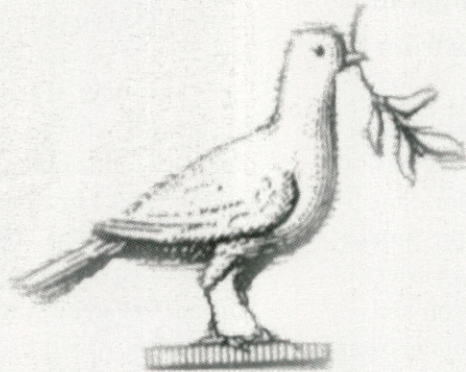


Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Elie Weisel, Fanaticism, and the Truth



by Renard Doneskey and Robert R. Mendenhall

Seven years have passed since the Branch Davidian compound went up in flames. But only this past September did a judge rule that the federal government cannot be held liable for the wrongful deaths of those who perished in the fire. Although the original compound burned to the ground and many Branch Davidians died that April day in 1993, the teachings of their founder, David Koresh, and his followers live on. These believers have a new prophet and the teachings of the Branch Davidians continue to evolve. At times we may ask ourselves how such teachings gain proponents. What characteristics do such charismatic leaders have that inspire such loyalty in their flock?

At least part of the answer lies in the nature of their belief system. In this regard, Elie Weisel, author of *Night* and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has much to say.¹ He recently visited Fort Worth, Texas, and on September 20, 2000, spoke to an audience at Texas Christian University about "The Seductions and Dangers of Fanaticism." Weisel's lecture, although not directly about Waco or the Branch Davidians, touched upon all types of fanatical behavior—religious, political, and racial.

"I shall speak tonight about fanaticism." Weisel's voice was calm and quiet. Almost as one, the four thousand or so people who came to hear him leaned forward in their seats and focused all their senses to hear this mild man through the low purr of the air conditioning system. He spoke directly to the point, but without hostility or hatred.

As we listened, we wondered how he could maintain his composure after all he has seen: this man who as a boy of fifteen was deported by the Nazis from his home in Sighet, Romania, and sent to Auschwitz; this man whose mother and younger sister perished there; this man who with his father was later transported to Buchenwald, where he watched his father die; this man who could write, "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust."²

Elie Weisel has good reason to scorn, to revile, to vilify those who have so terribly hurt him—and to do so passionately—but he does not. Weisel began with the story of a father and son taking a walk one morning, just after daybreak. They find a coin on the ground, clearly dropped by some recent passerby. The father, who wants his son to learn the importance of rising early, says: “Do you see my son, the value of waking up before others are out and about? We have gotten up early enough to find this coin.” The son replies “But whoever dropped it woke even earlier than we did.”

In this story, Weisel noted, neither the father nor the son displayed an important characteristic of fanaticism: an unwillingness to communicate. Fanatics, Weisel said, don’t communicate with each other, at least in the sense of trying to understand and be understood. Rather, fanatics desire to make others conform to their sense of how the world should be run. “The fanatic,” Weisel said, “believes life must be governed according to his rule.” Weisel cited some examples of such fanatical policies in history: the European Crusades against the Holy Land, the Nazi party’s crusade against the Jews, the American South’s crusade for racial segregation, and apartheid in South Africa.

Another characteristic of fanatics, according to Weisel, is that they have no desire to learn. Rather, “fanaticism kills the mind; [it] kills the heart.” The fanatic hates true learning, which requires a mind open to all possibilities. Why would anyone become a fanatic? Weisel asked. “Because it’s so easy,” he answered. “The fanatic has all the answers. The fanatic has answers before he has the questions.”

In contrast, the open-minded person is one who realizes the value of learning and education. Without education, Weisel noted, we have no humanity. Further, education must be undertaken with a sense of humility, avoiding the sense of superiority that might come with higher learning. Weisel emphasized his point by saying: “One minute before I die, I hope I’m still looking for the secret of life.” He implied that those who feel they have that secret are prone to fanaticism.

A child, Weisel noted, can only learn hatred after the age of three. Up to that point the child is a *tabula rasa*. Since racism and hatred are learned, Weisel said, they can be unlearned through proper education, especially at an early age. Fanatics also desire to segregate and establish scapegoats. The fanatic wants power, Weisel noted, but only the power to destroy.

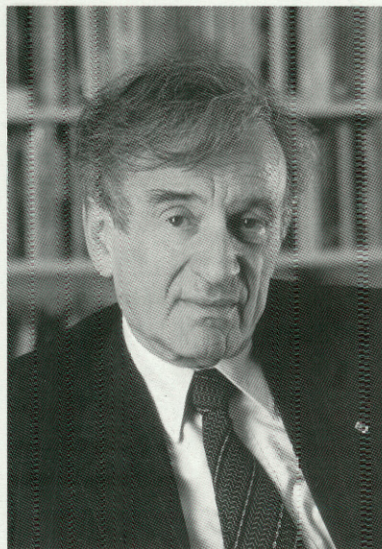


Photo: Boston University

Elie Wiesel (1928-) has worked to defend human rights throughout the world. He has supported the cause of Soviet Jews, Cambodian refugees, South African apartheid victims, famine victims in Africa, and prisoners in the former Yugoslavia. He received

the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his efforts. He is the recipient of numerous other awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award. Wiesel is the founding chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

Wiesel has also authored more than thirty-five books, many of which address the suffering of Jews in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. His first book *La Nuit (Night)* describes his personal experience of being deported at fifteen to Auschwitz with his family. Both of his parents and his younger sister died at the hands of Nazis. Other books by Wiesel include *Dawn, A Beggar in Jerusalem, The Testament: A Novel, The Forgotten*, and two memoirs: *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, and the sequel, *And the Sea Is Never Full*.

“Fanaticism,” he said, “must diminish others to feel powerful—must put others in prison to feel free.”

Again, by way of contrast, Weisel noted that the nonfanatic actively tries to establish equality. To illustrate this point, Weisel explained his theory of why God originally created only one man and one woman rather than a host of people. Weisel suggested that God gave us common ancestry so that “at no point in time and space can anyone say ‘I am superior to you.’” With Adam and Eve as original father and mother of all, each of us traces our heritage, our race, back to them.

In his concluding remarks, Weisel, with the quiet dignity that marked his entire lecture, asked, “What

have we learned? Everyone is unique. . . . No one has the right to say 'I have the key to the truth.'" And the key to the Truth is exactly what the followers of David Koresh still claim to have, a claim voiced through their current prophet. We find these words on their official Web site: "The mysteries of God's Word shall be clearly seen, that God's plan of salvation may be understood for those who live in the latter days. To not heed unto Present Day Truth, which this book reveals as never before, is to have no regard for the Spirit of Prophecy, therefore showing that you have no interest in God's Word."³

Here we find clear evidence that the remaining Davidians do claim to have the key to the truth. Further, they suggest that if you reject their version of the Truth you are committing the unpardonable sin: "However, if you break God's laws by rejecting Present Truth, then you . . . have committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. All manner of sins against man's laws shall be forgiven you, but those who sin against the laws of God, as revealed through the Seven Seals Scroll, shall not be forgiven, neither in this life or the life to come." And in another passage: "To reject the explanation of prophecies contained in the Seven Seals, which are found in this book, is to reject the Holy Spirit."⁴ The Davidians, then, claim to have the Truth and state that if you don't agree with their biblical interpretations of the Seven Seals, you have rejected God and have committed the unpardonable sin. Let's recall Weisel's words: "No one has the right to say 'I have the key to the truth.'"

Does any of this have relevance for the contemporary Seventh-day Adventist Christian? After all, aren't the Davidians just a cult with very distant connections to traditional Adventism? At first glance, it may seem so. For example, the Adventist Church was quick to distance itself from the Waco Davidians. While the initial news reports of the February 28, 1993, raid connected the Branch Davidians to Seventh-day Adventists, the Adventist Church successfully argued that any reference to Seventh-day Adventism was inaccurate, since the Branch Davidians had only distant historical connections to present-day Adventism.⁵

Nevertheless, we should not forget that the Branch Davidians have their roots in Seventh-day Adventism. Koresh targeted members of Seventh-day Adventist congregations for recruitment. Among the

eighty-six people who died at Mt. Carmel, the majority were former Seventh-day Adventists. Not all of these people fit the stereotype of fanatic cultists. Some were well-educated, intellectual people grounded in Seventh-day Adventism. Two of the Davidians had degrees in theology. Another was a graduate of Harvard Law School.⁶ That these particular people joined the Branch Davidians must give us, as Seventh-day Adventists, pause to analyze our own theological stance.

Are there aspects of Seventh-day Adventist belief that leave us vulnerable to fanatics like David Koresh? Do we, for example, believe we hold the key to the Whole Truth? "God," Weisel said, "is the fanatic's prisoner." We see this concept exemplified in many places in the contemporary world. In the last twenty-five years we have seen "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo; the tribal warfare between the Tutsis and Hutus; the genocidal actions of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; and other such atrocities throughout the world. In the face of all this fanaticism, Weisel remains hopeful: "On the edge of the abyss," he said, "it is possible to dream dreams of redemption. . . . I belong to a generation that has learned that whatever the question, indifference is not the answer."

Notes and References

1. Elie Weisel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).
2. *Ibid.*, 32.
3. *Seven Seals Revelation Library* <www.brandavidian.com>
4. *Ibid.*
5. James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
6. *Ibid.*

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