

Rereading *Night* and rethinking baptism

By [L. Roger Owens](#)

July 6, 2016

I had work to do the other day, but I set it aside to reread Elie Wiesel's *Night* as a way to mark the great man's death and remember his life.

While I was struck by passages I anticipated, like his account of how his belief was shattered upon seeing the furnaces of Auschwitz—"Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever"—it was an unexpected line that caught me, given a current news story I'd been following.

Donald Trump recently tweeted an image of Hillary Clinton among piles of \$100 bills and a six-pointed star bearing the words, "Most Corrupt Politician Ever." Unsurprisingly, many have seen anti-Semitism in this image. The use of the six-pointed star suggests what one commentator called a "classic trope" of Jews and money and their influence in politics. It suggests that Hillary is not with us, but with them. She's on their side, and (everyone knows) they're corrupt.

This controversy primed me to notice a line early in *Night* when the Jews of Sighet, Transylvania learn of the latest decree—"every Jew must wear the yellow star"—and Wiesel's father's unconcerned reaction: "The yellow star? Oh well, what of it? You don't die of it."

The decree was the first outward act in a long line of distinction-making: first the star, then the ghettos enclosed by barbed wire, then the convoys to the camp. Even there the distinctions continued: women and men, strong and weak, skilled and unskilled. Each new distinction either brought a person closer to death or offered a reprieve.

The many who perished did so as a direct result of that first distinction, the sewing on of a six-pointed star that incarnated an us-and-them ideology.

I'm not qualified to judge comparisons between Trump and Hitler, but I do believe that Trump's penchant to trade in the rhetoric of distinction-making is the same

spark that history has seen ignite murderous conflagrations. How many of the world's great atrocities—the Inquisition, American slavery, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the list goes on too long—began with the simple yet terrible act of making a distinction?

Oh well, what of it? You don't die of it. But millions have.

Which is why I'm baffled when I see Christians support a political vision in which this rhetoric finds a home. What could be more contrary to the vision of God's kingdom brought near in Christ, a kingdom that has at its heart the dismantling of humanity's predilection for this kind of distinction-making? We ritualize this dismantling every time we baptize someone. We recite Paul: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Yet the distinction-making tendency often prevails.

Of course, baptism itself can be seen as just perpetuating humanity's age-old practice of marking us and them—determining who's in and who's out, who gets to eat at the table and who doesn't, who has God's Spirit and who remains bereft of it. Such a view of baptism will never train us to see differently, nor school us out of our destructive dualisms.

So we must learn to see baptism differently. Not as a new distinction marking an "us" that can be too easily conflated with some social group, but as making explicit what God knows and mystics have always seen: we are all *already* one. If God still has a purpose for the church, surely it's this: to live as a community that shows this truth in its life and in its own politics.

If you want to know where the failure to be such a community can lead, just read *Night* and be reminded of the Christians in Germany who knew this was occurring and did nothing to stop it because it was happening to *them*. They'd forgotten the meaning of baptism. In this political climate, we shouldn't make the same mistake.