

Farewell to Revolution?" *China Journal*, no. 57 [Jan. 2007]: 1–22). This political process of consolidating authoritarianism highlights the creation of a new state-society model that allows for more pluralistic participation than we might imagine in an authoritarian regime, but the channels of participation and tools of "graduated controls" are still controlled by the state. Understanding this political process of authoritarian consolidation in China allows us to better analyze linkages between economic and political development and the proliferation of alternative state-society models.

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WHY THE JEWS?

C. Fred Alford: *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 172. \$23.99.)

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Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish question" had an extraordinary impact on the study of political philosophy in the United States. Scholars fleeing the Nazi regime found a home in America where they continued their inquiries and inspired a reawakening of political philosophy in American universities. Although the same could be said about the impact of the Nazi regime on the advance of the sciences in general, it is remarkable that the Holocaust engendered little interest among political philosophers in the significance of the Jewish question for political philosophy. Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, among others, thought, spoke, and wrote about the Nazi regime and totalitarianism. Arendt explored the significance of the Jewish question for the emergence of the Nazi regime and totalitarianism, but the Jewish question, or anti-Semitism, was of interest to her as a political or social matter only insofar as it helped explain the rise of totalitarianism. Arendt, having no apparent interest, or knowledge, of the contribution of the Jewish tradition to political philosophy, seemed incapable of thinking about the significance of the Holocaust both for the Jewish tradition and for the place of that tradition in the history of political thought. This, despite the Nazi belief that the Jews embodied an idea and way of life that was the very antithesis of the Nazi political ideal, and that the "final solution to the Jewish question" was an attempt to purge civilization of its Jewish foundation. While the deadly consequences of the Nazi's perverse view of the place of the Jewish people in history is unique, it is a modern variant of a very old hatred compelling us to ask the question, "Why the Jews?" That question cannot be understood apart from the role the Jews and the Jewish tradition played in the foundation and development of political thought. Strauss, who did so

much to restore the significance of Jewish thought for political philosophy, and who in this sense may have taken the Holocaust far more seriously than Arendt did, never saw the necessity of speaking of the relevance of the Holocaust for political philosophy. For Strauss, as well as for Arendt, the question "Why the Jews?" appeared either irrelevant for political philosophy or perhaps too difficult to speak of.

The absurdity of Nazi claims against the Jews may be reason enough to ignore this fundamental and all too obvious aspect of the Holocaust, and thus we could simply say that the Jewish question served Hitler's political purpose. Perhaps, then, the question "Why the Jews?" is not significant for understanding the Holocaust and we should be content to leave it aside. Yet if we were to give this answer to every historical occasion where the question of the Jews arose we would, in effect, relegate the perplexing question "Why the Jews?" to the particular political conditions of the moment. Because the Jewish question, so to speak, reoccurs throughout the course of Western civilization, it presents us with a question, and points to an idea, not wholly confined to a particular time and place. Since the Jews and the Jewish tradition are so fundamental to the foundation and development of Western civilization, one might suspect that the Jewish question has a universal or transhistorical meaning worthy of study. To be sure, the Holocaust emerges in a particular historical context; but it is a context without meaning if it is removed from the question that reappears through the course of history, and that continues to shape political discourse today. To ignore the fact of the particular Jewish character of the Holocaust is as absurd as Nazi claims about Jews and Judaism. To take the Holocaust seriously requires that we attend to the Jews.

C. Fred Alford's *After the Holocaust* takes the Holocaust seriously and is among the most thoughtful and important books written on the subject. Alford's work is informed by a vast array of sources drawn from philosophy, theology, and psychology and provides an example of contemporary political thought at its best. For Alford the Holocaust is worth studying because it has much to teach us about the most notable "mark of modernity," absurd suffering, or the meaninglessness of extreme suffering. But Alford's analysis goes far deeper and is far more complex than either the notion that extreme suffering is meaningless or Arendt's account of the banality of evil. This is a book, if I may say so, with soul, reminding one of the wisdom of the Greek tragedian crying out "sing sorrow, sorrow, but good win out in the end." Certainly the Holocaust reveals better than any event that "there is something insane or evil at the heart of many (but not all) humans, waiting for a chance to emerge" (155). Although Alford does not abandon this dark view, he rises above it, recognizing that attention to the particular experiences of the survivors of the concentration and death camps teaches an "alternative path to transcendence." This is transcendence "not in the sense that it belongs to God but rather in the sense that humans become capable of taking their everyday experiences with the things and people of this world and lifting them out

of the mundane," thus rendering "the world we live in sacred, holy, and ablaze with meaning" (134).

Alford begins with a discussion of Simone Weil's account of affliction, a suffering that transcends abjection, or meaningless suffering, to introduce us to an understanding of the possibility of finding meaning in the face of extreme suffering. Drawing upon the work of contemporary psychoanalytic and cognitive psychologists, Alford provides a masterful discussion of the book of Job, the writings of Primo Levi, and an account of Holocaust survivor testimonies as a way of engaging us in thinking through the possibility of finding meaning in extreme suffering. Alford's construction of a dialogue between a classic Jewish text, one of the foremost witnesses of the Holocaust, and the survivor testimonies presents a rare attempt to attend to the particular Jewish character of the Holocaust and what it has to teach us about modernity.

The chapter on Job roots his understanding of the problem of suffering in one of the most difficult texts in the Tanach, or Hebrew scriptures. In addition to the problems of translation, the book of Job, more than most other texts, is subject to multiple meanings, as is evidenced by the multiple and apparently contradictory accounts of Job in the Talmud (Baba Basra 15b–16b). Moreover, this text, more than any other in Hebrew scriptures, is understood by the traditional commentaries in a manner wholly opposed to a surface reading. Whereas Job initially appears wholly undeserving of his suffering, the classic Jewish commentators universally agree that he is not the innocent he appears to be. Adding to the interpretive difficulty within the Jewish tradition is that Job is not a Jew. For Alford, this last point is an advantage, making the text especially pertinent to confronting absurd suffering as a universal issue transcending its Jewish sources and context. We note that Alford does not appear to know the traditional Jewish commentaries on Job. Yet if Alford's argument is uninformed by traditional Jewish texts, his reading of Job is, in key respects, closer to traditional Jewish readings than those of the many modern biblical scholars he refers to and, more importantly, closer than Primo Levi's understanding of the book of Job. Alford chooses to discuss Levi because Levi recognizes Job's significance for understanding the modern dilemma, and because his account of his experience at Auschwitz and his reflections on the Holocaust are regarded by many as perhaps the most compelling witness of "a man who kept his humanity through the most dreadful circumstances, thus restoring our confidence in humankind" (23). But Alford opposes Levi's understanding of Job and the Holocaust and uses Job to reexamine Levi's work in light of his suicide in order to find clues to his ultimate despair and death. In contrasting the book of Job with Levi's work Alford suggests that Job provides a better way of grappling with the theological and practical human experience of absurd suffering. Although Alford has a profound respect for Levi's life and writing, his reading of Job serves as the basis for a critique of Levi whose analysis of Job, as well as his own life, fails to provide a means to transcend absurd

suffering. Unlike Levi, Alford recognizes Job's failings and offers a reading of the text according to which God's "ruthless" treatment of Job requires that "humans should be desperately figuring out how to treat each other with ruth—that is, with care, compassion, sympathy, and pity—because there will be no one else left to do it for them, no one to even set an example" (57). Alford's reading of Job's suffering provides a meaningful alternative to Levi and to the mark of modernity, absurd suffering.

The central focus of Alford's book is his analysis of Holocaust survivor testimonies. Alford draws upon psychological theories for his analysis of Job, but it is here that he applies these insights for listening to, and thinking about, the extraordinary suffering of Holocaust survivors. Alford's discussion of the survivors' testimony focuses on the question of how those who experienced extreme suffering, so extreme that many express the sense that they "died" at Auschwitz, are able to go on living. Alford observed that many survivors who lived through an experience in which "a world oriented to the values of life is conquered and overrun by a world in which the values of death reign" managed to go on living by "doubling" (72). Doubling allows survivors to live with the memory of unbearable suffering through a process in which survivors' "deep memory" is distinguished from ordinary memory "because ordinary memory lacks concepts and categories to explain a world that is no longer meaningful" (68). Alford presents survivor testimonies to show that while there are various approaches to doubling, the process appears to be a universal response to extreme suffering. Terrence Des Pres described the same phenomenon in his work, *The Survivor*, over thirty years ago. Alford complements Des Pres insofar as Alford's attempt to understand "what is broken and what remains, and how these two parts of the survivor's lives live on close but not always intimate terms" (66), assists the viewer of survivor testimonies attain, as he puts it, a "katharsis," or clarification, such that we are better able to understand both those who experienced and those who inflicted extreme suffering. In this way, a thoughtful viewing of survivor testimonies aids us in our understanding of the Holocaust itself. Alford recognizes that only a partial explanation of the Holocaust may be gained through viewing survivor testimonies, and that it is necessary to consider the social and political forces at work. But he also argues that if we are to come to terms with the great question of modernity it is not enough to understand social forces, as the insight gained through such an analysis is incapable of explaining the surplus of absurd suffering.

In the final chapter of the book Alford argues that paying attention to the particulars of individual testimonies "takes us out of ourselves," allowing us to share in some limited way the experiences of others who have faced such extreme suffering so that we are more attuned not only to the horrors of modernity but to the "the little beauties of everyday life" (142). To fully appreciate Alford's argument one must read his presentation of the survivor testimonies. Suffice it to say that Alford is wise enough to know that an event as singular as the Holocaust cannot be explained by any theoretical construct.

The beauty of Alford's book and its significance for political philosophy derive from his showing how the particulars of survivor testimonies gain us "a back door to transcendence." One might say that Alford's reading of the Holocaust is itself a "back door" to the political-theological problem, and that his work is an important contribution reminding us of the continued relevance of that problem for modernity. As such, Alford's book provides important insights into the significance of the Jewish question for contemporary politics.

Those familiar with the Jewish tradition might suggest that Alford's argument would be deepened by the theological and political wisdom of the Jewish sages. From the perspective of the Jewish tradition, and of those within the tradition who survived the Holocaust, Alford's argument too often misses the mark. At the same time that Alford is to be commended for drawing attention to the importance of Jewish texts, his reading of those texts does not do justice to the insights of those who thought, wrote, and lived according to those writings for millennia. Certainly insights can be gained from Weil, Levi, and other Jewish and non-Jewish writers. But it seems reasonable to suppose that discourse about Jewish ideas and Jewish suffering should be informed by Jewish traditional sources. It is hardly necessary to say that we would find problematic a discussion of Christian texts and historical events without reference to Christian theologians. Alford is perhaps at a disadvantage when speaking of Jewish texts as his discussions of religion and religiosity are more relevant to Christian than Jewish beliefs. Perhaps more problematic is Alford's dismissal of the importance of Jewish religious beliefs in his analysis of Holocaust survivors. Alford goes so far as to doubt the veracity of Levi's recognition that "true believers" did not experience suffering in Auschwitz in the same way as others (78–79). I do not doubt that the testimonies he witnessed gave him reason to suppose that "religious experience seems not to be a special category of experience or belief when faced with the pressure of Auschwitz" (79). Yet his discussion of what constitutes religious belief is often not relevant to Jewish belief, and my own experience of talking to many religious survivors who do not participate in the sort of interviews Alford examined is that religious belief was very important for their surviving Auschwitz. There are enough written accounts of survivors who speak of the centrality of Jewish belief to their survival to suggest that Alford might benefit from exploring Jewish thought more deeply. In trying to understand the significance of the Jewish question and the Holocaust for political philosophy, it would perhaps be better to begin with a Jewish understanding of the problem of suffering, rather than begin with Simone Weil who had little or no understanding of Jewish belief. Yet the Rabbis understood the relevance of the book of Job for those who were not Jews, and in this spirit it is fitting that we commend Alford for recognizing the significance of this singularly Jewish event for modernity.

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