectives, can destroy the world, but cannot save it.

For Rosenzweig at least there is one clear exception to the rule of human ineffectualness. It is the church. The church is a collective of individuals which, like the nation, acts in the world with the intent of transforming it. But there is one critical difference between the church and all other collectives. The unity of the church is rooted solely in revelation. The foundation of Germany, like all other nations, is based upon finite things like land, language, history, and such. But the church transcends all these particularities. Its unity ultimately is that it is the response of human beings (pagans) to a divine command to transform the world and everyone in it. However, if the ideal for the church is universal salvation, its involvement in the world can be no more realized in "lived life" than the Jewish Sabbath ideal of transcendence from the mundane. My cathedral story illustrates this Rosenzweigian generalization. At least on the surface, the cathedral ritual intended to use this time of memorial to move its congregation of participants beyond hatred of "outsiders" to sup-

port the present liberal struggle to reform Germany's immigration laws. But this is not what occurred. In truth the ceremony was about the world and its redemption, but the redemption actually invoked was neither moral nor political. It was liturgical.

It is obvious to me that everyone involved in the cathedral event—and not just the clergy—was performing ritual. Certainly no one was teaching anything—neither the clergy, nor the students, nor the congregation. Clearly the students were not. Otherwise, why would they persist in reading an incredibly long text to people who obviously, even to the protesters, were not listening? Nor were the clergy teaching anything. What they said was known already to everyone there. They, too, like the protesters, were making a statement with their processions and music no less than with their spoken words. Nor was the congregation, who wanted to kill—not convert—the protesters.

The event cannot be described adequately in any obvious way as a means to improve the world. Just what were the protesters protesting? Not what the clergy was saying, since they both were saying the same thing. Nor would their words and actions that evening have any profound social impact. No one said anything that everyone had not heard before, and every word that was said would have been anticipated by the congregation. It could be anticipated that the newspapers would mention the event, but the story would be small and buried in the back of the local paper. Newspapers are interested only in the exceptional. Since everyone played his part, the event was not exceptional.

INDEED, PLAYING A PART IS PRECISELY WHAT EVERYONE INVOLVED WAS DOING. The students wore the clothes, made gestures, built the sets, and spoke the words of defiant youth, no less than the clergy wore the clothes, made the gestures, used the sets, and spoke the words of the Christian church. In fact, the role of the students was critical to the clerics making their statement of what they believe Christianity to be. The main event of the evening was directed to the priestly, conservative side of the church. It is the side that requires ancient rituals, high art, and conservative minded parishioners. But the other side of the church is prophetic and radical. The congregation that came to observe the celebration was one side, the protesters the other, and the clergy were given the opportunity to act as mediators, demonstrating that the church can,

does, and should encompass both. If anything theatrical at all was happening, it was a drama not about improving the world or remembering the past or even atoning for anything, but about the perpetual glory and majesty of the Christian church.

However, this drama is not an adequate way to describe what had happened. This was not a play on a stage about a fictional world. The cathedral is real and so were the roles that the people played—particularly the angry congregation. The protesters may have been performing defiance, and the clergy may have been performing love, but the angry congregants truly hated. How do they fit into the arms of the Church? To me it seems that while every other player in the liturgy was Christian, they were not. Rather, they were, in Rosenzweig's terms, the pagans to whom the Christian church reaches out. It is to them that the beloved Christians form a kind of community (a community of people who, as converted through love, persist as individuals) to love the unloved (that is, the pagan). In other words, the event described was a Christian ritual of conversion, in which the reality created is the conversion-redemption-salvation of pagans (the congregation of nominal Christians).

Once again the schema for understanding here is Rosenzweig's. Humans create in two ways—through art and through liturgy. The art is merely an expression of human genius, “merely” because the reality it creates exists only within the mind of the artist. The audience plays no active role; it passively observes (as I did). While Rosenzweig has respect for artists, he has none for audiences. In his judgment, artists at least create beauty, even if it is not real. But audiences create nothing. They merely escape from the world when they should be acting to redeem it.

But genuine liturgy makes no separation between performers and audience, and it is never an expression of the human alone. Rather it is a (revealed) response by human beings to the human being (Adam) being loved by God (the Creator). It is part of an infinitely past-pointing chain of love (grounded in revelation and rooted in creation) whose immediate product is a real community of loved ones who love each other and (through that love) reach out to include others who are not yet loved. The end goal is the redemption of the world. But that end, while reachable, is infinitely remote, so that the reality of ritual becomes distorted, even perverted, when the focus is on universal salvation.

Rather, liturgy is most productive when it functions as an intentional response to God's word that accidentally forms an immediate community of loved ones—as when citizens respond liturgically to the shared memory of a communal event or when a family shares a ritual dinner. The former is paradigmatic of the way of the Christian, and the latter is exemplar of the life of the Jew. Whatever futility resides in either when viewed separately is overcome when they are conjoined. But conjunction does not mean dissolution—at least not until the end is actually realized. No single people can transform the world, for the characteristics that define both the Jewish people and the Christian church are mutually exclusive. (No human structure is more outreaching than the cathedral; and no human institution is more inclusive than the family meal.) However, the two in harmony can indeed make at least the hope of redemption hopeful.

I hope my story is read ultimately as an example of such conjunction. That, at least, is how I read it. The messianic age will be a perpetual Sabbath. The Christian service (meant to invoke it) and the Jewish dinner (meant to taste it) were universes apart, but somehow, through the friendship of a Christian who remained a Christian and a Jew who remained a Jew they came together in a particular space at a particular time to form a very memorable Shabbat.



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