Seriousness, Irony and the Mission of Hyperbole

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Abstract: Seriousness is achieved when a speaker effectively moves the audience according to his or her intentions: they take the speaker at his or her own evaluation, they follow the speaker, and they respond appropriately. But seriousness is fragile and subject to countless vicissitudes, illustrated in an encounter with the television evangelist Oral Roberts. I interrogate one of the means used to counter such vicissitudes, hyperbole. Hyperbole may include exaggeration and amplification of all kinds, and may be manifest in deeds as well as words. I follow hyperbole first through 9/11 and the competing ideologies of Salafi Jihadists and the Bush administration, and show how "absolute metaphors" – Blumenberg's term for world-enveloping concepts such as Islamic "oneness" (*tawhid*) or German "history" (*Geschichte*) – are enlisted hyperbolically. I show too how epic narratives are created in part through the use of such concepts. Finally, I show how sacredness, a form of hyperbole, is attributed to the Holocaust in present-day Germany, becoming in effect the founding epic for negative patriotism in the "Berlin Republic", the Federal Republic following reunification. Throughout I argue, and illustrate, how anthropological writing is of necessity ironic, such that irony is far better than "cultural relativism" as an understanding of the anthropological enterprise.

Keywords: Hyperbole, seriousness, irony, cultural relativism, absolute metaphors, 9/11, Jihadism, Holocaust, Germany, collective guilt, Blumenberg.

A Preliminary Encounter

In 1955 (or that's the date stuck in my mind) I was nine, living with Grandma, and the folks across the road bought the first television we had seen. I was allowed to go over with Grandma to watch it sometimes, the big attractions being *I Love Lucy* and — this was

Grandma's favorite — Oral Roberts, the early television evangelist. So far as I could see, this was just an extension of the church and tent meetings Grandma and I habitually attended. First Roberts preached to a congregation (for what seemed a very long time), then (finally) the organ played as he called on people to come down the aisle on their crutches and in wheelchairs and be healed with the laying on of hands. (And they were healed.) At last, by way of peroration, he turned to gaze into the camera, addressed 'you folks at home', and invited us to join him in prayer and be healed. 'Put your hands on the television set', he said….

That brought me up with a jolt. In those days I was in love with physics, and held decided, if unsophisticated, views about electricity and electromagnetic radiation. I was clear that putting your hands on the TV would do nothing, unless you electrocuted yourself. But however it came about, my concern in this essay is with the rift itself, that sudden split of a little world which was one — Oral Roberts, my grandma, and me, united in our attendance to one another— into two. I have written elsewhere of such a state, being torn from a single moral universe into a multiple one, a state captured in Adorno's (and Hegel's) term *Zerrissenheit*, meaning that which is torn, fragmented, broken (Carrithers 2005). In a comment addressed to that 2005 essay, Alcida Rita Ramos encouraged me to expand and strengthen my argument. I wrote there of irony as a central component of an anthropological understanding of *Zerrissenheit*, and she encouraged me to clarify how such anthropological irony differed from the tired notion of cultural relativity. She wrote optimistically that "'turning seemingly unproductive misunderstandings into productive opportunities to deepen our grasp of a world of possibilities [as I had tried to do] is one of the most challenging aspects of doing anthropology" (Ramos 2005:450). These are two of the three challenges I take up here, to respond to Ramos's provocation, and to answer Simon Coleman's invitation to write something of value to scholars of religion. These tasks go well together: there are

few sites where the *Zerrissenheit* among our moral worlds shows itself to be more irreconcilable than in those disagreements we call "religious".

To sketch briefly the direction I want to take, I continue for a bit with the story of Oral Roberts and me. In later years, after finding employment as an anthropologist, I have once or twice recounted the episode with Oral Roberts and the TV to an intimate, relaxed and like-minded audience, perhaps late in the evening. I would tell the story more or less as I did in the first paragraph above, up to "'put your hands on the television set'". I would then pause and conclude with emphasis:

"'And that's how I became an anthropologist!'"

Whatever effect this sally may have had at the time, the point is that this is irony, and indeed shows a side to irony that goes well beyond what Ramos and I discussed in print in 2005. The listener would easily enough catch that irony was afoot by realizing that a nine-year old boy could hardly become an anthropologist. The listener's mind might then search for sense, and could turn up some, or all, of the following.

Anthropologists study the exotic, so the newly-minted anthropologist is suddenly seeing the Christian evangelism, with which he is otherwise so familiar, as strange and exotic.

Anthropologists study the primitive, so Roberts is suddenly cast among the superstitious and the magicians.

Or the very idea of "'becoming" an anthropologist in peculiar circumstances might suggest the peculiarity of anthropology itself, a calling which aspires on Earth to impersonate a visitation from Mars.

Or here's another possibility: anthropologists are detached and scientific to a degree, so the boy found himself on the side of Science. He was on his way to becoming a young Richard Dawkins, a fundamentalist evangelical atheist.

You, the reader, could doubtless add further possibilities, and in any case *there is no reason to think that any inference is excluded*. A performance of irony opens a field of possibilities and so invites the listener/reader to entertain a wide view across the topic and to suggest a range of not necessarily mutually exclusive interpretations at once.

Irony is a stance of detachment. I once heard a lecturer describe how certain sorts of literary irony "'hover" (*schweben*) above the material described, and that is part of what I suggest here: the view from aloft is broader, even if never perfect or final. I also want to argue that this "hovering" can in itself be eloquent and strongly expressive, forcing on its recipients a fuller significance of the tensions in a situation. Kenneth Burke made the canonical statement about irony when he wrote that

> Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of this total form (this "perspective of perspectives"), none of the participating "sub-perspectives" can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another. (Burke 1969 [1945]:512.)

Burke then goes on to say that such irony produces

> a "resultant certainty" of a different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory* (as were we to think of the resultant certainty or "perspective of perspectives" as a noun, and to think of all the contributory voices as necessary modifiers of that noun) (1969 [1945]:513; his italics).

I take Burke to have set out the authoritative portrayal, and I use it here. Note, however, three features of that portrayal. First, irony has no necessary link to humour; it may appear in many forms. Second, the quotation marks around that "resultant certainty'" render it less than certain: if one's perspective, even though it be a "perspective of perspectives," is so necessarily modified, then it suggests that one's ironic perspective is no longer apodictic, certain and final, and in its turn may become a source of further irony. Third, Burke's description applies to an extended *performance* of irony, which includes dialectic, in which two or more sub-certainties are interrogated at length. I will argue that anthropology, including the anthropology of religion, is an extended performance of irony. In this respect I owe a good deal as well to James Fernandez, who pointed out that "irony can be expected in situations of unequal power when discourses, interests, or cultures clash" (Fernandez 2000:4). Since in fact such heterogeneity of "discourses, interests, or cultures" accompanies social life in all but the most circumscribed situations, I suggest that an anthropologist's ironic performance is a faithful and fitting response to the general run of social life.

For the moment, though, let me just tie off the anecdote of Oral Roberts and the TV set. Among the "sub-certainties"— wonderful coinage! — we have Roberts's certainty, Grandma's certainty, the young scientist's certainty, and then at a much later date the certainties arising from the anthropologist's, and his audience's, ideas about anthropology. But there has also been a "development," namely the making of that original raw experience in front of the TV into a narrated, interpersonally recognizsed and cultivated condition, at least in the small circle of the ironising adult anthropologist and his midnight audience. In that circle, Roberts can now not be taken at Roberts's own evaluation.

The Argument Rehearsed

Or, to put it more dramatically, *my audience and I no longer take Roberts seriously*. Let me first be clear what taking him seriously would mean: it would mean that, like my Grandma, I would respond to Roberts as he would wish; I would be moved as he would wish; my thoughts would follow his; the energy, *energeia*, of his eloquence would work on me; I would participate fully and wholeheartedly as a member of his audience; his single certainty would hold sway; I would not sit there questioning, distracted.

In what follows I pursue the contrast between seriousness and irony. I first encountered the need to think this contrast through at a presentation I gave in Mainz, in Germany, in 2002. There I described, in terms I then thought unexceptionable, how certain Germans had used irony to evaluate recent situations, both the situation in West Germany after the Holocaust and that in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. To my surprise and dismay, though, this presentation met with heated, outraged objections among a couple of German scholars in the audience. Their view was apparently that, in mentioning irony in connection with the Holocaust at all, I was failing to take the Holocaust seriously. It was as though I had *mocked* something holy. I was left speechless by their response, and it has taken me ten years to reply. This is the third challenge I take up.

Here I present a fragment of theory, setting seriousness and irony in tension against one another in a way that I hope will be an adequate reply to those objectors. I begin by suggesting that seriousness is in fact fragile, and must be defended and promoted by various means. I mention a range of seriousness tools, but I single out hyperbole, i.e. exaggeration or magnification, as one of particular significance. I address these matters first in the setting of the destruction of the World Trade Center by Islamic jihadists, and then in contemporary post-Holocaust Germany. Across these contexts the notions of irony, seriousness, and hyperbole touch sometimes on matters recognizably religious, and sometimes not; sometimes what seems most religious, notably *das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto's idea of "the holy," appears in a

notably secular form; and sometimes what seems most markedly secular, historical narrative, takes on an absolute, nearly religious, character.

And throughout I demonstrate how anthropology's essentially ironic nature is altogether more robust than any notion of cultural relativism would suggest.

Seriousness

I start from a facet of originary human sociality, its character as an intensely interactive flow of events which is always subject to retrospective interpretation, but whose future is always uncertain. This plight was captured neatly by Kierkegaard, who wrote that "'philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause — that it must be lived forward.'" (Hong and Hong eds. 1995:12). On the largest scale the unpredictability lies in unforeseen irruptions into the human sphere, such as disease or natural disaster. For Kierkegaard himself that uncertainty was revealed on a smaller scale, in a precarious, and then failed, courtship. But the worm of uncertainty burrows into human life even more immediately and intimately, at the very moment of any human interaction. Paul Friedrich put it plainly in his essay on "Ironic Irony": "all…instances [of interaction], given the dialogic situation of all communication, involve some slippage or lack of fit between the intended meaning and what was understood, between what was anticipated and actually happened" (2001:228). The seeds of irony — the possibility of finding that what is said is more, or different, than what is meant — lie in wait in every exchange. Yes, a conversation can go smoothly and well…but oh how many ways can it go wrong?

It is no wonder, then, that our human repertoire contains a rich variety of tools for dealing with misinterpretation, diversion, and distraction. Everyday conversation, for example, is rich in little routines which conversational analysts call 'repair', the practised way in which

interlocutors constantly adjust and correct possible or revealed misunderstandings from moment to moment, from second to second (e.g. ,Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). On one hand it is remarkable that discourse is so vulnerable to derailment; on the other, it is equally remarkable that we possess such useful and well-practicsed procedures to mend it.

The techniques of conversational repair are, so to speak, tiny machines of seriousness, but our repertoire includes much more elaborate machines as well, routines which compel extended performances of mutual seriousness in an attempt to preclude confusion, misunderstanding, impertinence or irrelevance. The sociologist Dirk Baeker discusses some of these machines in just the terms I have in mind:

> You have to deploy social institutions to make serious communication possible. No-one will doubt that serious communication occurs in court, at the doctor's, in the academic seminar, during pastoral care [*Seelsorge*], in the classroom, or in commercial negotiations. Everyone means what he says there, and says what he means. If you look more closely, though, you see that the saying and the meaning [what you say], and above all the agreement of saying and meaning in these settings are pre-programmed. It is the pre-programming that is taken seriously. And vice versa, the seriousness functions only because it is pre-programmed. Nothing will be more quickly outed in these settings than the joke, the irony, the silliness. They don't belong there, they make no impression, they change nothing. They stick in the throat. In these situations you take on roles. And you violate the seriousness of the roles at the cost of disregarding the situation. You are judge or defendant, doctor or patient, professor or student, priest or church member, teacher or pupil, buyer or seller. There's no quibbling. There's nothing to joke about. There's nothing to laugh about. It is to be taken seriously. (Baeker 2000:390; my translation.)

In fact the proliferating possibilities of misunderstanding — minor, comic, or tragic — permeate the very stuff of thought. We not only "live forward," but we also "interpret forward," that is, we use abstracting concepts to grasp and communicate a view of experience beyond what is present, beyond immediacy and into the future, to tame the ramifying possibilities of what could happen and achieve a taken-for-granted understanding that is broad enough to see things as more or less predictable and reliable. Yet, as Hans Blumenberg observed, our tools for generalization and prediction ('foresight', *Prävention*) are themselves fragile and approximate. 'Interpreting forward' is not necessarily any more certain than 'living forward', for any concept (*Begriff*) is best understood on the analogy of a hunter's trap. A trap (or concept) "'is directed to the shape and size, the behaviour and movements, of an expected, but absent object, which is to be brought within reach … in the future'" (Blumenberg 2007:10; my translation). Hence "'the concept [or trap] must have enough indeterminacy …, it needs enough space to play, so it can capture whatever concrete [thing] is to be subjected to it'" (2007:12; my translation).

But that indeterminacy in the trap, or concept, has a consequence. You might want to capture a beaver, but get a rabbit; a lobster, but get a crab. Similarly, a concept may do well enough for the most part, but still miss its prey, as is so well demonstrated in the life of the English term "person." On one hand, "person" can be used unproblematically (Question: is that a person there in the undergrowth? Answer: no, it's a bear). But on the other, this common or garden variety Anglophone term/concept continues to live an unsteady and disputatious life in society. For example, at what point does something become a person? Some, followers of the Pope, assert that personhood begins at the very moment of conception, while others place that moment later, even after birth (Singer 2000). Are animals persons, or at least some animals (e.g. Carrithers, Bracken and Emery 2011)? Can a corporation be a person? The United States Supreme Court decided recently that it can, at

least in that it possesses the right to free speech. Is someone in a permanent vegetative coma a person? And so forth….

For Blumenberg, all concepts are indeterminate at the edges. They possess a looseness aimed to the future and a world of possibilities, a "too-much" (*Zu-Viel*), a bagginess, in comparison to any concrete matter lying to hand. "An armoury of [conceptual] instruments for possibility must be far more capacious, and more subtle, than one for pressing [immediate] 'reality'" (Blumenberg 2007:17). All concepts are candidates for re- and misinterpretation.

In the work from which I have taken Blumenberg's argument, *The Theory of Nonconceptuality* (*Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*), he uses this contrast between what is immediate and graspable on the one hand, and what is conceptual on the other, to explore the peculiarity of human thinking in its mix of power and fragility. This contrast can help us, I think, to get a clearer picture of what I am calling seriousness. The most elementary form of seriousness appears in what Wittgenstein famously described in *Philosophical Investigations* as elementary "language games": military commands, for example, or workman's directions to assistants. Here seriousness is tightly bound by the materials-and-practices at hand: when a bricklayer calls for bricks on a building site, nothing else but bricks will do as an answer; when a surgeon calls for a scalpel, it is a scalpel she wants, not a discussion. Here the challenge to seriousness might be mispronunciation or mishearing perhaps, beginner's ignorance, or perhaps clumsiness, but conceptual ambiguity, irony, or fanciful imagination hardly play a part. In these settings Baeker's pre-programming comprises in part a training which depends, not on eloquence, clarity or cogency of address, but on the disciplined drilling of the apprentice in respect to what is immediate and tangible. In bricklaying I mean my order seriously, it is taken seriously, and the response, a load of bricks brought to me to work with, is seriously achieved.

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Here we are dealing with orders or requests, but not yet concepts: while you are laying bricks, abstractions have no role. Concepts, and their frailties, begin to show themselves in another venue, the classroom, where sooner or later the teacher must move away from command and rote drill to the less tangible. If you teach ancient Indian history, you are immediately pitched into the necessarily intangible, for if you mention Ashoka, he is not only absent from the classroom, but you have also got to introduce the concept of "emperor," and so of "empire". If you teach the nature of federal government to American children, the organizations and principles are impalpable and abstract, however many diagrams you draw.

In other social settings — courtrooms and government institutions, NGOs, temples, mosques or churches — concepts, however intangible, are nevertheless essential to the activity. Some allusion to "the law" must appear in courts, some mention of "the people" appears in most representative assemblies, and some reference to "the teaching," and to the "body of the faithful" or "the *umma*," in churches or mosques respectively. These abstractions are then connected to further, master concepts, concepts that tie together a huge range of mutually entangled ideas and images. Such knotting concepts include "justice", "freedom", "sustainable development", "Christianity", "human rights", "*islam*" ("obedience"), "socialism", "democracy", or "the *dharma*" ("the teaching" in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism). Such nodal, master concepts may appear only sparingly in actual discourse, but are often promulgated at key points to furnish general orientation to the future, to evoke the wider net of related ideas, to suggest or express ultimate values, and often simultaneously to legitimate the speaker's authority and seriousness.

Because such concepts are often enough evoked seriously, and heard seriously, they contribute in some part to the apparent continuity of institutions and to the relative success of the plans and projects for the future embodied through them (Carrithers 1990); yet we will not fully grasp the character of such concepts until we also understand how vulnerable they

are to failure in address. The list I give above is an expanded version of Gallie's (1956) list of what he called 'essentially contested concepts': none has a clear and agreed definition, all are topics of dissension and reinterpretation, each has been variously conceived over its career, and any present use will be too fertile and commodious to achieve unambiguous certainty about the future they may be used to motivate. Even when received and acted upon seriously, such concepts remain prone to slippage and therefore are exposed to the possibility of irony. Friedrich summarized such slippage neatly in these terms: "'[the potential for] irony may be defined provisionally as the infinite lacks of fit between what is intended to be felt and understood and what is actually understood and felt in speaker versus addressee, word versus deed, or theory versus practice'" (2001:226).

My point in leading to the dizzying prospect of 'infinite lacks of fit' is just this: bricklaying is anchored to the ground by the weight and tactile rectilinearity of the bricks, the finitude of the project's motivation — a future wall! — and the spare practicality of the communications. Any 'lacks of fit' would be swiftly remedied. But with those matters in which slippery concepts take the place of bricks we have perforce to work much harder to make the fit and keep communication and performance serious. Especially with those nodal concepts, dealing as they do with a general orientation to existence, we need somehow to clothe these concepts with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations they propose seem uniquely realistic.

You will recognize, I think, that in that last sentence I have pirated key words and phrases from Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion ([1966] 1973:90). When he wrote, nearly fifty years ago, Geertz suggested that the work of making the intangible as tangible as possible, the "clothing" of the concepts with an "aura of factuality," was achieved by a "system of symbols." That "system of symbols" is, in retrospect, a curiously abstract and bloodless idea in itself. But Geertz's own practice, as well as the force of subsequent

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scholarship, suggests what I am arguing here: where these slippery and insubstantial concepts of existence attain successful seriousness, they do so in part through entanglements with the more palpable and sensuous realm of experience. Some examples: Csordas (1990) has stressed corporeality and embodiment; J.Z. Smith (1987) has written of the meticulous use of place; Bruner (1986) and Carrithers (1992) have written of the persuasiveness of vivid stories; and Bellah (2011) has reminded us of the importance of pre-symbolic experience and play. In writing of worship in southern Digambar Jainism in India (Carrithers 2000), I found that 'exuberance' was the best way to think about the lush and prolific melange of practices, postures, stories, places, characters and attitudes which evoke distinctive Digambar concepts of existence; and I think 'exuberance' expresses very well the fertile imaginativeness with which we humans create entanglements between what is immediately felt and at hand and what is more distant, speculative, and possible rather than present.

Hyperbole

I now take up one thread from among the many which are wielded to evoke or compel seriousness: hyperbole. In the first instance hyperbole is a figure of speech, a figure of exaggeration or extravagance, overstatement rather than understatement, making for vividness, emphasis, or strength of feeling. In a recent involuntary conversation undertaken in a local hospital waiting room, for example, my interlocutor was at pains to convey his understanding of immigration to me. "Immigration" — he was against it — is itself a fairly colourless and distant concept; but my interlocutor rendered it more immediate and dramatic for me by speaking of "hordes of them", "flooding into England", "taking us over". These are quintessentially extravagant, hyperbolic terms which, in part through that very extravagance, have a far more sensuous and experiential resonance than "immigration." His hyperbole

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expressed with vigour his own seriousness, and it impressed strongly on me that I, too, was meant to take his view seriously.

Here, however, I want to move the notion of hyperbole beyond verbal eloquence alone. I take the inspiration for this from the penetrating insight of Ralph Cintron in an essay titled "Inventions of Hyperbolic Culture" (2009). Cintron's is a critical ethnography in which he argues that we can identify hyperbole as a marked trait that appears in both material expression and in a pervasive frame of mind in American society. Hyperbole is "the naming of excess and the making of astonishment" (2009:140). He instances the Brooklyn Bridge, built in 1883 and for thirty years the longest steel suspension bridge in the world, and the Empire State Building, completed in 1931 and the tallest building in the world until the completion of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in 1972: these are physical structures, but their expressive face is hyperbolic. The enterprising action that goes with this cultural 'hyperbolic hypermodern', as Cintron puts it, is *invention*, understood not as it once was understood, the Latin *inventio* as skill in the discovery of something already present, but rather as the creation of the new, the innovative, the original, the never-before-seen. This hyperbolic originality then becomes in effect the necessary expressive face of enterprise, embodied in these typical slogans Cintron found on corporate websites:

Verizon Communications: Make progress every day.

American International Group: The freedom to dare.

Boeing: Forever new frontiers.

Duke Energy: We generate what's next.

These express the sensibility which drives the hyperbolic hypermodern.

The World Trade Center was the product of such hyperbole, so much so that the excessive and extravagant became its own justification. At every step in the planning the movers and shakers behind it dealt with challenges by making it ever larger and making greater claims for it (Cintron 2009:146-7; Glanz and Lipton 2002). The guiding spirit of the project was chutzpah: the project leader said that, while President Kennedy would put a man on the moon, this project, now expanded from one building to two, would be the two tallest buildings in the world. They would not only reconfirm New York as the most advanced metropolis in the contemporary world, but their provision of a huge space for financial and related business would certify New York's centrality to the world economy. Any group that opposed it would be "standing in the way of the inevitable march of progress" (Cintron 2009:146). Architects and engineers would devise new methods, new designs, new materials: extravagant innovation. Above all, the Twin Towers, as they came to be called, would express the outsized power that had to be wielded, power to push opposition aside, power to amass and expend the huge sum required, and thus power to compel recognition of the seriousness of the project before the entire world.

The success of the planners' hyperbolic eloquence was written into the subsequent catastrophe. Whatever politico-economic career the Twin Towers enjoyed became irrelevant, for it was their extravagant achievement as the most prominent index of America's global reach which drew the recognition of jihadists. The jihadists' response was hyperbolic as well, though within a very different hyperbolic culture, one not of endless progress and invention, but of apocalyptic finality.

Jihadist Hyperbole

Much of jihadist discourse is extravagant and hyperbolic in a routine and easily recognizsed form. Thus, for example, Osama Bin Laden emanated a statement to the Arab press under the title of the "World Islamic Front" in which he spoke of the "'crusader armies'" which have "swarmed across the [Arabian Peninsula] like locusts, devouring its plantations and growing fat off its riches", and of nations "attacking Muslims like leeches" (Kepel and Milelli 2005:53). This is in the same school of expression as that concerning immigration that I met in the hospital waiting room.

But jihadism presents conceptual hyperbole as well. This is in some perspectives the opposite of hypermodernism. The jihadists consider themselves Salafists, thus identifying themselves with the *salafi*, the original, pure and correct followers of Mohammed. So instead of invoking a self-transcending future, they call on a utopian past. In other respects the jihadists' ideology represents a differentiation not only from Western ideologies, but also from surrounding schools and practices of Islam. In effect, the jihadists took, at each step, the most extravagantly radical and simplifying turn (Wiktoriwicz 2006; Turner 2010; Wiktoriwicz and Kalthenthaler 2006; Wagemakers 2009). Thus the distinction between the *dar al Islam* and the *dar al Harb*, that is, between the 'territory of Islam' and 'territory of war', is one which is given many meanings by Muslim theorists, but for the extreme jihadists it came to mean the difference between themselves, the tiny band of strictly observant Muslims, and the rest of the world, including the backsliding rulers and peoples of ostensibly Islamic nations as well as the greatest enemies, Israel and the United States. The plot line that went with this was one of constant battle, in which there could be no compromise: "jihad and the rifle alone, no negotiations, no conferences, no dialogues" (quoted in Turner 2010:545). This division comprehends the entire universe: attitudes and acts fall into a strict dichotomy, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, loyalty or disavowal, either total loyalty to Allah and strict Islam, or a wholesale betrayal (Wagemakers 2009; Kepel and Milelli 2008). Hence if you demonstrate

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your loyalty and thus participate in the battle, you live on, past death, wreathed in holiness. But if you do not, you have chosen disavowal, and Hell is your destiny.

The hyperbolic character of this dualism is nowhere better exemplified than in the extreme jihadists' refinement of the notion of defensive war. Widespread and well supported opinion in the Islamic world is that jihad as physical conflict, rather than spiritual and inward struggle, is only justified if it is defensive, and in any case that women, children and the elderly must not be harmed. The jihadists, however, drove their interpretation eventually to the extreme point that everyone who is not for them are against them, and so are justly exposed to deadly attack (Wiktorowicz 2006; Ibrahim 2007).

Yet for the extreme jihadists this Manichean dichotomy, running through the entirety of creation, is founded in an even more comprehensive oneness. Thus Ayman Al-Zawahiri, a leading theorist for Al Qaeda, summed up the jihadist creed as it flowed from the previous work of the widely influential Sayyid Qutb:

He [Qutb] affirmed that the issue of unification [tawhid] in Islam is important and that the battle between Islam and its enemies is primarily an ideological one over the issue of unification. It is also a battle over to whom authority and power should belong—to God's course and the shari'ah, to man-made laws and material principles, or to those who claim to be intermediaries between the Creator and mankind. . . . This affirmation greatly helped the Islamic movement to know and define its enemies.

Sayyid Qutub's [sic] call for loyalty to God's oneness and to acknowledge God's sole authority and sovereignty was the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad. The bloody chapters of this revolution continue to unfold day after day. (Quoted in Wiktorowicz 2006:80)

In this perspective the concept of tawhid, oneness, is made all-embracing, reaching from the unity of the godhead to the application of that oneness — meaning in effect a monolithic understanding and measure of judgment — through all spheres of human life, moral, legal, spiritual or political (Wagemakers 2009). The jihadists' understand this notion of oneness not to contradict, but rather to underwrite the dualism of 'our' good versus the enemy's evil. They are two sides of one coin. Beside this global certainty, there can be no sub-certainty, and beyond this totality there is nothing: *ne plus ultra*. The extravagant, hyperbolic consequences of this concept is plain in Al-Zawahiri's message: "the bloody chapters of this revolution continue to unfold day after day."

For my argument, of course, this hyperbolic certainty of oneness is a sub-certainty, and following Blumenberg, it is a concept, and therefore prey to the fragility of concepts. But it is also a particular kind of concept, namely one which refers to a totality. Good examples of such a totality are 'world' or 'reality' or 'being', all words which, for the English speaker, suggest an entity which acts as a ground on which more detailed or palpable discourse may proceed, and beyond which discourse cannot proceed. Other examples might be 'life', or 'history', or 'the self', insofar as these are taken as a whole, forming the horizon within which a whole world's worth of detail may be contained. Such terms are, from Blumenberg's perspective, *absolute metaphors* (2000:64-65). These concepts cannot have an indexical relation to what they signify: I cannot point to them, I cannot display them, I cannot direct your attention unambiguously to them, except by further metaphor. Thus the concept 'life', taken as one's accumulating experience as seen from a first person perspective, is essentially indeterminate and undefined; we have access to it only through analogy, such as 'life is a journey'. Similarly, history, taken by many contemporary societies as the process of salient and publicly recounted events which create a present reality, forms at once the horizon for all

present events and a totality which is beyond description or specification. The common comment, "history will judge", certifies at once the absolute character of the concept and its opacity to further thought: for the judgment of history will be final and decisive, yet who today can say what that judgement will be?

So absolute metaphors also have the capacity to put an end to further dispute. Thus the oneness of Allah, in the jihadists' version at least, forms the ground beyond which nothing is thinkable. It marks an end to further argument. Its certainty cannot be overtrumped; it comprehends both description and prescription, such that everything — an everything that concentrates on human acts — is both rightly understood and rightly judged. In this respect the jihadists' ideology calls to mind the Indic notion of *dharma*, which is both a description of reality and a prescription for right action within reality. Yet finally, despite what may seem rigidity, such concepts are especially plastic, for their abstraction and generality can capture and digest any unanticipated ideas and actions that may stray into their jaws. When wielded as the jihadists do, such concepts lend their users absolute authority.

Crusader Hyperbole

The Towers' destruction drew in turn a hyperbolic reply, the message of 'shock and awe', the American Defence Secretary's phrase which condensed into a single quintessence all that the hypermodern military forces of the US would later visit on Iraq. But there was another hyperbole evoked in the American response as well. In the widely quoted 2002 State of the Union Address which became the charter for America's extravagant violence, George W. Bush spoke freely of 'evil', most prominently in his characterization of the 'Axis of Eevil'. With that term he reached the edge of his projected moral universe: by linking the supposed opponents with the Nazis and so with the consummate crime of the Holocaust, nothing could

be worse than this evil, nothing could be more serious. In that respect Bush wielded a concept which echoes the finality of evil as projected in the nearly Manichean dualism of the extreme jihadists.

However Bush's speech could not achieve quite the same totalizing effect as the ideology of the jihadists, because there was no single opposite to pair explicitly with this 'evil'. The chief contrast Bush used in the speech was with 'freedom', which is mentioned fourteen times. It is true that, within the bounds of that speech, as in a great deal of the speechifying that followed, the concept of 'freedom' was used as a hyperbolic certifier of seriousness. Yet the notion of 'freedom', in the setting of American politico-religious discourse, is not equivalent to 'the good', and indeed the concept of freedom cannot reach to finality or exhaustiveness, for those qualities are reserved for expressly religious concepts and practices under the notion of 'freedom of religion'. It could only be left implicit that Christian ideologists could complete the total circle and compare the evil manifest in the jihadists with the good of the Christian God.

That the Bush government's metaphysical reasonings were bound to be thus limited was demonstrated in an earlier episode. Within two weeks of the attack on the World Trade Center, the military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan was announced under the title 'Operation Infinite Justice'. This title did close the circle, so to speak, by offering a Manichean opposite, 'infinite justice', to match the terminal evil attributed to Al Qaeda. But the title also brought instant objections — these were from from Islamic clerics, but they could as well have been made by exponents of any of the Abrahamic religions, all of which have a notion of the difference between perfect divine justice and the flawed justice practiced by human beings. The Bush government quickly fell back from its unsupportable presumption, changed the title to 'Operation Enduring Freedom', and left the even more hyperbolic grandiloquence to Al Qaeda. Bush had also casually mentioned the word

'crusade' in relation to the prospective operation, but he was quickly corrected: the jihadists might allow themselves a holy war, but not the Bush regime. Yet in any case the fertile phrase, 'Axis of Eevil', was already enough to work with, since it evoked a decisive extreme, a *ne plus ultra* of wickedness, a concept already well established for the contemporary North Atlantic audience.

Interim Balance

Let me pause for a moment. I note, first, that the concept of evil set out here, namely evil as a metaphysical absolute, does not necessarily have a counterpart in other ethnographic settings; it does not represent anything like a cultural universal, despite its seemingly universal reach. Thus, for example, the renouncer religions of India, Buddhism and Jainism, possess richly developed concepts of good action and correspondingly a rich vocabulary of things that people can do wrong, or that can go wrong. But the absolute sense of evil as a presence in itself, and as the opposite of absolute good, is absent. It is easy to see why: the monotheistic notion of a single absolute Godhead is also absent, so there is no good-in-itself with which to compare a notion of evil-in-itself. Something similar can be said of India's theistic religions: though divinities take a role in them far more salient than in the renouncer religions, these divinities are many and various, and tend to have power rather than goodness as their salient attribute. Where something resembling monotheism does appear, for example in forms of Vedanta, the functional opposite of "divine reality" tends to be ignorance or illusion. Here is an absolute metaphor, sometimes referred to as Brahman, the very ground of being, where good and evil are far less salient than in the Abrahamic cases. From that perspective the concept of evil suggested by Bush requires prior monotheistic grounding in West Asia, not South Asia.

Note, too, that, though the hyperboles of Al Qaeda and successors, and especially of Bush and successors, had huge effect in a physics of death and ill-being, they also furnished vivid textual, ocular and aural Spectacle, narratives broadcast to distant worldwide audiences by today's prodigious achievements of printed, taped, photographic and cinematic mediation (Debord 1994[1967]). The jihadist's messages were addressed, for example, to the whole nation of Saudis, or to all Muslims, or to the entire West through figureheads such as George W. Bush or the Queen of England (Kepel and Milelli 2006, Ibrahim 2007). Bush's State of the Union Address was similarly addressed. As Spectacle, the stories, and the concepts these performances render memorable, took on a life far beyond any single theater of operations. They formed epic matters, like the 'matter of Troy', treasuries of story seeds (Carrithers 2009), images and characters, both individual and collective, which had the potential to run and run as sources for imaginative reinterpretation in later ages, not only by poets but also by men and women of action. And, far more than the ancient matter of Troy, the matter of 9/11 is still molten and moving. The raw material of damage and reaction still furnishes fresh motives and leads to new reasonings and new acts, and hence new plots and subplots which spin off unforeseeably. There is, as yet, no end in sight; we are *in medias res*, we are in the middle of things.

In saying that the Spectacle of 9/11 is matter for epic, I also suggest that the magnification of scale found in the hyperbolic Twin Towers and their destruction runs throughout the subsequent events and reasonings. In addressing themselves to the greatest audiences possible — audiences which comprehended not only those now alive but also posterity —, the protagonists speak, and frame their projected actions and reactions, in the most solemn and grandiloquent register, in both a narrowly linguistic and a wider conceptual sense. The conceptual vocabularies in particular evoke fecund ideas, such as 'freedom' and 'loyalty-or-disavowal', which offer free scope for huge and comprehensive application, while

the absolute metaphors refer beyond the limits of the quotidian experienced world to authoritative totalities. Those acting and acted upon within these swelling narratives find themselves subjected to a logic of seriousness, whether they accept the reasoning or not. The motivating stories draw in further participants through the expanding scope of their reference and their ability to accommodate identifications of persons far beyond those at the sites of destruction themselves. Indeed, to extent that your person contains hints that a third party might identify as, say, Muslim or Christian, Western or Eastern — perhaps at an airport — , you may find yourself plotted into this epic, willy-nilly.

Still, Kierkegaard's comment — understanding backward, but living forward — is relevant. In retrospect the machine of 9/11 and its disastrous consequences can be described as a narrative unity, a coherent plot line beginning well before the event itself and rolling on indefinitely into the future. Indeed the term and the topic, '9/11', already presupposes a narrative coherence, even though that coherence might appear in sharply varying forms and evaluations among different commentators, one side or another, lay or scholarly. Yet we can easily retrieve, from among that perceived inevitability, moments of other possibilities, alternate interpretations, which were entirely plausible as people 'lived forward' at the time, and which reveal a far less uniform and compelling texture in events. Two linked acts of magnification, for example, were necessary to provide reason in the US and UK for the destruction in Iraq: first, Saddam Hussein needed to be wrapped into a larger and more threatening conspiracy of Islamic evil alongside the jihadists, and he had to be inflated into the possessor of 'weapons of mass destruction'. These worked at least long enough to get the war in Iraq started, and to give an expressive face to the use of systematically destructive power. Yet the very energy, effort and expressive skill that went into this hyperbole betrays at the same time how many could be disinclined to take the argument seriously and how great and various the opposition could be.

The point I want to take forward is just this: the trajectory, whether successful, tragic, or both, of any such magnifying, encompassing narrative is accompanied — always, inevitably, and especially because of the magnitude of its aspiration — by the lurking awareness of those 'infinite lacks of fit' which may occur between its expression, its reception, and a reaction among its audience.

The Past is not even Past

Though I did not phrase it thus at the time, the topic of my presentation in Mainz in 2002 was less about a central serious Spectacle being driven through against a host of sub-certainties, than about the sub-certainties themselves; and it was, I think, that emphasis which may have dismayed some of my audience. I now turn to that talk, to the epic matter of the Holocaust, and to a redressing of the balance between the central epic material and the clamouring sub-certainties.

The background to the talk was this: in the course of conversations with participants in East Germany I became aware of a landscape of public culture, that is, the ideas, stories, commonplace phrases and images passed about in print and broadcast media which gave the events of those days, and the newly emerging narrative of the recent past, a scaffolding of intelligibility. This landscape was enhanced, too, in great public performances by the state, including, for example, two legislative commissions of enquiry into the now defunct German Democratic Republic, and the creation of institutions such as the so-called Gauck Commission (*Gauck-Behörde*), named after the figure who was then in charge of the carefully conserved files of the Stasi, the East German secret police. These were huge, and hugely expensive, public acts and institutions, in total far outstripping in scale anything similar in post-socialist Eastern Europe, and were worth considering in that very peculiarity.

I came late to these events, but was just able to catch the last such performance, the creation in 1997 of what the German official translator calls the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED [East German Communist Party] Dictatorship (*Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur*). Central to the conceptual vocabulary manifest in this foundation was one idea in particular: *Aufarbeitung.* Does *Aufarbeitung* equal 'reappraisal', as the above translator put it? Well, yes, and the purpose of the foundation is to 'reappraise', that is, to research, preserve, and publish materials about the GDR, in the first instance from the viewpoint of the citizens' movement (*Bürgerbewegung*) which brought down the Wall. But to translate is to betray, and the trail of *Aufarbeitung* led into a territory which was far from transparent. A lexicon-style definition of *Aufarbeitung* might give 'working through', as one might work through a backlog of correspondence. But in the newly unified Germany, the backlog was the dark recesses of the secretive East German state, and its citizens' experiences in those recesses, and the working through was public performance. *Aufarbeitung* addresses itself to the general public sphere and to posterity, in lectures, in historical writing to a general or specialist readership, in radio and television broadcasts, and in the revelations of parliamentary commissions and parliamentary deliberations. Such performances are understood to tell the *true* story, the *real* account of what happened, as opposed to the falsified narrative under dictatorship.

Digging more deeply, though, it became clear that *Aufarbeitung* has some striking peculiarities. In the first place, its current meaning was also understood in contrast to another concept, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 'mastering' or 'overcoming the past', as one would master a difficult practical problem. On the face of it, these two figures, 'mastering the past' and 'working through' the past, would seem near synonyms, different metaphors for the same process. The contrast, though, is simply this: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a term routinely used since the late 1950s in West Germany, was suspect to activists in East Germany. It was,

they charged, effectively a *denial* of guilt in respect to the Nazi past, for West Germans had 'mastered' by ceremonial acts which may have recognized the Nazi deeds to an extent, but also buried them by treating them as past, finished, no longer relevant. By contrast, *Aufarbeitung* was understood as a wholesome process, one that would deal with the dictatorial East German past as the West Germans had failed to deal with the Nazi past: the truth would be publicized, reality would be revealed to all, and the memory would be held constantly before the public gaze.

Ah yes, but digging more deeply still, it turned out that both the terms emerged in the late 1950s, and with a similar programs. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* originated with the Christian writer and intellectual, Erich Müller-Gangloff, whose argument was that, at that time, Germans were not dealing with the guilt, not publicly facing and owning up to their crimes, and until they did so their spiritual, social and political health would suffer, individually and collectively. Theodor Adorno, writing in a different idiom and from different experience, but from similar observations, pleaded for a proper *Aufarbeitung* of the past, not what was going on in West Germany at the time, which concentrated on the injuries done to Germans rather than the crimes the Germans had committed. The two writers even wrote in similar light/dark imagery: Müller-Gangloff wrote in 1955 of "'the shadows of an unmastered past'", which "'show themselves more powerful than ever'", while Adorno wrote of "'breaking the spell'" of that past "'through bright consciousness'" (*durch helles Bewußtsein*; Müller-Gangloff quoted in Carrithers 2009: Adorno 1977[1959]:555). But by the 1990s Müller-Gangloff was forgotten, while the concept *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* had become relatively neutral West German journalese for what were in fact ever increasing performances of public contrition for the crimes of the Nazi past or commemoration of the victims in West Germany.

Even in this compact account of those keywords' history the play of different parties and perspectives, of sub-certainty against sub-certainty, is clear enough. The title of my Mainz

talk, based on such serious conceptual play, was "'The Ironic Life of Keywords'" (never published as such, but discussed in Carrithers 2006 and 2009). One example I used was ironic in a straightforward literary sense, in that the writer feigned polite address to the disappearing Communist leadership, while intending a thorough critique (de Bruyn 1994[1990]). Another example displayed the various sub-certainties of the situation in a dialectical style (Adorno 1977[1959]). Insofar as the objectors in my audience felt that irony was inappropriate to my deeply serious topic, I would still say that they were wrong: it was not I who started the irony, but the German public figures whom I quoted.

But in other respects I had a good deal to learn from my critics. For in fact the concept of *Aufarbeitung* — let me use that one term for the common concept behind the two keywords — has developed a powerful and infectious sting which contributed to the epic matter of the Holocaust in Germany. And to understand that, I must for the moment turn to the concept of *holiness*.

Wholly Evil

In 2001 Annegret Ehmann, criticizing the treatment of the Holocaust in German education, wrote that "in the course of the past two decades the concept Holocaust has detached itself from history and become a quasi-mythical, sacred happening of naked Evil" (2001:7; my translation). Similarly, Christoph Dieckmann drew an analogy between the "memory of the Jews' murder" and that of Christ's murder, both being a "horrendous happening from which history [is] defined" (*Die Zeit*, 21 January 1999; my translation). It is a distant echo of this holiness that we hear in Bush's hyperbolic "Axis of Evil" proclamation.

There were expressions of hyperbolic holiness from the beginning of the Holocaust epic. Holiness was attributed to Germans and Germany in the Nazis' songs and literature, and

Hitler's constant lavish and operatic magnification evoked holiness often enough, as when he spoke of the "sacred task" of dealing decisively with the supposed Jewish threat (cited in Safranski 1999:272). In the same style, Himmler, mesmerized by the imagining of a new/ancient Aryan religion, lent a hyperbolic, heroic holiness to the members of the 'task forces' (*Einsatzgruppen*) carrying out mass murder of Jews in Eastern Europe: "most among you know what it means when a hundred corpses lie together, when five hundred lie there, or a thousand lie there…. To have borne up through this and to have remained decent, … that is a glorious page in our history, never written, and never to be written" (cited in Safranski 1999:274).

With the defeat of the Nazis, the value of that hyperbolic holiness switched to the negative. Erich Müller-Gangloff spoke with great solemnity of the Nazis' evil as a spiritual malaise, and particularly of Hitler as "the horrendous in person", the subtitle of a book he began writing in the 1950s (see references in Carrithers 2009). Rüdiger Safranski continues this line of thought today, expressing a common and long-held idea that there was something "demonic" about Hitler — a force of evil expression and persuasion originating beyond the human personality as commonly understood; Hitler was "possessed", subject to "forces of dark and destructive violence" (Safranski 1999:272-278). Safranski specifies his concept of the holy evil as "a separated sphere in which different rules apply than in ordinary life, an elevated place, terrifying and reverence-inspiring at once" (1999:273).

An "elevated place"? We are now very far from Dante's world, where powerful evil lay imprisoned at the bottom of the universe. The concept of holiness at work here may be best understood through Rudolf Otto, whose book *Das Heilige* (2004[1917), translated into English as *The Holy*, argues for a more challenging and capaciously enveloping concept. For him, the holy is a mystery before which one quakes in fear (*mysterium tremendum*); it is fascinating (*fascinans*); it is horrible; astonishing; unapproachable; one is speechless; one

cannot name it; it is incomprehensible. While reverence and worship are appropriate to the holy, they do not reach it. It is irrational; it is beyond conceptual thought.

I think it plain that nothing could be more serious, nor could there be any metaphor more absolute, than this: Otto's is still a concept, but one designed to show that, by displaying the limit of conceptual thought, it gestures metaphorically to some encompassing reality beyond. To understand *the holy* in the present setting, however, we must perform one further operation: we must subtract from his expression the theistic orientation to a divinity, the assumption of a single presence for which he coined the word 'numinous' (*numinos*). In place of the numinous we would set 'the Holocaust' or, in the usage more common in Germany before about 1980, 'Auschwitz', both of which index the epic matter and its accompanying darkness, in whatever horrifying detail the listener/reader may call up.

Let me give two examples of how this sacralizing concept of evil entered public expression. The first is from Adorno's key address of 1959, given before the Coordinating Council for Christian-Jewish Cooperation. He spoke there of the political and psychic pathology created in the mentality of the time, a resolute refusal of German people in general, and public figures in particular, to admit to any guilt for Nazi crimes, and, on the contrary, to regard themselves as the victims. He wrote that 'the attitude (*Gestus*), that everything should be forgiven and forgotten, which would be appropriate to those who experienced injustice, is practiced by the partisans of those who committed it.' He then went on to say that this contradiction is 'occasion enough for reflections *that relate to a region from which such dread still emanates that one hesitates to call it by name*' (1977[1959]:555; my italics, my translation).

In the larger field of Adorno's writing, this passage is unusual precisely in that it evokes an absolute which, elsewhere, is always relativized to some other sub-certainty in Adorno's

pervasively critical and dialectical philosophical style. Here, though, he was addressing a relatively small audience for whom — unlike so many among the German public at that early post-war date — this assertion of seriousness could be taken at face value: whatever else might have been disputed or relativized, this effectively *nameless* horror could not.

For the time being Adorno was one of few, each crying alone in the wilderness. A generation later, by 1980, a wider acceptation of holy evil had taken form. By that time American and Israeli Jews had come to accept those murdered in the Holocaust as *victims*— — a designation that the first generation of survivors and Israeli settlers had rejected (Novick 1999). This then allowed the Holocaust to take on an individuality, as an event separate from the many millions of others killed by the Nazis; and that in turn called forth a variety of theological interpretations, among them that of the Nobel Prize- winning Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, whose cabalistic experience in early life had led him to see the Holocaust on the analogy of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and so as a testimony of the Jews' election by God (Garber and Zuckerman 1989). Such theological details did not translate beyond his Jewish audience, but the notion of a powerful and world-transcending importance in the Holocaust did. And there were further reasons — social-political in the US, geopolitical in Israel — why a terminally and indisputably serious interpretation, a sacralization, of the Holocaust spread in Israel and the US (Novick 1999).

In Germany itself the broadcast of the American television series *Holocaust* in 1979 was seen by a huge audience, and became the occasion for energetic public discussion in the public sphere. The question of the relative 'uniqueness' (*Einmaligkeit, Einzigartigkeit*) of the Holocaust became a public topic: was it comparable to other mass slaughters, such as those perpetrated by Stalin, or by the Turks of Armenians? Or was it in some way incomparable, an event "outside history", a "horrendous happening" from which a new era is defined, as Dieckmann put it? However that question might be answered, President Richard von

Weiszäcker established such questions as central and inescapable issues for the Federal Republic of Germany in his authoritative and much quoted speech on 8 May, 1985, the fortieth 40th anniversary of German defeat. This was confirmed in 1986, when there ensued a heated debate among German historians over the the Nazi regime and its deeds, the so-called *Historikerstreit* ("historians' dispute"; see Maier 1988). This dispute, despite the often sober and highly nuanced language of the participants, showed that the Nazi period had become no routine history, but highly charged epic matter. For by then any German writing about the Nazi period was inescapably involved in monumental moral and spiritual issues, and this just by virtue of being German and so implicitly related in some way, pro or con, to the perpetrators of those lavish and hyperbolic deeds.

In 1987 Dan Diner, holding academic positions in both Germany and Israel, responded to that dispute in a new language, one lying at the intersection of Germany's argument over the Holocaust's uniqueness and the Israeli-American argument over its sacredness. In a collection of historians' articles he edited under the title *Is Nazism History?* (*Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte?;* 1987), Diner made his own position plain:

> The…desire that the greater and increasing distance to the Event Auschwitz will ease the memory of the horror, will weaken the consciousness of the nightmare of that rupture in civilization, has not proved true. … So it would appear that the Phenomenon Auschwitz, as an account of events belonging to the past, has its consciousness-creating future now before it. With increasing distance … the view on the inconceivable occurrence grows sharper; with increasing remoteness its outlines stand out more clearly from that befuddling shock of a civilization rupture that is signified for the Western culture area generally. … Meaning demands an answer in the face of Non-Meaning made real. (1987:185-6; my translation.)

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In this translation I have allowed myself some capitalization in English that cannot be differentiated in German, but I believe this to be justified by the sonorous seriousness of the prose. Diner's argument — the clash of 'Meaning' with 'Non-Meaning' (*Nicht-Sinnes*), and the suggestion that *clarifyin*g distance reveals *the inconceivable* — evoke just that irrationality and incomprehensibility that Otto found in the holy. Indeed the original title of Diner's piece referred to *aporia,* to an inescapable contradiction blocking the use of rationality. He wrote of Auschwitz that "such a business is not to be integrated with the understanding ordained by secular forms of thought — or it would shatter them" (Diner 1987:186). So here, concentrated in a brief passage, are the basic ingredients for driving forward a sacred seriousness about the Holocaust, a conceptual vocabulary which could ground apparently unanswerable arguments about the central importance of the Holocaust in German national life. Because sacred, the Holocaust would be timeless; and because timeless, its significance would be felt into the unforeseeable future.

Further Epic Chapters

As the sacredness of the Holocaust became generally established, so too did a conceptual vocabulary of high censoriousness, epitomized in the title of a 1987 book by Ralph Giordano: *The Second Guilt, or Concerning the Burden of being German*. That 'second guilt' included any form of forgetting, any failure to perform *Aufarbeitung*, any evidently wilful negligence in respect of the Holocaust; and the guilt applied to all Germans, of all ages, just be by being German. This attitude was richly demonstrated in reactions against a comment by Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, in a speech before the Israeli Knesset in 1984. Kohl said that he spoke as one who did not share in Nazi guilt, because he had "the blessing of late birth." He had, in other words, been too young, as following generations of Germans would be too young, to share the guilt. But that fatal phrase, "the blessing of late birth" (*Gnade der späten*

Geburt), instead gathered negative resonance over the years as evidence of "the second guilt", as an attempt to shed that "burden of being German". Former Chancellor Willy Brandt expressed the tone of reprimand now available in public discourse in a 1987 article: "…it would be a terrible self-deception for us in Germany if we imagined we could talk ourselves out of the shame/disgrace/humiliation (*Schmach*) that has been brought over us by the Nazi regime, with its million-fold murder of the Jews" (*Der Spiegel*, 20 March 1987). Brandt's tone was echoed in the language of a public demand, published in early 1989, for the building of a huge central monument in Berlin, dedicated to the "murdered Jews of Europe":

> *Half a century has passed since the seizure of power by the Nazis and the murder of the Jews of Europe. But until today on German soil, in the land of the perpetrators, there exists no central memorial place for this unique genocide nor a hortatory monument [Mahnmal] that recalls the victims.*
>
> *That is a Schande [shame/guilt].* (Reproduced in Stavginski 2002:309.)

This language of reproach — *Schmach, Schande, Schuld* — matches the sacralized uniqueness of the Holocaust with secular words which nevertheless also resonate with Luther's Bible translation, and together they establish two further, specifically German, chapters to the Holocaust epic. First, with the end of the Nazi regime, Germans repressed consciousness of their crimes, thus creating a second guilt, quite despite the voices raised against that complacency. Then, in the 1980's, Germany developed a consciousness of the Holocaust, and a conscience, and began a belated *Aufarbeitung* of that second guilt.

This latest chapter of *Aufarbeitung* was capped by the eventual building of the huge Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, comprising 2711 concrete standing blocks covering 19,000 square meters at the center of Berlin, finally dedicated in 2005. Jürgen Habermas, that decidedly secular prophet, characterised this monument as a public

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commitment to a self-understanding into which "is burned the deed — the crimes against humanity committed and permitted in Nazism — and therewith the shock of the Unsayable that was done to the victims, as a persisting consternation and admonition" (published in *Die Zeit,* 31 March 1999; cited in Stavginski 2002:291). It was that "persisting consternation and admonition", I suppose, that led my interlocutors in Mainz in 2002 to take such exception to my talk there.

Sub-, Un-, and Certainties

What I have traced here is the core narrative, the line of serious certainty, the Spectacle frequently mediated and re-mediated to German audiences in a great variety of forms, now possessing in the public sphere a presence as concrete as the standing blocks of the Holocaust Memorial itself. Any contributor to the German public sphere can allude knowledgeably to this epic matter — whatever his or her actual opinion — and to the values and attitudes embodied in it, knowing that the audience will catch the reference. In this respect, seriousness has won out over diversions, distractions, counterarguments, and confusions — those "'infinite lacks of fit'" — against which the subtle magnification and hyperbole of the central narrative line have been so successful. And in any case these magnifications — the singularity (not comparability) of the Holocaust, the holiness (the Unsayable, not the sayable) of those events, the extension of the guilt to all Germans into the indefinite future (and not limited to the Nazis and collaborators only) — may seem proportionate to their genesis in the Nazi's own hyperbolic acts and theories.

These magnifications in the Holocaust epic are also proportionate to the diversions, distractions and counterarguments which they met in their career. How to get the measure of this countervailing sea of sub-certainties? Well, let us take just the Holocaust Memorial

alone. In its massive certainty it covers an area about equal to the ground plan of the Bundestag building with its surrounding pavements, and larger than Pariser Platz, the great open area before the nearby Brandenburg Gate. Its 2711 featureless standing blocks range between 0.2 and 4.7 meters high, arrayed so that a single person "can plunge into this structure, accessible from all four sides", and, threading a way between the close-standing blocks, find that its "wave shaped form is perceived differently from every location" (http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/denkmaeler/denkmal-fuer-die-ermordeten-juden-europas/stelenfeld.html; accessed 25 June 2012). Each block is artfully arranged at a different small angle to the vertical, and above all, the whole is so large that one can get disoriented or lost in it. This is indeed the point, according to its designer Peter Eisenman, for the "scale", "potential for chaos", and "lack of connection to human reason" in the monument is meant to match the "inconceivability" of its occasion (in Heimrod, Schlusche, and Seferens 1999:881).

The alternative sub-certainties to the monument are even more extensive and labyrinthine, but can be compressed into a smaller space. I have them here on my desk: a hardbound book, a "Documentation" (*Dokumentation;* Heimrod, Schlusche, and Seferens 1999) of the printed opinions and arguments about the proposed Memorial which were published in newspapers, magazines, and official documents from its very first proposal, including texts and images of the more than five hundred designs submitted in the two public competitions to choose its shape. It includes, too, the transcript of key debates in the Bundestag and the submissions to a three-day official 'colloquium' that was called to allow a panel of experts and stakeholders to discuss the final form of the monument. The documentation is sub-titled "the Debate about the 'Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe'", and runs to 1297 pages, is larger than A4 format and weighs in at 4.2 kilograms, about 9.2 pounds. If the Memorial itself is the size of a city block, then the debate would dwarf the other books on any desk.

In the nearly eleven years that the controversy raged those who contributed did so with tremendous energy, cogency and fluency.

Extraordinary ideas and initiatives were formulated, discussed and discarded. … Some public figures were exhausted in their engagement for the project, turned away in disappointment or changed from glowing supporters to outright skeptics…and vice versa. The patience of those involved, but also of the participating public, … was tested beyond the reasonable. … Nevertheless this debate [was distinguished by] an enormous wealth of layers of argumentation, a tremendous intensity in the public sphere, and an intellectual engagement which demolishes the usual fields of expertise.' (Heimrod, Schlusche, and Seferens 1999:7).

The debate revealed a huge range of alternative possibilities, hovering sub-certainties, which carried on through the controversy, the building of the Memorial, and beyond. One concerns those foregrounded third person plural nouns (Carrithers 2008) thrown into the glare of public attention. The topic of the Memorial was "Germans and Jews", but this turned out to be a magnified simplification. Were those the only collectivities involved? What about the Gypsies, the *Sinti und Roma*, of whom about 500,000 were systematically murdered? What about the homosexuals executed? The handicapped? And then there are the Russian prisoners deliberately starved in German captivity, and the starvation policies practised on Slavic populations in the East. So are there different ranks of victims, some first class and some second class, as the spokesmen for the Roma complained? That would seem cruelly biased, as though Jews were promoted above others in memory, even though others shared just as awful a fate. The specification for the Memorial set out in the second design competition justified the Memorial as devoted to the Jews alone in part because the terror "tore a culture of a thousand years out of the heart of Europe" (Heimrod, Schlusche, and Seferens 1999:838). But did the Roma not have a culture? Perhaps there is just a calculus of numbers,

so that the more killed, the larger the monument? If, on the other hand, all victims were to be 'levelled' (*nivelliert*), treated equally after death because they were equally mistreated into death, is not something of the specific evils of Nazi racism lost? The historian Reinhart Koselleck summarized this indigestible problem with the observation that "to display is to hide" (*Zeigen heißt verschweigen*; cited in Leggewie and Meyer 2005:60). In a more general perspective, this dictum goes for any propositional assertion: to say something about A is to ignore B. But the dictum becomes much more pointed if the proposition concerns one of the categories of person comprising a nation-state, which therefore implicitly denies other categories: if the Jews are displayed as the premier victims, then the others' suffering is hidden.

The solution eventually was to build smaller monuments near the Holocaust Memorial, one to the Roma and one to the homosexuals: not quite "hidden", but much less "displayed". The decisions eventually made by government to build the three monuments presented a resolution of the arguments, the equivalent of a Solomonic judgment. But the matters under discussion — the relative weight of sufferings and deaths of persons classified by a loose and cross-cutting set of criteria, including what anthropologists now call "ethnicity" — are not in their nature settled or stilled by a single decision. The "resultant certainty" of the decision—— I return to Burke's language— — is "necessarily ironic" because it is produced by "the interaction of terms", or in this case, the interaction of arguments, monuments and perspectives. We can only see the Holocaust Memorial aright if we see it alongside those other monuments set back among the trees. In Burke's words: "they are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another."

Another source of differing "'voices, or personalities, or positions'" lay in the temporalities implied in the Memorial. In the first place, the Memorial was understood by those supporting it to be "historic" in the weightiest sense, as a recognizable event in the epic

of the Holocaust and in the longer History, *Geschichte*, of the Germans. The primary sense of that keyword, History, is a "political, cultural and social process of becoming (*Werdegang*)" — I depend on Duden's Universal Dictionary for this, but also on the sense of portent with which the term is used in this context — and in that respect History is another absolute metaphor, a final and encompassing horizon determining present reality. History is timeless and unchanging, insofar as the events are fixed and known; and the Memorial would add another fixed and known event to the chain of those which had gone before. The concrete immobility of the Memorial itself is therefore a metaphor for the timeless absoluteness of History. But if the monument is fixed, the *Aufarbeitung* associated with it is conceived as a dynamic process, as speakers and writers continually stressed both before and during the Holocaust Memorial campaign. In that idealized process individuals, or the public in general, first ignore or repress the crime; then they accept it and reflect on it, accompanied by relevant emotions such as shame; and then some positive state ensues, such as the resolve that such catastrophes will happen "never again". Yet there was a general awareness that *Aufarbeitung* could easily become fixed, routinized, everyday, unremarkable, and so amount to a further repression, a "drawing the line under" the past and finishing with it. This was already a frequent complaint about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* long before the campaign for the Memorial, and it arose during that campaign when a sceptic, or a sceptic about some particular design, could remark that the Memorial would become a *Kranzabwurfstelle*, a "wreath-dumping station", where politicians or visiting dignitaries would carry out meaningless acts of respect. Insecurity over this possibility also accounts for the frequent insistence on calling the monument a *Mahnmal*, which I have translated as "hortatory monument" to capture the sense, intended by by those using the term, that the monument be continuously active and present as terrible warning, rather than a *Denkmal*, a memorial, something finished and no longer of concern.

These few observations merely hint at the multiplicity of issues, and of "voices, or personalities, or positions", in the debate over the Holocaust Memorial. And in fact the editors of the documentation considered that very multiplicity itself as evidence of the value of the debate, as opposed to the Memorial. Hence the headline title of their massive documentation: *Is the Memorial Dispute Itself the Memorial?* (*Der Denkmalstreit - Das Denkmal?*; Heimrod, Schlusche, and Seferens 1999). This title expresses neatly a line in contemporary German political thought which might best be called Habermasian, in that it regards the political health of the Federal Republic as directly proportional to the freedom with which varying viewpoints on issues of import can be freely exchanged in the public sphere. However an even richer sense of different voices, now of the public rather than the publicists, appears in Gerburg Rohde-Dahl's exceptionally sensitive and thoughtful film, *Ein Weites Feld*, a documentary made about the Holocaust Memorial between 2003 and 2007, during and after its building. On one hand one hears the stern voice of Lea Rosh, whose single-minded, undeviating, and admonitory seriousness did most to drive the project through. It is clear from Rosh's stance, and is brought out nicely by the film editing, that Rosh was serious: she meant what she said, and said what she meant, *"and that's an end to it"* (*Aus!*), as Rosh put it. On the other hand, the film transmits the voices of many others as they observe the building of the Memorial and use it after its dedication. For some German visitors who were old enough to remember a childhood or youth during the Nazi regime, the Memorial does have the capacity to raise memories, and remorse, guilt, and reflection, as intended: they take it *seriously*, to return to the term with which I began; they take it in the sense intended by Lea Rosh. For others, though, it raises a wide range of reactions. During its building one woman, speaking slowly and with evident care, said of the Memorial's size that it is perhaps proportional to the evil done, but nevertheless seems "'megalomaniac'" (*größenwahnsinnig*). Another woman said that it is as if Germans were competing against the

world to be "the greatest at grieving" (*im Trauern die Größten*). An elderly man said "typically German, once again overdone" (*typisch deutsch, wieder mal übertrieben*), but another, much younger, man rebutted such charges of hyperbole by saying that the Memorial is proportionate to the huge scale of the buildings around it. Rohde-Dahl also reflects her own reactions in the film, as when she found herself responding automatically that anyone who criticizes the Memorial in any way must have a disguised antisemitic attitude — an attitude I may have met in Mainz. After the Memorial was opened, she then filmed people lying on the blocks in the sun and children and adults laughing and playing among the them…including Peter Eisenman, the Memorial's architect, who seemed delighted to show the Memorial's architectural possibilities by playing hide and seek with the filmmaker and her camera. For Rohde-Dahl the making of the film was an occasion to explore her own unexamined feelings of shame and guilt, and of knee-jerk condemnation of those who did not feel just as she did. Finally, after four years of filming others', her own, and her family's relation to that catastrophic history through the Memorial, she came to a resolution which recognizes the multiplicity of " voices, or personalities, or positions" which the Memorial calls up. "When I walk in the field of blocks," she said, "I feel something of the horror (*Grauen*), and at the same time I hear shouts of glee and laughter. By now I hear [all] these voices as constituents of the Memorial."

Coda

I set myself three tasks in writing this essay, one of which was to respond to my critics in Mainz, who seem to have felt that I had transgressed against the sacredness of the Holocaust by my mention of irony. I have tried here to set that right, in part by retrieving public sensibilities about the Holocaust in Germany at that time, 2002, sensibilities that had matured to the point that the "second guilt" had become common currency and the building of the

Memorial had been decided. I have not tried to find a balance among the arguments for and against the Memorial nor between the Holocaust's sacralization and the more determinedly human-sized perspectives taken on it. That is matter for a far fuller treatment. Instead I have let Gerburg Rohde-Dahl's own painstaking personal/public *Aufarbeitung* speak in conclusion. I suspect that she would hardly think immediately of her achievement as 'ironic', but in the penetrating language of Kenneth Burke it is just that, a "perspective of perspectives". All the sub-certainties are "contributory", as he put it, and the final result has a different quality than any of the self-assertive certainties of which it is composed.

My second, allied, task was to answer Alcida Rita Ramos's invitation to offer a fuller explication of the notion of irony as a fundamental feature of anthropology. She wrote, "what potency is there in the notion of irony that is absent in the concept of cultural relativism?" (2005:450). I have tried to illustrate rather than explain the potency of irony here, but I should point out that my illustrations are of a particular kind: I have written about public culture and the public sphere, about controversial or warring issues, and so about participants of widely differing views engaged adversarially with one another. In such settings the language of irony which I have adapted from Burke has the capacity to accommodate a wide variety of sub-certainties set against each other and to encourage the weaving of a perspective of perspectives. But I would argue, too, that such ironic work goes on in what might at first glance seem far more simplified ethnographic situations. Thus, for example, Vivieros de Castro's summarizing work on Amazonian perspectivism begins from just two viewpoints, those of humans and animals standing against each other, but also goes on to display that Amerindian perspective — itself already a perspective of perspectives — against Western and/or anthropologists' perspectives, thus achieving yet a further perspective of perspectives (Vivieros de Castro 1998, 2004; see also Descola 2005 and Carrithers et al. 2011). In that light a much earlier work, such as Godfrey Lienhardt's superb *Divinity and Experience*

(1961), may seem extremely simple, yet it too is an ironic perspective of perspectives, constantly displaying the ethnographer's experience, the presuppositions of his readership, and the expressions and attitudes of Dinka, and setting each against the others in a constant display of complex and irreducible clarity. Against performances of such depth, the notion of 'cultural relativism' is peculiarly shallow and colourless, missing as it does the perennial play of differing stances in any social situation, whether within or beyond a single 'culture'.

This concept of irony entails a particular notion of detachment. Take the case with which I began, my sudden estrangement from Oral Roberts. That estrangement gradually grew over a lifetime into a more or less calm detachment from the various forms of Christian evangelism to which I have been exposed, and finally to a late night ironic performance in which I displayed the perspectives of Roberts, the boy, and the supposedly mature anthropologist beside one another in an open-ended perspective of perspectives. That perspective of perspectives, though, was not an Olympian 'view from nowhere', but was the result of my own formative travels among the world's sub-certainties. Similarly, the ironic detachment of ethnography that I have in mind is not a single, uniformly elevated and dispassionate, scientific detachment, such as might be envisioned in the concept of cultural relativism. On the contrary: the ethnographer's detachment is from a particular achieved perspective, from a location, so to speak, which is always already set in her/his own life as well as among the other perspectives, and is moreover specific to the occasion and the audience to which the ironic/ethnographic performance is addressed. It is sometimes complained of relativism, whether moral or cultural, that it leaves its advocate in a wishy-washy, neither-here-nor-there state, without morality or culture. But ironic anthropology entails a commitment, and indeed a doubled commitment: first, to find a fair and faithful perspective of perspectives among all the parties — the ethnographees, the ethnographer, and his/her audience —; and second, to address the audience in as accessible and enlightening a

form as possible. The greatest struggle is to find that 'fair and faithful' perspective of perspectives, of course, but it is made all the more demanding by two considerations. First, the ethnographees may turn out to be the audience, as I found to my discomfiture in Mainz. And second, the ethnographer too brings a perspective to the encounter, a perspective arrived at through whatever experience has shaped her/his life, and that perspective, too, will inevitably be one of the sub-certainties. The final twist, though, is that the practice of anthropology itself, with whatever distinctive moral aesthetic sensibility it works on its practitioner, may shape a life, as it no doubt has mine (Carrithers 2005).

My third task was to say something relevant to the study of religion. Though myself often a student of religion, I confess that I have found myself reluctant to do so, a reluctance stemming from the effect of framing: the very act of mentioning 'religion' as a topic, which in turn I have felt constrained to do by publishing in a journal with 'religion' in the title, may suggest that the phenomena I describe here *are* religious in nature, and as though that description were the firmest foundation for studying them. Or the 'religious' frame may suggest that these matters are to be seen most clearly by comparison with other religious phenomena. The effect of such framing may be best exemplified by the notion of History as an absolute metaphor. I met this first and most vividly in East Berlin when I asked a former East German dissident why he was lavishing so much of his life, with little reward, on researching, compiling, archiving, and publicizing — performing *Aufarbeitung* — of the GDR past. "'For History!'" (*Für die Geschichte!*), he answered, as though I had asked a particularly stupid question about the nature of reality, a reality seen plainly by him but not till then by me. Further enquiry persuaded me that this perspective was widespread in his circles, taken for granted, and that if it had an origin, it was in the Marxist-Leninism which was the standard stuff of schooling in the GDR. The origins of History in West Germany tended to have a different source, in nationalism, or in the overwhelming presence of the

Holocaust narrative itself, with its insistence that 'Germans' be a central and abiding character in History. Now it is true that one could trace this absolute metaphor — or this "metahistory", as Hayden White designated it (1973) — back to philosophical roots in the Nineteenth Century and then further back, perhaps, to the soteriological world history of Christianity. And that would throw one sort of illumination on the concept History. But here I have wished to avoid that magnetic pull of 'religion' as an explanation, and have instead argued that there exist absolute metaphors, in this case History, which in practice tend to play the part as a final, encompassing explanation — I have tended myself to think of it as a 'necessary hypothesis' — beyond which no further thought is required or indeed conceivable. Such absolute metaphors do not appear solely in 'religious' settings; and in any case my concern with them, especially in the German case, is to see them employed, in decidedly non-religious settings, to try to compel seriousness in a public sphere whose very size and variety only emphasizes the possibility of "'infinite lacks of fit"'. By the same token, the other explanatory notions I have adduced here — epic matter, concept, seriousness, irony — are none of them specific to a religious setting.

Now that I have got that off my chest, I would like to end by pointing out two features of the material I have offered here that might be of special interest to us students of religion. The first is the role played by the Holocaust epic in the self-presentation of the Berlin Republic, as the re-united Germany is now sometimes called. On one hand, just insofar as this epic envisions the absolute metaphor of inconceivable evil, and conceives Germans as a transhistorical plural person, it amounts to something like a civil religion, though a civil religion offering a peculiarly, and profoundly, negative form of patriotism, a common and uniting guilt. On that view, the erection of the Memorial is a final founding act of the new Republic. On the other, this civil religion was strongly opposed in the debate over the Memorial by another view, one which considered such *Auratisierung* — such "clothing in a

[sacred] aura" of the Holocaust — as deeply misguided. Instead what is required — so the argument went — is a well-informed, engaged public, willing to enter into controversy, and that is only achieved through education and by making the detailed materials of History, the archives and documentation, available to that public. And indeed the Memorial was finally built only at the price of offering instruction and documentation as well, in the form of a spacious underground "Location of Information", lying concealed beneath the Memorial itself, which offers a great deal of information, including materials of the debate and access to the other numerous sites and archives, spread throughout the Berlin Republic, which hold further information.

The second, similar, point concerns the emotions, attitudes, and corporeal habitus entailed by *Aufarbeitung.* As an affair of the public sphere, and hence consummated by various acts of publication, whether in book, article, film or archive, *Aufarbeitung* does not presuppose or prescribe any visible posture or attitude that would be distinct from, say, common reading, writing or viewing a serious film. If a performance is entailed, then at most it would be an act of further expression, say in personal talk or public debate, that might reflect opinions arrived at by study. However, the insistence on building the Memorial implicitly entailed a more palpable and distinctly visible performance. Lea Rosh made this abundantly clear when Rhode-Dahl put some of the other forms of behaviour at the Memorial — leaping from block to block, sunbathing — to Lea Rosh. In firmly rejecting those behaviours, Rosh stressed that *Schwere,* "heaviness", meaning "gravitas" or indeed "seriousness", was the desirable reaction. One woman, she said, reported having heart palpitations at the very act of approaching the Memorial. That such gravitas is widely understood as the appropriate stance is well borne out by the 1101 comments on the Memorial on tripadvisor.de, the tourists' website used by so many Germans. The opinions are hugely various, but a common theme on which visitors comment is the manifest seriousness, or lack of seriousness, with which others

approach the site. From my brief scan through those comments, the word *nachdenken* and its derivatives and synonyms stand out, meaning "to meditate", "contemplate" or "reflect". But that is not remotely the final story. Let me leave you with two perspectives on the Memorial which point to an eventual perspective of perspectives that might be difficult to achieve, but still worth the challenge. Commentator lordfreak of Munich mentions the litter which has accumulated between the Memorial's blocks, and the children playing hide and seek, and concludes that the monument has "missed its point". On the other hand, beilig of Frankfurt says that "the feelings are what are important there, not the mandatory standing in silence or the forced period of thoughtfulness". "The situation is open for feelings of every kind," he or she writes, "and one should visit this place in any case." I leave that sentiment for any future student of religion who may stray there.

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