

IN SPIKE OF EVERYTHING

From: Against Silence: The Voice & Vision of Elie Wiesel, V. III

[1985]

REYNOLDS Father Hesburgh, in your foreword to Mr. Wiesel's book *Four Hasidic Masters* you spoke of the "vital center that embraces contraries." What does that mean?

FATHER HESBURGH I think it means that God is the vital center that embraces contraries, because contraries are not as contrary as they may seem. Take Judaism and Christianity as two religious traditions. You cannot possibly understand Christianity without understanding Judaism. Jesus Christ was a Jew, his mother was a Jew, his apostles were Jews. The whole culture in which Christianity burst on the world was Jewish. The whole language is that. Somehow if we would get back to our spiritual center, if we would transcend a kind of deep-set secularism, you would be amazed how close Jews and Muslims and Christians would be, because we are all, if you will, sons of Abraham. We all worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are all religions of the Book, if you will, the word of God impinging on human history. That is a vital center. It is the most vital center I know, and it is that which draws us together, and it does not draw us together by homogenizing us. But it draws us together in being what we are, and yet relating whatever contrariness we find around that common center which is the God we worship.

REYNOLDS In your foreword you also spoke of the "ability to perceive union without losing necessary distinctions." Well, now why in 1978 are the distinctions still necessary?

WIESEL I must go back to what Father Hesburgh said earlier. It is true that a Christian today must know Judaism; for the Christian to be Christian he must know Judaism. It was not necessary for a Jew in my time to know Christianity. In my little town I did not even know that the Jews and Christians believe in the same God. I thought that Christians only believed in Jesus. Why? Because Jews and Christians in my town lived in separate worlds. I never saw a church; if I saw a priest, I ran away -- for good reasons. You know, we had our experiences.

REYNOLDS You ran away?

WIESEL I ran away because our priests were not Father Hesburghs. Twice a year, on Easter and on Christmas, I was beaten by my Christian school friends.

Now I believe that there is a possibility to establish a true and honest communication. And I emphasize true and honest, meaning I tell the truth. I say what I remember, and I'm sure this is what Father Hesburgh does too. But I say so in order for me to remain what I am. That means I want to remain Jewish, authentically Jewish, totally Jewish, and I believe that if I am Jewish, a Christian who speaks with me will become a better Christian.

REYNOLDS Father Hesburgh, Mr. Wiesel has told us of his early recollections of Christians. What are your early recollections of Jews?

FATHER HESBURGH I think probably like those of many people who grew up as I did in a rather closed society. As Elie knew mostly Jews, I knew mostly Catholics. I went to a parochial school in Syracuse, New York. And I think I thought of Jews as being somewhat different, which of course they are and should be. But you did not always think of someone being different in those days as being a good thing. It was generally thought of as being a bad thing: They are not like us. Why can't everybody be like us?

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And that reminds me of a wonderful Midrash I heard once. It says, if I am what I am because you are what you are, then you are not you and I am not I. And what it really means, I think, is that we have to be ourselves to understand each other. We have to be ourselves to have what Elie said earlier, an honest and sincere dialogue.

REYNOLDS You are both men of very strong faith. Father Hesburgh, how do you deal with your Christian faith, sitting alongside Elie Wiesel . . . a survivor of the Holocaust?

FATHER HESBURGH Well, I deal with it, I guess, in saying that I have tried to live it in my life and to realize that at the very core of it is not only the glory of God but the dignity of man, and that anyone who works against that dignity in any way is doing a blasphemous thing. That is why a good part of my life has been given to trying to defend human rights. Of course, the Holocaust is the ultimate of blasphemies, the murder of so many innocent people, in a so-called political cause. While that horror is there and one should not forget it — it ought to be an educative horror even for those who had no part in it — at the same time I think we must look ahead. I am sure Elie would agree with me in this, from what I understand of him and his writings, that we have to look ahead so that we do not create another holocaust. We are creating one right now. We can blow up the world seven times over. And we are adding to the power to do that. That is another blasphemy. And do not say it cannot happen. You know Murphy's Law: What can happen will. I hope, I pray to God this does not.

But, in a smaller concern, I am happy to be sitting here with Elie Wiesel, because I think we understand each other, because we're honest with each other. We realize that we represent two great traditions that are religious and spiritual at their core. I do not think we could get into an argument about religion *per se*, because I understand that Elie is Jewish, and he wants to be Jewish, and I am Christian, and I want to be a Christian; and he understands and respects that, and I understand and respect what he is. It is important, though, that we understand each other. And once we have done that, then I think we have to stand together a little more than we have in the past, stand together for peace and stand together for justice.

We had a meeting in Portugal last November of a group called the Inter-Religious Colloquium for Peace and Justice. It was made up mainly of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. The Jews were both American and Israeli, the Muslims were from throughout the Middle East, as far away as Iran, and the Christians were mainly American with a few Europeans. We were Protestant Christians, Orthodox Christians, Anglican Christians, and Catholic Christians. We were together as distinct religious groups. We prayed together every morning taking turns praying, and what surprised us all was how similarly our prayers ran, how much we suffered for the same cause of injustice in the world, how much we wanted to eradicate it, and how much we thirsted for peace. But we came at that strongly out of our own traditions, and we came at it together. And at the end of a week's conversation in this matter, it was just incredible how much we felt like brothers. We were beginning to call each other "brother," which is a kind of Muslim custom.

REYNOLDS Now, Mr. Wiesel, you have heard Father Hesburgh's statement just now. He is a realist, but he is also an optimist. Are you?

WIESEL I am less optimistic than Father Hesburgh. I will tell you why — for the same reasons, by the way. Something happened one generation ago, and I am afraid that the world has not been punished yet. And I am afraid of the punishment, and I do not want that punishment — a nuclear holocaust. And yet, I know that the story has not been concluded, it is still going on. There are so many tragedies in this world, you have, in Zaire, savagery; in Cambodia, a new genocide; in Bangladesh, Muslims are being persecuted.

Simply there are too many things going on, and I believe that all of them are connected somehow to what happened one generation ago. It was done then, and therefore the gates opened. And evil was unleashed. The only way for us to prevent a nuclear holocaust is to remember the Holocaust: that is why we try, all of us, to remember it, and to remember it in its purity, in its authenticity, with all the pain that goes with it. To say that we will succeed, I am not sure.

REYNOLDS May I say to you, hearing you, you make me optimistic. I think you make Father Hesburgh optimistic too. This is a question I have no right to ask, but having gone through everything that you have endured, why do you still have faith?

WIESEL Faith in what? Faith in whom?

REYNOLDS Faith in God.

WIESEL I rarely speak about my faith in God, because it is something so personal, and whatever I would say, really, would not be the truth.

REYNOLDS Faith in man.

WIESEL Even less. In God --- I know how to deal now with my faith in God. Even then, today I do not believe the way I believed when I was a child. Faith in man, I have faith in man. . . . The only thing for me to do is to have faith in man and faith in God. If not, then we are all lost. So I have faith *in spite of* everything. I have faith because if I were to lose faith, and I know why, what could I teach my students? I try to teach them something. I have a son. I try to teach him. Today to have children in this world and to be a teacher in this world are tremendous responsibilities. Why do you speak, and why do I write, and why do you teach? All for the same reason; we try to save mankind. It is very pretentious. But to live today is a very pretentious undertaking. . . .

REYNOLDS Did you detect any difference in the questioning that you received here from the students at Notre Dame than elsewhere around the country?

WIESEL No, students are students, and I have great faith in students. I love the young people today. Theirs is a religious quest. They want the truth. And in Notre Dame, of course, the emphasis is on religion. They want to know what you ask: How can I go on having faith? But then I give my questions to the students. I give them my anguish. But if you share your anguish, it is already an answer. You tell the students that there were reasons not to believe. At one point, only the believers refused to believe. At one point, one had to believe in God, and very firmly, in order to say no to God. And whoever did not say no to God was not a believer. So you try teaching that even this is part of my tradition, this is the beauty of the Jewish tradition: I can say no to God, I can quarrel with Him, I can argue with Him, and I do argue with Him. As for man, of course this is a problem. . . . Forgive me, but I must be honest with you. Those who killed were Christians.

FATHER HESBURGH That is right.

WIESEL As a Jew it is not my problem. As a human being it is.

FATHER HESBURGH Not good Christians.

WIESEL That is what I want to hear.

FATHER HESBURGH Yes.

WIESEL I want Christians to tell me again and again --- for their sake.

FATHER HESBURGH Yes.

WIESEL It's not for mine. That they were not good Christians.

FATHER HESBURGH No.

WIESEL But the fact is that those who killed were Christians. Hitler was never excommunicated. Himmler was convinced that he was acting as a good Christian when he was killing Jews. Of course, you condemned them and that's why we are close.

FATHER HESBURGH Yes.

WIESEL What is my problem? My problem is that we as Jews live in a general society, and we have to save that society. I try to save it as a Jew, together with you.

FATHER HESBURGH Yes.

REYNOLDS Well, can it be saved? You acting as a Jew? Father Hesburgh acting as a Christian?

WIESEL I would turn the question around. It can be saved *only* if I act as a Jew. And *only* if he acts as a Christian.

REYNOLDS I hesitate even to say this, Father Hesburgh, but the differences are important, but not all-important.

FATHER HESBURGH Yes, they are not terribly important because we are all back at our roots at the moment, and the Jewish tradition comes as a covenant with a mission from God. That covenant, that mission is still there.

REYNOLDS You spoke of both Jew and Christian waiting?

FATHER HESBURGH That is right. We are waiting for the Second Coming.

REYNOLDS And the Jews?

FATHER HESBURGH And they are waiting for the Messiah. We are both in an attitude of waiting. But I must say that we both bring something terribly important to the world today. You said something that, believe it or not, I said an hour ago, giving a talk at another part of this campus. I was talking to a group of priests, and I said we are called to nothing less than to save the world. And that is, indeed, a very pretentious thing to have to do, to save the world, given the state of the world today. You, now, an hour later, say exactly the same thing from your tradition. And I say, let us do it together. Let us stand together for justice. Let us stand together for the dignity of that beautiful thing called humanity that God created and that you and I represent in different ways but represent loving Him and serving Him in humanity.

WIESEL We try.

REYNOLDS What did you learn here at Notre Dame, Mr. Wiesel?

WIESEL That I can speak to Christians.

REYNOLDS Was that the first time?

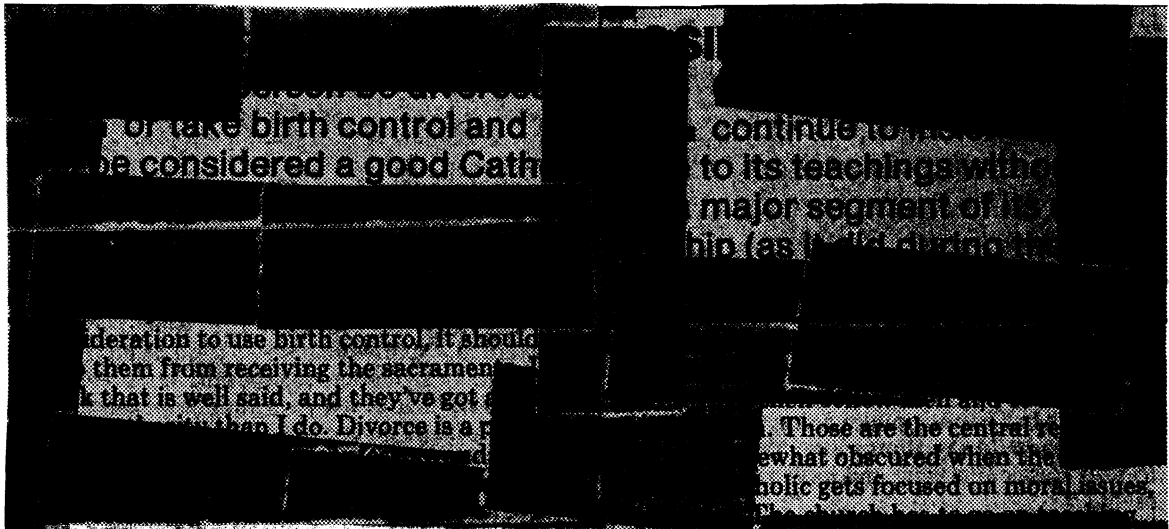
WIESEL Oh, I had spoken to Christians before, but here I discovered an environment so Christian that the words I said and the words they heard were the same.

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VIEWS



The Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh is president of the University of Notre Dame and a former chairman of the



CHURCH AUTHORITY

Q. Recent polls indicate that most American Catholics disregard church teachings on many moral issues. Does that mean the church is losing its authority over its members?

I don't think so. I think the church teaches what it believes it should teach. They probably disagree with the times when people have to live in the church will find them closer, possibly as a matter of fact.

PUBLIC DISSENT

Q. Is it appropriate for Catholics to dissent publicly from church positions? If so, how? Why not?

I don't think dissenting from church teaching is something that Catholics should do. There will be times when people will dissent, but on most things they are agreed. I think the problem is that there is always looking for a dissent.

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