

Truett Seminary student explores ethics at Auschwitz

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WACO—Ministers and medical practitioners in Nazi Germany enabled the Holocaust not because they abandoned professional ethics and moral codes but because they redefined them, a student from Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#) concluded after her time at Auschwitz.

Julia Wallace was one of 13 seminary students—Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim—who studied alongside medical students as part of the [Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics](#). She is the fourth Truett Seminary student chosen to participate.

The two-week intensive program in Germany and Poland not only included a tour of Auschwitz, location of the largest extermination camp established by the Nazi regime, but also a conversation with a Holocaust survivor and visits to the German Resistance Memorial Center, the Topography of Terror Museum, the Euthanasia Museum and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

The interdisciplinary program explored how professionals in Germany—considered among the top in their fields internationally—enabled and sometimes advanced Nazism. Seminar leaders led participants to apply the lessons they learned to contemporary ethical issues.

‘Professional ethics gone wrong’

“It was a study in professional ethics gone wrong,” said Wallace, who is

pursuing dual degrees from Truett Seminary and Baylor's [Diana R. Garland School of Social Work](#).



Julia Wallace reviews notes from the two weeks she spent in Germany and Poland as part of the Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics. (Photo / Ken Camp)

She noted the experience reminded her of the words of an Old Testament prophet: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" (Isaiah 5:20).

In part, clergy under the Nazi regime began to redefine good when they started to redefine God in nonbiblical terms, Wallace observed.

"I think it is a powerful reminder that good must be rooted in God's revelation to us, since he is the source of goodness," she said.

In turn, other professionals began to exalt what they saw as the collective

good over the individual good, she added. For example, medical professionals justified experimentation on unwilling human subjects by pointing to potential advances in scientific research.

Balance competing values

Participants in the two-week study also talked about the challenges professionals face when confronted with competing values, such as security and freedom or forgiveness and accountability.

They discussed how religious leaders could balance those values when faced with issues such as the immigration debate in the United States or the treatment of perpetrators of sexual abuse who confess their offenses and seek restoration, Wallace noted.

The Nazi regime seized on existing anti-Semitism in the general population and stoked the fires of hatred to advance its ideology, she learned.

“Genocide doesn’t begin with killing. There is a gradualism. It doesn’t happen overnight,” she said.

Failure to speak up for victims

Within the context of growing anti-Semitism, many ministers told worshippers what they wanted to hear, she observed.

“They catered to the congregation rather than being prophetic voices,” Wallace said.

Some ministers feared financial repercussions if they went against the wishes of their congregants, she added. Others in hierarchal denominations felt a duty to obey their superiors, even when the established church became increasingly identified with the Nazi state.

“Some wanted to climb the ladder of success and associate with the powers that be,” she said.

Ministers who conformed to the expectations of their congregations, their peers and their superiors lacked the courage to stand as “one dissenting voice” in part because they never practiced the spiritual discipline of solitude, she noted.

Other ministers simply said, “It’s not my job to speak out” on politically sensitive issues, she observed, pointing out the continuing challenge clergy face in that regard.

“How do you speak from the pulpit about politics? It’s a balance for the minister who does not want to become a political pundit but also does not want to be completely silent about important issues,” she said.

Willfully blind

When churches become too closely identified with a particular political perspective, worshippers—particularly in today’s mobile society—may simply select a congregation that will reinforce their opinions rather than challenge them to follow God’s direction, she observed.

“The church can become an echo chamber, when people choose to go to a church where everybody sees things as they do,” Wallace said.

Ministers who claimed they did not know about the horrors of Nazism intentionally chose not to look, she learned. They willfully turned a blind eye to what should have been readily observable, and they made the decision to do nothing.

“We talked about how there are not just sins of commission but also sins of omission. Passivity is also a sin,” she said.

Wallace, who grew up as the child of Baptist missionary parents in South Africa, reflected on how memories of a nation that was struggling to emerge from Apartheid shaped her own commitment to racial justice. She noted the importance of remembrance—acknowledging complicity in institutionalized sin and accepting the demands of restorative justice before reconciliation can occur.

Fear or love?

Many ministers in nations under Nazi control failed to challenge congregants to recognize their responsibility to those whom they viewed as “the other,” instead focusing only on those who were like themselves, she said.

“Is a decision based on fear or on love? How are we to love those around us? As Christians, we are not to love only our own people but all people,” Wallace said. “We are not called just to care for our own.”

Christians who saw the Jews as outsiders who rejected Christ failed to stand with them and speak up for them, she noted.

“We have to stand up for the religious liberty of others, recognizing freedom of conscience is a God-given right,” Wallace said. “We should not just stand up for our own but for all people.”

The example of Nazi Germany offers a cautionary lesson not only regarding the danger of the church becoming too closely tied to the state, but also Christians valuing their national identity more than their allegiance to God, she observed.

“God’s kingdom is supreme and cannot be equated with any single nation-state,” she said.