

10. "The Greatest Taboo of Postwar History: There Were No Nazi Gas Chambers," *Marco Polo*, February, 1995.
11. David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 259.
12. David Ogden, Acting Assistant Attorney General, at Senate hearing, June 28, 2000.
13. *Congressional Record*, July 12, 2001, H 3993.
14. *Congressional Record*, July 12, 2001, H 3995.

## Reflections on the Shoah by an Itinerant Muslim<sup>1</sup>

Shawkat M. Toorawa

*The subject of Muslim response to the Shoah remains woefully understudied and is one about which one can find very little in print that is not polemical. In this essay I use the biography of my own engagement with Jews, Judaism, and the Shoah as a way of broaching this topic. I describe my early education and upbringing and my first contact with the concepts "Jewish," "Nazi," and "Holocaust." I go on to describe my subsequent contact with Muslims who demonize Jews, remain silent about Nazi horrors, and deny the Holocaust—all of whom I take to task. I call on Muslims to dissociate themselves from Holocaust revisionists and deniers and to denounce them in the strongest possible terms; and to remember that no person has the right to limit another person's humanity.*

**Keywords** Muslim; Islam; Holocaust; Pluralism; Revisionism; African-American

You [Jew] and I [Muslim] are joined together by a braid that goes back beyond history to the beginnings of our recorded recognition of the Almighty. Some strands of this braid are dark. Some are glistening gold. . . . In unlit moments, walled in by the present, we forget the golden strands and what might yet be possible.

—Sanaullah Kirmani

What is the impact of the Shoah on the Muslims who live outside Europe and North America? In this essay I use the biography of my own engagement as a way of broaching the subject of Muslim response to the Shoah.<sup>2</sup> This is a subject that remains woefully understudied, and about which one can find very little in print that is not polemical. An exception is the 1994 address by Sanaullah Kirmani at Temple Israel in Silver Spring, Maryland, in an interfaith Yom HaShoah Commemoration.<sup>3</sup> This is the only statement I have been able to find that clearly articulates a Muslim position of empathy. It is also, to my knowledge, the only proactive Muslim denunciation of the Shoah.

I was born in England to Mauritian parents of Indian origin, Muslims both, one Shi'i, one Sunni. My father, having abandoned medical school in India, took employment with a kind family in what was then Bangladesh. After several years, this kindly family paid his passage and told him to make a life for himself in England. In London, he took work in the clothing district, befriending all and sundry, in particular immigrant Jews who, like him, were seeking ways of making ends meet. It was the late 1950s. My mother, who had been sent to boarding school at Tunbridge Wells, had been told to call upon my father if she had any difficulties: he was one of only a handful of Mauritians then in the United Kingdom. She did contact him, they courted, and in 1962 were married. I was born a year later. In 1961, my father had joined a company that had developed a revolutionary new textile product, fusible interlining, and in 1965 he was transferred to Paris and we followed.

I do not know when I first became aware that I was a Muslim—probably around the age of four when Abdullah Diop, a Senegalese graduate of Al-Azhar, the world's oldest university, was hired by my parents to come daily to our apartment to teach

me the Arabic script, and to tell me the stories of the Prophets. That would have been the first time I would have heard stories about Jewish people, but I do not remember the identification. I do not remember, not because my memory has failed me, but because it was not singled out in any significant way.

When I was five, I started attending an English school in Paris. My father had told me that the principal had insisted to Nazi authorities in 1940 that the school be allowed to continue to serve the children of expatriates and that they were not welcome to occupy the premises. Although it was an apocryphal story, that is nevertheless when I first learned about the Nazis.

I learned in primary school about Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. I remember learning about the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea and how it echoed what I was being taught by Abdullah Diop. I remember learning that Jesus was the son of God—my *Children's Encyclopedia* at home said the same thing. And I remember that my parents told me that different people believed different things; that we were Muslims and consequently believed that God could not have a son, but that He loved Jesus dearly. My parents explained to me that we did not believe that he had been killed or that he had died on the cross, but that Christians did, and that was fine. I remember getting a little chocolate Jesus in a candy manger every year from the school, and I remember my parents never objecting.

At school, I was the only person who would not eat meat in my age group. I would be given plain yogurt with two lumps of sugar and fruit when everyone else had meat. No one made fun of me, but I did ask my mother why I could not eat the meat my classmates were eating. We could, we just don't, she explained, we follow certain rules, others follow different rules. We aren't

better than your friends, they aren't better than us. This sank in right away. My wife and I teach our children that different people do different things, behave in different ways, eat different foods, speak different languages, have different complexions, but that these differences amount to nothing more complicated, and nothing less spectacular, than the differences between flowers, each a different color, size, scent, and so on.

We used to buy our *halal* meat in the Algerian quarter of Paris. One day, the Muslim butcher said something to my father that created doubts in his mind about whether the meat was veritably *halal*. We went to the kosher butcher down the road, and we began spending time at Boule de Neige, an Algerian Jewish restaurant.

I began to understand that being Jewish was a lot like being Muslim. That a belief in one indivisible God, attention to ritual and diet, and what I would later understand was a shared and intertwining history that created affinities and empathies which it was hard to find in mainstream French and European culture, tied us together.

My father was transferred to Osaka and then to Hong Kong in 1972. We performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*, before traveling to Japan. Our fellow pilgrims from Mauritius, Réunion, South Africa and elsewhere, would talk about the "Yahood," as if they were something to malign, distrust, and demonize. I remember images of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War on television and I began to understand that Muslims insisted on making a link between the Palestinian cause and Islam, and between Zionism, the State of Israel, and Jews worldwide and from all time periods. This is the kind of elision of identities and histories, the kind of monolithizing, I have spent a whole life rejecting.

I do not know when I first learned that my father's company had been founded by a brilliant Jewish scientist, Harry Rose, but I do know that the fact that he was Jewish was not singled out; neither the fact that my father's immediate superior, Derek Kartun, a wonderful novelist incidentally, was Jewish too. It was they who urged my father to move to Japan, Hong Kong, and finally Singapore.

We moved to Singapore in late 1973 where I attended an international school. Singapore is about 17% Muslim, but at a school for expatriates, I was one of only a handful of Muslims. It was a school that celebrated the multiple identities of the students, one which welcomed diversity of faiths, convictions, and practices, and which was serene in its own largely Christian origins. I say this because this kind of serenity, on the part of anyone, allows for empathy. Extreme attachment to one's origins—imagined, constructed, or real—creates barriers of dogma and constriction; excessive laxity about these undermines and perhaps even devalues difference. There is a serene middle ground, a golden mean. I used to read the Lord's Prayer at morning assembly, even though I didn't have to; I sang Christmas carols, and still do.

In 1977 I needed glasses. All our Muslim friends told us that the best optician in Singapore was Isaac Benjamin. So began a friendship with someone whose family members had been killed by the Nazis. We learned this in 1978 when the series "Holocaust" showed on Singapore television, creating a sensation on an island that still remembered its own Japanese occupation, and that had a Jewish population. I remember my father asking Mr. Benjamin if he was watching the series. He said he was, but he did wonder whether it wasn't best to remember without representing: never to forget, but also never to project. As *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful* have more recently shown, this still is a question of

incalculable importance. I watched, though, and I saw horrors I could not have imagined. I cried, and began to see things in a new light. Or, I should say, a new darkness.

In 1981, I left Singapore for the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied Arabic, and where I met many Jewish people. But, whereas I had known many Jewish people before, and knew Jewish culture, ritual, and custom, I, on the other hand, was the first Muslim most of them had ever met. They assumed I was Arab—something complicated by the fact that I had decided to major in Arabic, a language I knew only how to read without comprehension. Most of my friends assumed that my theological and political positions were one and the same, that that position must be the position they imagined all Muslims—more than a billion people—held worldwide. Even though they had never met a Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

I spent 1988/89 in Cairo studying Egyptian poets and their urban poetry and took the opportunity to visit Jerusalem, in March of 1989. I visited the tombs of Abraham, Joseph, and others. I visited Bethlehem, and also many of the sites in East Jerusalem. One curious thing I noticed was all the Mercedes Benzes. One taxi driver told me these were part of a reparations package from the German government.

As fate would have it, I was finally able, in the 1990s, to spend part of my adult in Mauritius, my parents' and my wife's place of origin. Living there was an eye-opener. I was now living in a communalized milieu, where every racial or ethnic or political or religious group had a gripe against the other; where a history of slavery and massive immigration had complicated demographics, governance, and opportunity; and where the *lingua franca* was among other things a repository of history and racism. I was fluent, though not native in Mauritian Creole, but it was only there

that I learned that in Kreol *zulu* means a black man, or that *zwif*, Jew, means thief. I knew that there had been no Jewish immigration to Mauritius. Why and how had such a terrible term come into being? I realized quickly enough that it had come from French, the language from which Kreol has borrowed much vocabulary, and was not surprised. I was surprised, however, to learn from my father that there had been Jews in Mauritius.<sup>5</sup>

I watched a lot of videos in Mauritius. It was a way to keep in touch with anglophone culture. One day, I watched *Fiddler on the Roof* with my wife. I had seen it many times, but it was my wife's first time. She was enchanted and recommended it to her sisters, then 27 and 28 years old, both educated and well off. They refused to watch it, wondering why they would need to watch a film about Jews, but we insisted. They enjoyed the film, which engendered such remarks as, "I didn't know Jewish people did things that way . . ."

It was in Mauritius that I saw *Schindler's List*, dubbed in French. I am not much of a Spielberg fan because his filmmaking manipulates audiences and replicates stereotypes in that overly influential medium, popular cinema. He demonized Arabs in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; he did the same to Indians in *Temple of Doom*. But I had liked *The Color Purple*, and I knew he was capable of helping shape opinions and promote discussion. I did not like *Schindler's List*, though. I thought, as does Judith Doneson, that the Jew is feminized in it.<sup>6</sup> I thought that the little girl and her red outfit was oversymbolic; that the camera was voyeuristic; that the Nazi colonel was demonized and shown as sadistic, instead of being shown as someone "average," someone for whom unspeakable horror had become commonplace, explicable, excusable, enabling, necessary. And I thought that the fact that it was based on a true story—which makes more urgent

the question of representation and verisimilitude<sup>7</sup>—took away from it more than it contributed. But I was delighted that it was a huge success in Mauritius, and that it brought to the movie theaters people whose view of Jews, the Holocaust, and its wrenching aftermath it forever changed. I was very disturbed, however, to learn that *Schindler's List* was banned in most Arab countries (except for limited screenings in film clubs in Egypt and elsewhere). Once again, the issue of Palestine has been elided with the Shoah in the most insidious of ways.<sup>8</sup>

Elision has also been a strategy of the *Nation of Islam*. This is a group whose faith I have no right to question. But, both as a Muslim and as a student of things Arabic and Islamic, I can and do question a theology steeped in racialized, and therefore racist, claims: that Wallace Fard Muhammad was an incarnation of God; that white people are devils and the result of an experiment gone awry; that Jews bear special responsibility for the North Atlantic slave trade. And I can and do question the statement made by one of the Nation of Islam leaders that there was a Holocaust but “African Americans pay a hell of a cost.”<sup>9</sup> As Yosefa Loshitzky pertinently observes, these “witticisms” give voice to African-Americans’ frustration with attempts to frame their victimhood through the experience of other groups. For African-Americans, such efforts are ways of silencing their own victimhood and making it invisible.<sup>10</sup> This needs to be addressed by all concerned. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Spielberg’s movie *Amistad* was not partly a response to this, a need to speak about the more than 12 million who were enslaved.

If the Nation of Islam’s links to Islam have been questioned by many Muslims, the links to Islam of the now-banned radio station and still operating Web site, Radio Islam, are, to my mind, non-existent. Radio Islam is an organization that self-endows legitimacy from its appeal to objectivity in the word

“radio” and from its appeal to divine sanction in the word “Islam.” The site consists of diatribe: offensive, criminal—the person behind it has been convicted in France and Sweden and has served a prison term—and un-Islamic. What makes it worse, far, far worse, is that the Muslim world—in this age of cyberspace—must be aware of it and yet does not condemn it in the strongest possible terms. The same goes for the South African Radio 786, which aired the views of one Yacoub Zaki of the now defunct Muslim Institute in London, who said that he accepted that 1 million Jews had died during World War Two but disputed the fact that they were killed in gas chambers. They died, he maintained “like other people in the camps, from infectious diseases, particularly typhus.”<sup>11</sup>

All these individuals and organizations use the word Islam, hide behind it, and thereby taint it. This is exacerbated by the fact that a number of prominent Holocaust deniers and revisionists have sought and obtained refuge in Muslim countries.<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Graf, the Swiss revisionist, fled Baden in November 2000 to escape a 15-month prison sentence for Holocaust denial. In the words of his colleagues, “Jürgen Graf is staying in Tehran at the invitation of a group of Iranian scholars and university professors who are sympathetic to Holocaust revisionism.”<sup>13</sup> And Roger Garaudy, prosecuted in France for his Holocaust denial, was received royally in Egypt. Fortunately, Reda Hilal, deputy editor of *Al-Ahram* was one of the first Egyptian journalists and intellectuals to write against Arabs associating themselves with racist historians “who are looking for Arab money as well as sympathy for their anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denial discourse.” Hilal even says, “We should not sympathize with those who should be blamed for it.”<sup>14</sup>

One strategy of revisionists is not to deny the Holocaust outright, but to insist on revising the extermination figure down

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from six million, a figure they criticize is a mantra. Hilal says, "Even if only five people were killed, it is still a crime against humanity." The significance of this issue cannot be underestimated, and must, however grudgingly, be understood as the prism through which many Arabs—and I say Arabs, not Muslims, a distinction it is crucial to remember to maintain—view the Holocaust. It is crucial for Muslims to dissociate themselves from revisionists and deniers, and to denounce them in the strongest possible terms.

I should like to conclude by once again invoking Sanaullah Kirmani:

As a Muslim I take the event of the Holocaust as the moral negation of the Ruler of all. These evil perpetrators deny the rule of the Almighty. The fool in Psalm 16 affirmed in his heart that there was no God, but the fool never claimed that he believed in other than God. The Nazis went an enormous step beyond. They asserted they were God. They played God. In Islam, coming into being and passing away, life and death, condemnation and salvation, establishment and destruction of nations are only for God to command, and not for human beings to decide. No person has the right to limit another person's humanity.

Shawkat M. Toorawa

ENDNOTES

1. I am very grateful to Bill Miles for having occasioned my presentation, "The Shoah: Meditations of a Multicultural Muslim," (available at [http://www.violence.neu.edu/Shawkat\\_Toorawa.html](http://www.violence.neu.edu/Shawkat_Toorawa.html)) of which this essay is a revised version. I am grateful also to my fellow symposiasts for their comments, in particular Nadim Rouhana. [Note: Given the ephemeral nature of the web, some of the URLs cited below may no longer be active.]
2. During the symposium, Professor Rouhana, while acknowledging my passion, pointed out the limits of an impressionistic, autobiographical presentation as a way of interrogating Muslim response(s) to the Shoah. He recognized the virtue of self-criticism, the need to bring things to the floor, rather than to sweep them under the rug, but he also felt it was important that one not rely on impressions, lest these contribute to further stereotyping of the Muslim and Arab worlds. I cannot pretend to speak for a billion other people, and do not. But I can, with full confidence and with no excuse, comment on what they do. Evidently, I have not met all one billion Muslims. I do, however, organize my thoughts around my own biography. I have met many Muslims in many places, and I report on that. If I thereby stereotype, it is unintentional. As will become clear, however, it is my intention to convey that there are indeed monolithic positions - both self-actualized and imposed by others. Both positions are problematic and have to be studied. I might add that, sadly, impressionistic discussions remain one of the few ways in which Muslims engage the question of the Shoah, when they do at all.
3. That address was subsequently published as "The Holocaust: Reflections of a Muslim" in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34:2 (Spring 1997), pp. 218-222.
4. My relatives in Mauritius trivialized anything Jewish, demonized anyone Jewish. I had come to expect this in and from the Arab world, where the question of Palestine has been inextricably linked with Jews and things Jewish. But what were Muslims of Indian origin, like myself, living on an island where there were no Jews, doing? Simply, they were collapsing their theology with political ideology.

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5. On the arrival of 1,580 Jewish refugees in Mauritius in 1940, see Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of the Jewish Detainees in Mauritius, 1940-1945* (Mauritius: Editions VIZAVI, 1998).
6. Judith E. Doneson, "The Feminization of the Jew in *Schindler's List*," in Yosefa Loshitzky, ed., *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 140-152.
7. See Matthew Kapell's interesting (but to my mind, flawed) article, "Speakers for the Dead: Star Trek, the Holocaust, and the Representation of Atrocity," *Extrapolation* 41:2, pp. 104-114.
8. Professor Rouhana has taken me to task as follows: "Just saying *Schindler's List* was banned in every single Arab country stereotypes the Arab world as people who cannot or do not sympathize with the Jewish experience. I think that is wrong. I think it's important why *Schindler's List* was banned in the Arab world. It is also important to investigate why there were attempts to cut the very last minute or two from *Schindler's List*. As you remember, the last two minutes brought out the Zionist, not the Jewish, experience in order to present it to the Arab world. The last minute or two in *Schindler's List* connects the Holocaust with the Zionist enterprise." I do not think that by pointing out that *Schindler's List* was banned in most Arab countries, and many Muslim countries, I am stereotyping the Muslim world. I am simply pointing out something that needs to be pointed out, and something that needs to be understood. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was banned in Singapore. There were reasons for that, primarily about offending the Christian population. I am not stereotyping Singapore by pointing that out. If I say Singapore bans chewing gum, I am not stereotyping Singapore unless my interlocutor decides that any fact or datum I have about the place is enough for him to decide about that place. Then the problem is him and not the information. Everything is multiple and must be understood multiply.
9. Cited by Loshitzky in her Introduction to *Spielberg's Holocaust*, pp. 6 and 16, note 23; and reported widely online. Cf. Khalil Muhammad, from his 19 April 1994 Howard University speaking engagement, quoted at <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/orgs/american/adl/uncommon-ground/noi-and-denial.html>.

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10. Loshitzky, "Introduction," *Spielberg's Holocaust*, pp. 6-7.
11. Widely reported by the Jewish press in South Africa and elsewhere. See e.g. Anna Cox, "Muslim Holocaust denial tests South Africa's hate speech ban," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 6 December 2000: [http://www.zipple.com/newsandpolitics/internationalnews/20001206sa\\_hate\\_speech.s.html](http://www.zipple.com/newsandpolitics/internationalnews/20001206sa_hate_speech.s.html)
12. Professor Rouhana notes: "There was a conference planned in Beirut for those Holocaust deniers that were prevented from holding their conference somewhere else. Under the pressure of Arab intellectuals, Beirut stepped in and banned the conference two weeks ago. I think this is very important." It may indeed be that the Beirut 2001 conference was banned as a result of the activism of Arab intellectuals. Alas, published reports are all rather about the activism on the part of Jewish organizations.
13. Institute for Historical Review, "Swiss Revisionist Forced into Exile for 'Thought Crime,'" 24 December 2000: <http://www.ihr.org/conference/beirutconf/background.html>. Cf. [http://www.freedomsite.org/pipermail/fs\\_discussion/2000-December/001280.html](http://www.freedomsite.org/pipermail/fs_discussion/2000-December/001280.html)
14. Nadia Abou El-Magd, "Debating Holocaust Denial," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, pp. 11-17 May 2000: <http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/481/eg12.html>

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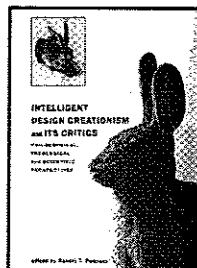
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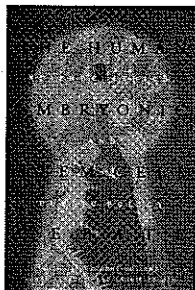
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## Versions and Perversions of the Holocaust in Latin America

Ilán Stavans

*What is the impact of the Holocaust in Latin America? Between 1939 and 1945, the region remained, for the large part, distant from the military campaigns that unfolded in Europe, North Africa, and the Far East. But as soon World War II was over, it became a safe haven for Nazi refugees and concentration camp survivors. In nations such as Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, these two groups often live tete-à-tete in the same neighborhoods. The way the decimation of European Jewry has been digested in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas in pop culture and by the intelligentsia is explored. It reflects on ingrained ignorance and anti-Semitism and establishes a bridge between the tragedy and local catastrophes such as the so-called Dirty War in the seventies.*

**Keywords** Anti-Semitism; Argentina; Brazil; Dirty War; Latin America, Impact of Holocaust; Holocaust, Intellectual Response; Mexico

*Barbarie y Memoria* is a slim volume, barely a hundred pages long, from Argentina.<sup>1</sup> Edited by Manuela Fingueret, it is an anthology of international contributors intended for a general Spanish-language audience. From the outset, I was intrigued by its attempt to link the Holocaust to the military dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1983.

As the Holocaust has become a permanent fixture in American-Jewish life over these last three decades, so has the number of anthologies about the Nazi atrocities proliferated during

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