Testimony, Tensions, and *Tikkun*

TEACHING

THE HOLOCAUST

IN COLLEGES

AND UNIVERSITIES

Edited and Introduced by
Myrna Goldenberg and
Rochelle L. Millen

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AND ROCHELLE L. MILLEN

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Developing Criteria for Religious and Ethical Teaching of the Holocaust

DIDIER POLLEFEYT

And if any of you would punish in the name of righteousness and lay the axe unto the evil tree, let him see to its roots;

And verily he will find the roots of the good and the bad, the fruitful and the fruit-less, all entwined together in the silent heart of the earth.

—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Christian theology and Christian religious education as such are no guarantees against genocide; on the contrary, the Christian religion and Christian religious education (catechetics) were themselves involved in the genesis of the Holocaust.

It is not correct, as the Vatican's statement We Remember does, to separate radical (Christian) anti-Judaism from (racist) antisemitism. The Christian theology of substitution and supersessionism and especially the Christian teaching of contempt (in catechetics, preaching, and liturgy) are necessary conditions for understanding the Holocaust. Substitution theology assumes that, thanks to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the election of the Jewish people was definitively and exclusively transferred to Christians, and that Christianity and the church took the place of Judaism,

for all time and completely. The implication of this theology is that there is no longer any place for Israel in God's plan of salvation, and that Israel no longer has a role to play in the history of revelation and redemption. It is claimed that the Jewish "no" to Jesus, the Messiah, meant the end of God's involvement with Israel. Consequently, Christian education developed a teaching of contempt: the Jewish people had been, at one time, the beloved of God, but after missing its invitation with the coming of Christ, it lost its election and thus its right to existence—it is now a cursed or, at best, an anachronistic people. It is true, as *We Remember* asserts, that Nazi ideology was directed against the Jews as a race (antisemitism), not as a religious group (anti-Judaism). Nevertheless, without this theology of substitution and the religious teaching of contempt, the Holocaust cannot be explained. This is why Western (Christian) ethics and the teaching of Western ethics (Christian religious education) are not proof against genocide.

Nor is it correct to understand the Holocaust simply as a diabolical revolt against ethics, as some educators so easily do. Nazism used modern ethical arguments and theories that were acceptable, or at least debatable, in light of Western ethics. The Holocaust is not so much a question of immorality as a question of the vulnerability of ethics. An extreme example is so-called Nazi ethic.² According to Peter Haas, the Nazis were neither diabolical³ nor banal⁴ but instead, throughout the war, considered themselves ethical beings. Thus, for Haas, the Nazi ethic can be seen as a new construction, but one erected from the old building blocks of Western ethics. And this explains, at least in part, the success of the Nazi ethic, both within and outside Germany. For Haas, the ethical framework of Nazism stood in continuity with the formal framework of Western ethical discourse. Of course, Nazism was a perversion of morality, but, according to Haas, it is important to see how ethics and ethical education itself became involved in this process of perversion.

Obviously, teaching ethics and religion is no guarantee that genocide will be prevented in the future. This is true even when the Holocaust itself is taught. During the Holocaust, in fact, classes and university auditoriums were filled with students taking courses on ethics and religion. Religion and ethics should start by recognizing their limits, their responsibility, and even their guilt with respect to the Holocaust.

The teaching of the Holocaust in courses on religion and ethics is

always influenced by certain ethical and religious interpretations. There is no neutral way to present the Holocaust within an ethical and/or religious perspective. That this is true is not a problem as such, but all Holocaust educators should be aware of their presuppositions when teaching the subject. They should understand the tensions within the hermeneutical complexity of the Holocaust, the particularity of their own positions, and the specificity of their pedagogical goals.

Indeed, Christian educators can misuse the Holocaust for religious goals of their own. They can select only those facts or stories that correlate well with their own religious faith. An example of the misuse of the Holocaust by Christian theologians involves Elie Wiesel's Night and the religious and pedagogical misappropriation of that work's famous story about the hanging of an angel-faced little boy. At the hanging, someone asks, "Where is God now?" Wiesel's inner voice answers: "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows."5 The Christian identification of this scene with the scene of the suffering Christ on the Cross is problematic for many reasons, and from moral, pedagogical, and theological perspectives. The boy hanging on the gallows is not an adult who has freely chosen to die for a good cause; his suffering is not redemptive, nor is his death answered by divine redemption. Comparing the boy to Jesus puts Christians on the side of the victims, not on the side of the perpetrators and bystanders. Two instances of suffering are compared rather than recognized in their uniqueness and historicity.

Educators teaching Western ethics can also misuse the Holocaust for pedagogical goals of their own. They, too, can select only those facts or stories that best match their own anthropological and ethical presuppositions. For example, teachers who want to demonstrate the evil of human nature can focus primarily on stories of extreme and terrible atrocity and violence, whereas teachers who want to develop a more optimistic view of human nature can focus primarily on heroic examples of solidarity or rescue. The moral lessons one draws from the Holocaust are primarily determined by the selections one makes from the history of the Holocaust. For example, a famous sentence from Anne Frank's diary—"In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart"—is used to support very general and optimistic conclusions about humanity after the Holocaust.⁶

To (mis)use the Holocaust for one's own pedagogical goals is to commit an injustice toward the victims. It is also to carry out an a priori elimination of the radical challenge of the Holocaust for every kind of ethics and religion.

CRITERIA FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

There is an increasingly critical attitude toward the possibly ideological character of Holocaust teaching, and not just on the extreme right. It is evident, of course, that extreme-right neo-Nazi movements do not want to be confronted with the historical consequences of their ideologies. But questions are being asked from moderate political and educational perspectives as well—about Holocaust education, its assumptions, its goals, and its consequences for international politics, nationalism, and contemporary moral positions on such topics as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and so on. The only adequate reply to these questions is the development of criteria for Holocaust education. We are in urgent need of an instrument for analyzing existing Holocaust curricula according to scholarly standards. This chapter proposes the following central criterion: In Holocaust education, students should learn to deal, in a critical and open way, with the basic dilemmas and problems entailed in ethical and religious Holocaust education and, consequently, in their own understanding of human evil and religious convictions as influenced by the Holocaust. Consideration must be given to the aspects described in the sections that follow; indeed, they constitute a virtual checklist that can be used to evaluate existing Holocaust curricula and to develop new pedagogical tools for teaching the Holocaust.

Universal and Unique Aspects of the Holocaust

When all the emphasis is on the universal elements of the Holocaust, the event loses its historicity, and the unique suffering of the victims is reduced to a metaphor for suffering in general. When all the emphasis is on the unique aspects of the Holocaust, the event becomes not only "extraterrestrial" but also (pedagogically) noncommunicable and, finally, irrelevant to contemporary society.

Perspectives of Victims, Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers

Holocaust education should allow and stimulate multidirectional partiality. The Holocaust itself was a consequence of the impossibility of understanding the perspective of the Other. When one studies the Holocaust only from the perspective of the victims, one risks not coming to a broader and more analytical understanding of the Holocaust, an understanding necessary to the prevention of future such events. When one studies the Holocaust only from the perspective of the perpetrators and bystanders, one risks becoming insensitive to the concrete suffering of the victims and to the ultimately unexplainable character of this enormous moral evil, and one falls into the danger of confusing an understanding of the mechanisms that led to the Holocaust with acceptance and even legitimization of them.

Continuities and Discontinuities between Western History and the Holocaust

Students need to learn that the Holocaust did not come from nowhere but was a logical consequence of certain developments in Western history. Nevertheless, the Holocaust must not be presented as an unavoidable "effect" of this history because that kind of presentation denies the free agency of human beings and groups, nor must the Holocaust be presented as just a logical next step in this history, since that kind of presentation denies the novelty and the absolutely unexpected immoral nature of the event.

Small-Scale and Large-Scale Events

A focus on small-scale events helps students understand the immense tragedy of the Holocaust for concrete human beings, the daily moral evil of the perpetrators and bystanders, and the human courage of the rescuers. It reveals the Holocaust in a narrative form that can touch the student's mind, heart, and body. A focus on the large-scale events helps students see the social and political factors involved in the Nazi genocide. Showing the link between small-scale and large-scale events is cru-

cial to helping students discover their moral, political, and religious responsibilities in preventing future genocides.

Emotion and Rationality

It is not enough to explain the Holocaust rationally, using the human sciences. Holocaust education should aim at cognitive, emotional, psychomotor, and social goals. Nevertheless, teaching about the Holocaust must not end in emotionalism, in touching students' feelings alone. Failure to acknowledge the cognitive dimension, even that of emotions, puts one in danger of becoming manipulative and can render the results of Holocaust education temporary, even evanescent.

The Science of History (Statistics) and the Pain of History (Anedcotes)

Holocaust education requires balance between an objective approach and a subjective approach to the facts. Objectivity without a subjective element leads to indifference. Subjectivity without an objective element leads to irrationality and blindness.

The Normality and the Abnormality of the Event

Students should be made aware of the extraordinary character of the Holocaust, in quantitative as well as qualitative terms. The debate on the Holocaust's "uniqueness" must be reflected in every Holocaust curriculum. The danger in emphasizing only the abnormality of the event, however, lies in feeding students' sensationalism and creating an absolute discontinuity between the Holocaust and Western civilization. When the Holocaust is isolated from the rest of Western history, it risks becoming an abnormal, exceptional curiosity rather than an event that is relevant to today's society.

The Humanity and the Inhumanity of the Perpetrators

Holocaust education should show how normal human beings can do morally inhuman things. The greatest challenge for Holocaust education

is to show that the perpetrators were not monsters but human beings. If the Holocaust had simply been the work of monsters, then explaining why and how inhuman beings did inhuman things would be tautological. It should also be shown, however, that inhuman acts can affect a person's humanity to such an extent that the person excludes himself or herself from the human realm. It is important to help students reflect, in a nuanced way, on the relationship between the person and that person's acts.

Jews as Holocaust Victims, and Jews in Other Contexts

It is important to show how religious and racial prejudices made the Jews victims of history. It is just as important to show that, historically, Jews were not only and always victims but also a strong people who created an immensely rich moral and religious tradition, contributed to the arts and sciences, and also resisted the evils of the world, both physically (for example, in the revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto) and politically (for example, in the state of Israel).

Jewish and Non-Jewish Victims

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"Not all the victims of the Holocaust were Jews, but all Jews were victims," asserts Elie Wiesel, aptly summarizing the balance that has to be established in Holocaust curricula between the Jewish perspective and the perspective of non-Jewish victims. The exercise of this kind of balance will also bring up the question of the role of antisemitism in Nazi ideology. Was antisemitism the dominant motive of the Nazis, or should the extermination of the Jews be situated in the broader eugenic program of Nazism?

Pessimistic and Optimistic Aspects of the Holocaust

Holocaust education and study should be careful not to formulate general conclusions about human nature that are too optimistic or too pessimistic. Sometimes Holocaust education falls into the trap of essentialism, or using the Holocaust to make pronouncements about the essence of human beings (for example, that human beings are intrinsically evil, or always free to do good). Holocaust education should make students aware

of the very contextual character of the Holocaust. It is impossible to say things about human nature as such on the basis of the Holocaust because human beings are not made to live in such extreme circumstances.

Revisionist Denial and Ideological Misuse of the Holocaust

No history is simply a recitation of facts. It is also a reconstruction of the facts, one that reflects the hand and the mind of whoever does the reconstructing. Therefore, it is impossible to create a neutral reconstruction of the history of the Holocaust. Students should be made aware of this fact, especially when they are confronted with extreme products of this reconstruction process: denial of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and ideological misuse of the Holocaust, on the other. It is especially important that students learn to understand the connection between both forms of extremism. For example, in ideological misuse of the Holocaust, historical facts are selected in a one-sided way so as to construct a version of the Holocaust that does not reflect the totality of the Nazi system; this very one-sidedness is then often used by revisionists to call the reconstruction into question and to label it, and the Holocaust itself, a hoax. Therefore, a necessary element of Holocaust education is the science of historical critique, used to examine and exclude certain ideological presentations of Holocaust history. In other words, Holocaust education should also be education in scientific historical critique.

Clichéd and Less Known Stories and Pictures

Holocaust education should introduce students to the basic facts of Holocaust history and to the "classics" of Holocaust literature. Since the Holocaust is mostly treated as a topic in courses offered over time within separate disciplines (history, religion, moral education), it is important to incorporate enough differentiation into didactic tools (histories, testimonies, poems and other texts; artworks; videotapes; multimedia technologies) and course content (history, philosophical analysis). In this way, one can avoid Holocaust "saturation," mostly the consequence of a too limited arsenal of didactic tools and content in Holocaust curricula, by which Holocaust education becomes too predictable, preprogrammed, and repetitive.

Theodicy and Anthropodicy

The questions "Where was God in Auschwitz?" and "Where was man in Auschwitz?" should be raised in post-Holocaust education. The Holocaust poses questions both to religion and to secular humanism. Religious education should develop, in this context, the relationship between human ethics and authentic religiosity, along the lines of Levinas's idea of God entering our existing through the face of the vulnerable Other. Secular moral education can show how religion as such is neither good nor bad but has good and evil potentialities, as the Holocaust also demonstrates.

The Role of Modernity and the Role of Christianity

Christianity and modernity have been analyzed as two main perspectives through which to understand the Holocaust. In the first case, the Holocaust is understood as the logical outcome of centuries of furious Christian anti-Judaism. In the second case, the Holocaust is seen as possible only when modern society had produced the technology to kill Jews in a rationalistic manner and on a large scale. In the first case, the Holocaust is understood as a relapse into primitive, premodern barbarity. In the second case, the Holocaust is understood as the end point of modern society. A third interpretative perspective is often forgotten: that the Holocaust is neither a relapse into premodern barbarity nor the end point of modernity but rather the anticipation of postmodern society, in which emotionalism, the lack of universal values and norms, and relativism are main features. The advent of postmodernity, at the end of the twentieth century, can then be understood because of the possible association between postmodernity and Nazism.

Demonic and Banal Aspects of the Genocidal System

A danger of Holocaust education is the temptation to select only those historical facts that emphasize the demonic aspects of the Holocaust and to condense these into a single picture that is then offered as representative of the Holocaust in all places and at all times during World War II. The opposite danger of Holocaust education is the temptation to concen-

trate only on the large-scale, industrial-grade, rationalistic aspects of the Holocaust so that students become inured to concrete suffering, and the Holocaust is studied in the same way as the Industrial Revolution.

Analyzing and Moralizing

A moralistic approach to the Holocaust can do harm to correct, nonselective historical presentation, but a purely historical approach can be so objective and neutral that the Holocaust's meaning for ethics is lost. Moralizing can create resistance in students because they may feel that they are being associated too much with the perpetrators, but too much analysis can render students morally indifferent to the subject.

Determinism and Human Freedom

In Holocaust education, it is necessary to strike a delicate balance between notions of determinism and notions of human freedom. Students often use determinism to excuse the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and human freedom to criticize the victims for their perceived lack of resistance. The opposite line of reasoning should also be developed. The perpetrators' behavior was not completely determined by the system; they could always have made use of remaining sites of freedom within the totalitarian system to slow down or undermine the processes of extermination and to help individuals or groups. As for the victims, they had very limited resources for acting freely within the Nazi system (even if they sometimes did so); their survival depended much more on external factors than on the exercise of human freedom.

Human Evil and Human Holiness

In Holocaust education, students should discover that human evil is a possibility, but so is human holiness. Narratives describing acts of terrible atrocity that illustrate the depths of human evil should be combined with stories about extraordinary and sometimes paradoxical moral and religious behavior (for example, stories about people who gave their lives for others). Moreover, such extraordinary goodness should not be presented only in

the form of heroic stories; it should also be presented in the form of more modest stories illustrating such ordinary or "daily" virtues⁷ as human dignity, caring, and creativity in the midst of evil and catastrophe.

Remembrance of the Past and Hope for the Future

The central idea of post-Holocaust education should be that the Holocaust happened and can therefore happen again. Thus it is necessary to remember for the sake of the future. Remembrance is the only acceptable graveyard for the victims of the Holocaust. Remembrance is more than just sterile repetition of past events. Remembrance should not be reproductive but instead productive, creating a new future out of respect for and as a tribute to the victims of the Holocaust.

Holocaust education should always be aware of its context. The Holocaust can be taught in a Jewish, a Christian, a humanistic, or a pluralistic setting in Israel, the United States, or Europe (with its different national contexts: German, Belgian, Dutch, and so on) and in the first, the second, or the third world. In order for Holocaust education not to be(come) ideological, each setting should integrate those particular aspects of the Holocaust that most challenge its own ideological presuppositions. Thus descendants of Holocaust victims should be open to the universal aspects of the Holocaust and attentive to the perspective of the perpetrators. Descendants of the perpetrators should be open to the unique aspects of the Holocaust and especially to the perspective of the victims. Believers should be attentive to the challenges of "death of God" theology (theodicy). In a humanistic setting, the crisis of Western ethics (anthropodicy) should be analyzed. Jews should be careful about "victimism"; Christians, about apologetically refusing guilt (*We Remember*).

MORAL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE: THREE DANGERS

A New Ethical Absolutism

Nazism can be seen as a (pseudo-)ethical movement. It (mis)used ethical categories. It was the outcome of a certain Manichaean ethics, which used the dual categories of good and evil. In Nazism, the complexity of good

and evil was reduced to a simple confrontation between absolute good and absolute evil, God and the devil, the Übermensch and the Untermensch.

Nazism can also be seen as a (pseudo)religious movement. It was the outcome of a certain exclusivist theology, which used a concept of God's being with us (*Gott mit uns*). For Nazism, man was not created in the image of God; rather, God was created in the image of the collective identity of (Aryan) man.

In response to the Holocaust, post-Shoah ethics and moral education should make clear the complexity of good and evil. Even if Manichaeism is an interesting pedagogical and ethical tool for teaching the Holocaust, a Manichaean presentation of the Holocaust reproduces and imitates the logic of Nazi evil itself. Nazi ideology did not allow ethical complexity, and post-Shoah ethical education is not necessarily a good thing in and of itself; if it feeds Manichaean ideology, it can even establish the mentality for a new genocide. Thus the first challenge for post-Shoah education is to avoid the danger of a new ethical absolutism by recognizing that, in the name of the Holocaust, one can become so fanatical in searching for the good that one commits new evils. If ethics excludes any degree of doubt, dialogue, discussion, attention to gray zones, balancing pros and cons, and so on, post-Shoah education can itself become the source of new violence, perpetrated in the name of the good.

A New Religious Absolutism

In response to the Holocaust, post-Shoah Christian religion and religious education should find ways to transcend exclusivist theology—and, specifically in relation to Judaism, to transcend supersessionism. The central question of religious education after Auschwitz should be "How can we affirm the truth of our own faith tradition without denying the religious claims of the Other?" Post-Shoah religious education, like post-Shoah ethical education, is not necessarily a good thing in and of itself; if it feeds exclusivist theology and new theologies of substitution, it, too, can even promote the mentality for a new genocide. Thus the second challenge for post-Shoah education is to avoid the danger of a new religious absolutism by recognizing that, in the name of the Holocaust, one can so absolutely affirm one's own religious truth, one's (imagined) sup-

port by a particular God, that post-Shoah education can itself become the source of new violence, perpetrated in the name of a God who is "with us." If any degree of otherness, challenge, questioning, heteronomy, or pluralism is excluded from our post-Shoah discussions of religion, we can again commit evil in the name of religion.

Ethical and Religious Relativism

The third challenge for post-Shoah education is to avoid the danger of ethical and religious relativism. After Auschwitz, it is just as dangerous to say that all ways are the same (ethical and theological relativism) as to say that there is only one way (ethical and religious absolutism, or Manichaeism). Ethical and religious teaching should be oriented toward the discovery of a basic moral norm or standard according to which all ethical values, cultures, ideologies, and religions can be tested and criticized, and through which individual human beings and whole societies can be oriented toward the good and/or the Good. Therefore, Western civilization must turn to its Jewish roots because Judaism brought and still brings the perspective of Other(ness) into the picture. And Auschwitz is an adequate starting point because no matter how people differ in their ethical views, they will almost unanimously condemn the Holocaust as a most brutal denial of the "face of the Other." Indeed, those who do not condemn the Holocaust place themselves automatically outside the sphere of humanity. The confrontation with the Holocaust can teach students that morality is not just a matter of personal preference and that not every moral claim can be deconstructed, but that there are basic moral norms and values, which are not matters of individual choice and taste but which have categorical meanings.

Post-Holocaust education should not reduce religion to ethics; that is, it should not present Judaism and Christianity only in ethical terms. Everything is ethical; but, even after Auschwitz, ethics is not everything! Ethics and religion alike have their own interrelated, complementary, but distinctive meanings. Moral education after Auschwitz should embrace and move beyond both the moral emotion of pure horror and the moral rationality of pure cool analysis. To be sure, the shocking confrontation

with the cruel facts of the Shoah is not automatically frightening or guaranteed to educate people. But the opposite is also true: rational analysis can kill empathy and moral feelings (such as anger, indignation, helplessness, despair, fear, engagement, and hope) as well as moral identification with the victims, and it can open the way to moral relativism. Narratives are appropriate pedagogical tools for creating adequate moral attitudes because they engage both emotion and reason and because they are unique instruments for bridging the gap between the general and the abstract, and between more pessimistic and more optimistic perspectives. They can be chosen carefully, in light of the students' particular stage of growth. Stories should be given preference over pictures of the Holocaust. Moral education in particular should be very careful with the use of wellknown photographs showing extreme aspects of the Holocaust (piles of corpses, sadistic acts, lamps made from human skin, and so forth) because such photos quickly reduce the Holocaust to a cliché, and they risk replacing long-term moral imagination with endless and, in the long term, "tiresome" repetitions of what is always the same. As Roland Barthes argues, "In confrontation with such pictures, our own evaluation is taken away. Someone has already been horrified, thought, and judged in our place: the photographer has left nothing for us but our duty of moral accord."9 Showing crimes against humanity is not in itself a weapon against those crimes. Moreover, it is important to speak not only about genocide in general and the Holocaust in particular but also about more moderate forms of evil, which do not lead to genocide, and of which Jews are not the only victims. Otherwise, we risk damaging students' sense of proportion. When students are exposed too frequently and too exclusively to the most extreme examples of evil, they run the risk of becoming relativistic toward more "ordinary" forms of evil, and even of becoming, in the long run, insensitive to extremes that have become "ordinary." Constant exposure to extreme forms of evil can destroy sensitivity to degrees of immorality in daily forms of subtle evil. It is also important to try to bridge the gap between the Holocaust, on the one hand, and contemporary society and daily life, on the other—for example, by identifying Manichaeism in television programs or supersessionism in contemporary religious-political conflicts. The Holocaust was not the work of devils, monsters, or animals but of human beings. We should warn

not only about the final steps in extreme genocidal evil but also and especially about the first steps leading in that direction. Otherwise, we risk the possibility that students will be horrified, will not understand, and will turn back home, but with nothing having changed in their moral attitudes—or in political life within democracy.

Religion cannot be reduced to ethics after Auschwitz. Religion in particular is challenged by the Holocaust, but it can also make its own positive contribution to post-Shoah education. Religion and ethics are deeply interrelated, but they are not identical. Auschwitz made clear how religion without ethical concern, and ethics without a transcendent point of reference outside one's own community, can contribute to extreme forms of immorality. Today there is sometimes a tendency to replace Jewish and Christian religion, centered on the biblical God, with a kind of alternative civil religion of the Holocaust that is centered on the commandment "Never again!" But Judaism and Christianity alike have a much richer and longer tradition, which cannot be transmitted exclusively by reference to the Holocaust. The Holocaust as a cult or creed is not a substitute for traditional religion. In Judaism and Christianity, centrality is not given to evil but to Go(o)d; not only to repentance and remembrance but also to healing and forgiveness; not only to immorality but also to reconciliation; not only to despair but also to hope. Each religion possesses a rich legacy of and expertise in stories, metaphors, symbols, and rituals to help people and cultures repent, remember, confess, mourn, forgive, and reconcile—to open a perspective "beyond Auschwitz" without denying the "after Auschwitz."

NOTES

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- 8. Emanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Nijhoff: Den Haag, 1971), 173.
 - 9. Roland Barthes, Eloge de la désobéissance (Paris: Le Pommier, 1999).