After the Holocaust, what future for faith?

Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time, Marc Ellis SCM Press, £12.95
Let me declare an interest. Marc Ellis's study of religion and political-social atrocity and injustice in our time deals extensively with my own work. It does so in a generous and perceptive way.

Ellis's geography of horror is planetary. Its black holes are the current treatment of Palestinians by the • Israeli authorities; the massacres in the Third World; the systematic oppression of native populations and the underclass throughout Latin America. Behind this cartography of pain, of torture at the hands of the police and the military, lie two determinant enormities: that of the Holocaust, and that of "1492", Ellis's somewhat catch-penny designation of Western imperialist colonialism, with particular reference to the extermination of native peoples and cultures across the American continent. It is these two phenomenologies of terror and of genocide which inform Dr Ellis's tormented and tormenting indictment.

What he asks is this: if we are to diminish, let alone abolish, the perpetuation of atrocity, must we not struggle to bring both Judaism and Christianity to an end? Jews have experienced the "hypocrisy" of the Christian message of love and of justice "on their bodies". It is state-backed Christianity which has visited on Latin America and on Africa the horrors of colonial and missionary history. Today, in Israel and the occupied territories, Jews humiliate, dispossess and kill Arabs (the massacre at Hebron on 25 February 1994 and the plaudits it earned from Jewish orthodox fanatics, are Ellis's starting point).

The radical questioning is addressed, first and foremost, to a number of Jewish religious and philosophic thinkers who, in a phrase Ellis courteously takes from me, "come after". The post-Shoah writings of Richard Rubenstein, of Elie Wiesel, of Emil Fackenheim and of myself are considered in some detail. They are placed "in dialogue", as it were, with the very few Christian theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz and Jurgen Moltmann who have seriously confronted the seminal role of both Roman Catholic and Protestant creeds and churches in the long tragedy of Jew-hatred. The second main focus is that of "liberation theology", of the feminist revaluations of Christianity most notably in Latin America. Here the insistent voices are those of Gustavo Gutierrez, Joan Casailas and Elsa Tamez. Marc Ellis is eminently fair in his paraphrasing and summaries. He has little difficulty in showing the ultimate inadequacy of Jewish responses, be they mystical, ethicaltheological or historical-sociological, to the enormity of 1933-45. He points to Wiese's silence on Israeli policies on the West Bank; to the vacillations in Rubenstein's view of Christian culpability. He insists that there is some failure of essential nerve, some numbness of heart in the Jewish understanding of racism when it is inflicted on others. His finding in respect of Christian-Holocaust thought is damning: "Despite the rhetoric, Christian attention to the Holocaust has been centred on the renewal of Christianity, as a way of side-stepping the void that Jewish suffering introduces." At the same time, contends Dr Ellis, the dialogue between the two faiths is wholly ambiguous. Both are en fausse situation. The Christian will not face or atone for his terrible guilt; the Jew has not only absorbed much of Christian sensibility in the face of other ethnic worlds, but is now a despotic "Christian" in Hebron.

Is there any way out of the spiral of atrocity? I have, over long years, argued for the extraterritoriality of Jerusalem, for the instauration of an open city equally sacred to Judaism, Christendom and Islam (the Vatican has hardly been helpful). Ellis adopts this notion: "Sharing Jerusalem is the starting point of this journey, the broken middle of Israel and Palestine, which can become the new middle where the dead and the living, the martyrs and the survivors of both peoples, can be heard, mourned, and celebrated."

Concomitantly, the industrial-technological West must alter its entire stance towards the exploited, enslaved millions of Africa and Latin America. In this mutation, liberation theologies and the recuperation of women into Christian thought and practice have a vital function.

But the crux of Ellis's protest lies deeper. Both Judaism and Christianity in any true sense will only become "available to us again once the cycle of atrocities comes to an end". For they "are a source of the tragedy itself'. They are "part of the end for millions upon millions of people historically and in the present". The inference is inescapable. Ellis sees scant hope for a humanisation of man till Judaism and Christianity, its fatal offshoot, have disappeared (the process may well be quite irreversible already).

What is to come in their dark place? The hope, the expectation that "a God will come into existence, a God who remembers the forgotten and urges us to create a world beyond barbarism". "Until God exists" is a talismanic phrase. The daily fact of dawn points to "a path beyond barbarism and atrocity, a path beyond even the language of God." After the critical exploration undertaken by this tract, "the task of making God exist remains. It is a task which was bequeathed to us and which we now bequeath to the next generation." Unavoidably, there are oversights. The two Christian theologians who have engaged with Auschwitz most profoundly, Markus Barth and the late Donald MacKinnon, go unnoticed. More damaging is the total inadvertence of Dr Ellis to the agnostic-atheist option (now, surely, in the ascendant). If slaughter and hypocrisy are endemic to the monotheist faiths, the claim of the "godless" to tolerance and mutual trust needs careful scrutiny. As does the likelihood that Leninist-Stalinist tyranny and anti-Semitism were an epilogue to religious-ecclesiastical intolerance and in no way a natural feature of materialist atheism. I find disturbing, moreover, the lavish reiterations throughout this short book of accounts of Israeli atrocities. Ellis's condemnation is altogether justified. But proclaimed from the safety of the academic parlour, so distant from the daily menace, both internal and external, which shadows every aspect of life in Israel, such anathema is a touch facile. These high principles need to be lived, fought for, in situ.

These are only partial dissents. The main failing is, of course, that of the "solution" offered. The concept of a "God" whom man "makes exist" is ontologically and ethically naive. It is an abuse of language. As it happens, I urge something similar in a forthcoming book, but with a sharp sense of its utter inadequacy. But then, neither Dr Ellis nor I are St Augustine or Pascal or Karl Barth. And even they....

—George Steiner