Religion and Memory: The Importance of Monuments in Preserving Historical Identity, by J. Kirsch

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The '#Must Fall' movement has had a significant impact in the United Kingdom and South Africa as a result of a reassessment of these nations' colonial and imperial histories which resulted in many monuments being erected in the face of the population. Mandela claimed that such monuments must remain in order to remember the past—good and bad. That was a simplistic view despite its partial truth as it took no account of the memories of those who suffer and now live with the constant offence caused. The same is not true of monuments erected to commemorate national disasters and yet, questions may still be raised concerning their ongoing value and appropriateness for the present and future.

This book presents an in-depth study of two such monuments erected to remember two disastrous events in the twentieth century—the Tsitsernekaberd memorial commemorating the 1915 Armenian Christian genocide and related historical events, and Yad Vashem in Israel commemorating the murder of 6,000,000 European Jews ('a paradigm for all mass crime' p.23). This project began in 1942 although it was not processed until after the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. This study is inter- and transdisciplinary with theological, philosophical, architectural, historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives. It accounts for the global changes regarding the need to avoid such tragedies in the future. This has led to the growth of a culture of human rights in which memorials have become integral to the formation of 'remembrance cultures' (p.17). The author emphasises the compatibility of political cultural and biblical-theological perspectives or remembrance along with secular ideas of theories of memory. This is developing into a historical memory research-oriented academic discipline. It raises serious questions regarding how it may become a tool for the future remodelling of societies rather than a projection of the dreadful alternative of oblivion.

Gathering appropriate and necessary information can be extremely difficult with the passing of time and the passing of eyewitnesses. Ideological preferences also play an important role and often involve a combination of myth, symbolism, and religion.

Many concepts relevant to the issue of historical identity are considered—memory, remembrance, commemoration, and ideology, in relation to these tragic national events which have had global repercussions and continue to have political implications.

As the author points out the British concentration camps of the South African War (1899–1902) provide an earlier case of genocide in South Africa and have had an impact on the history of twentieth-century South Africa. Their effects do not just go away with the passage of time; as we have seen, they have political consequences for coming to terms with the past. She makes a substantial case for collective memory as a source for the role of collective memory in promoting theological beliefs and practices while forming and strengthening a sense of identity through history and architecture.

This book is one of several related publications. It raises serious matters that require detailed attention to achieve closure in the sense of coming to terms with, though not forgetting, the past. A good read for interested parties