



Consequences of the Shoa for Contemporary Theology

“Auschwitz ... is the greatest event since the cross.”
(KERTÉSZ Imre)

After sixty years even the third generation should ask the question: Why did it happen? How can humans cause such suffering to others? The Shoa is irrational. Although it took place with the most precise rational planning, administration and logistics, the core of the genocide is not understandable.

It is impossible to name any rational causes. Radical evil is always irrational. The inexplicability of the cause opens transcendental dimensions. Regarding our total powerlessness, we should ask ultimate questions, searching for meaning.

Theology is asked how all that evil could be done by humans against their neighbours. The silence of God during these years questions all positive teaching about a loving Father in Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Negative Myth

Arthur A. COHEN used *tremendum* to describe the fearful overwhelming power of radical evil in Auschwitz. The term was originally used by Rudolf OTTO, who in his classical book *The Holy* referred to the fearful other side of God as *tremendum*.

Arthur COHEN's use of this term shows the transcendental way of the search for meaning, although he points in the opposite direction of transcendence: “The appropriate neologism for the poetic direction of this *tremendum* is that it ‘subscends’ its origins, digging deeper into the infernal abyss of human and historical negativity.”²

1 KERTÉSZ Imre, *A holocaust mint kultúra (The Holocaust as Culture)*. Budapest, 1993.

2 COHEN Arthur A., *The Tremendum*. New York, 1981. 30.

The Shoa is the deepest experience of negativity for the Western Judeo-Christian civilization till the present. During the bloodiest years of World War II, when people became accustomed to cruelty, the genocide of the European Jews took place in a more or less hidden way.

Although the death camps were secret, many atrocities, discrimination and violence took place before the eyes of many millions of Germans, Magyars, Slovaks, Czechs, Poles, Austrians, Croats and others.

The Shoa happened right in the heart of Europe, starting on the streets of Budapest, Praha, Warszawa, Bratislava and Wien. Mostly the Jews of Poland, Russia, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were deported and killed.

Christianity remained silent. Even the present Christianity does not seem to be able to face the full depth of the abyss called Auschwitz. Johann Baptist METZ speaks about the “astonishing complacency of systematic theology in front of this catastrophe.”³

Dealing with the Shoa is not only important from the viewpoint of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is also crucial for Christian theology itself. Auschwitz is a radical question for our understanding of God and also for our Christology.

To become seriously concerned with the Shoa is the task for contemporary Christian thought sixty years after Auschwitz. This process needs courage and honesty. Radical questions should be asked regarding our teaching about God and our understanding of Judaism. The circle of awkward silence and meaningless commonplaces in public discourse in Central Europe should be broken.

In the Magyar contemporary literature the Nobel Prize of KERTÉSZ Imre in 2002 broke the silence in public discussion. Even nationalistic and patriotic Christian groups had to answer the question at that time, whether the prize (the only Magyar Nobel Prize in literature so far) is a prize for Magyar literature or for an alien one.

If they accept it as a Magyar Nobel Prize, by implication they need to recognize the Shoa as a national tragedy. Accepting the Shoa as a national tragedy is a hard task not only for the extreme-right, but also for the broader society.

The question in Europe is whether the trauma of the Shoa can become a part of our religio-cultural identity. KERTÉSZ Imre wrote

3 MANEMANN Jürgen – METZ Johann Baptist (eds.), *Christologie nach Auschwitz*. Münster, 2001. 99.

about the possibility of a negative myth. As the Shoa is *surhistorical*,⁴ it can become a part of universal human memory from Mount Sinai to Golgotha.

Even though these events happened at a concrete moment in history, they are timeless. The active memory makes it possible to pass through the events again. Remembering the innocent victims from Cain to Auschwitz keeps their memory alive.

Johann Baptist METZ called this process the *memory of suffering*.⁵ Remembering the voiceless victims who should have disappeared from history, means keeping them in history. For Christianity the three days of the Passion of Jesus Christ are such an active memory, especially in the Eucharist.

The negative myth also needs to be a clear story in which the division between the victim and the perpetrator is clear, and good and evil are at odds with each other. In Auschwitz the lines are clear.

Perpetrators

The abyss killed six million Jews and others and destroyed the optimism of modernity forever. After World War II—Hiroshima and Auschwitz—we see that the dream of modernity is lost forever.

The technology and bureaucracy of the modern state can become devastating tools even against their own citizens. Everything was officially planned with all the necessary laws, transportation, economic interests. New laws were passed in all fields of life from education to marriage, from Jewish property to the yellow star.

The Nazi war against the Jews was a mixture of the Middle Ages and Modernity. Ancient tribal kinship had to be supported with modern biology. Pre-Christian paganism of the Germans was mixed with totalitarian state-paganism.

The old ethics of Europe became a boundary that had to be removed in order to let a new ethic of genocide enjoy its full space. Even fundamental Christian teaching had to be changed in the new situation.

The movement of Nazi Christians (Deutsche Christen) is the worst example. They tried in their anti-Semitic rage to remove the Old Testament from the Bible. The state and its *Führer* were the new deities of their religion.

4 HELLER Ágnes, *Auschwitz és Gulág (Auschwitz and Gulag)*. Budapest, 2002. 30.

5 PINNOCK Sarah K., *Beyond Theodicy*. Albany, 2002. 111.

In this state paganism (also in Stalinism and Leninism), an enemy within was necessary. HELLER Ágnes wrote in her essay comparing Hitlerism and Stalinism about a pagan who composes a myth why Cain has to, or why it is inevitable for him, to kill Abel.⁶

The totalitarian leader himself wants to become divine. Faithful Jews and Christians must have their conflicts with the absolute claim of emperors and *führers*, from Rome up until the present day.

Theodicy and Antitheodicy

Accepting the Shoa as God's just punishment for the sins of the chosen people is a possible answer for ultra-orthodoxy. The collective punishment of both the guilty and the innocent is well known from the Bible and Jewish history.

The first and second destruction of the Temple were explained as such reactions by God after the long-lasting divine patience. Although this understanding has a long tradition in history, it is hardly acceptable for the human conscience.

The collective view of society as a united religious community is unacceptable after the Enlightenment. The various people in Auschwitz were coming from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. The faithful orthodox Jew and the atheist communist Jew were both punished. Even for the individual the problem of innocent suffering remained.

The book of Job is probably the most significant text in the Bible discussing theodicy. Job does not accept his friends' charges. He is convinced that he is innocent. Even with the closing of the book we get a "deeply ambiguous conclusion."⁷ Religious explanations for suffering do not give one perfect answer either.

Zachary BRAITERMAN writes: "Theodicy and antitheodicy do not represent stable entities. Instead, they constitute interpretive boundaries between which religious discourse plays back and forth."⁸

Theodicy as the acceptance of what happened in Auschwitz is a blasphemy against the God of love. Antitheodicy as the death of God and the breaking of the Covenant leads humans to total hopelessness.

It is acceptable and necessary, however, as a protest and mourn-

6 HELLER Ágnes, *Auschwitz és Gulág (Auschwitz and Gulag)*. Budapest, 2002. 18.

7 BRAITERMAN Zachary, *(God) After Auschwitz*. Princeton, 1968. 57.

8 BRAITERMAN Zachary, *(God) After Auschwitz*. Princeton, 1968. 58.

ing. Between theodicy and antitheodicy it took quite a long time for Christian theology to find a proper way to speak about the Shoa.

Profound silence covered the Shoa in theology for long decades. After 1967, the Six-Day War, in the American Jewish community new voices appeared. In the radical 'God is Dead' theology of Thomas ALTIZER and William HAMILTON, Jewish antitheodicy found a fruitful soil.

Richard L. RUBENSTEIN published in 1966 the first edition of *After Auschwitz*. He was influenced by the Christian 'Death of God' idea. He spoke about the breaking of the covenant by God.

According to him, the silence of God in Auschwitz, when children were killed just for being Jews, was the end of the Covenant. His radical viewpoint changed in the second edition of *After Auschwitz* in 1992.

Hans JONAS and the Attributes of God

In the Jewish context different theological viewpoints are present. Probably the most fruitful and rich is the theory of Hans JONAS. God has three major attributes: omnipotence, goodness and comprehensibility.

Regarding the Shoa, just two of these attributes can be true. If omnipotent and comprehensible, then not good; if omnipotent and good, then we cannot understand God; and lastly—the option Hans JONAS chose—if God is good and comprehensible, then God is not omnipotent.⁹

Hans JONAS wrote a small creation myth. When God created humanity, God gave total freedom, restricting the divine omnipotence. The Creator had to withdraw to make a place for humans.

In this freedom humans become *partners* of God, more than just creatures. It is not the deism of the Enlightenment, as far as God keeps a close watch on the Earth. But it is the possibility of free choice that makes people partners of the Creator.

God wants the world back at the end of time, although God created the risk of human freedom. JONAS' concept gives humans an enormous responsibility on the one hand, and the promise of a history with aim on the other.

⁹ JONAS Hans, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz*. Frankfurt am Main, 1987. 43.

Individual Piety against Totalitarian Rationality

Hans JONAS gave with his myth a wide perspective for the whole of human history. That cannot be enough, however, for the level of the individual. Sarah K. PINNOCK suggests the following in this respect.

“For religious thought to move beyond theodicy means that philosophical effort should shift from global, conceptual theodicy treatments of God and evil to concentrate on situated practices of faith response to suffering.”¹⁰

The Shoa has six million faces, names, and stories. Intending the same fate for all Jews, this individuality should have disappeared in the camps. Nameless, faceless masses should march into the gas chambers.

The Nazi regime created its most horrifying product in the so called *Muselmann*. It is the name given to human persons who gave up all hope and dignity in the death camps. Their spirit was already dead, while their body was still alive. Just a few people managed to keep their human dignity and hope alive.

One of the resisting victims was a Polish Roman Catholic noblewoman, Pelagia LEWINSKA, who was in the camp of Auschwitz. She wrote: “A very thoroughly conscious idea was in the back of the camp’s existence. They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abase us, to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of humanity, to return us the level of wild animals, to fill us with contempt toward ourselves and our fellows. But from the instant I grasped the motivating principle ... it was as if I had awakened from a dream. I felt under orders to live. ... And if I died at Auschwitz it would be as a human being. I was not going to become the contemptible, disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be.”¹¹

Emil FACKENHEIM called the will to remain human as the commending voice of the living. It is the new way of sanctification. Before the Shoa the *kiddush ha-shem*, the acceptance of martyrdom, was the sanctification of God’s Holy Name.

In Auschwitz for the *Muselmänner* the *kiddush ha-hayyim*, the sanctification of life, became the way of ultimate testimony.¹² To survive or to die with dignity were the only ways to resist the Nazi death machinery.

10 PINNOCK Sarah K., *Beyond Theodicy*. Albany, 2002. 141.

11 RUBENSTEIN Richard L., *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore, 1992. 187.

12 RUBENSTEIN Richard L., *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore, 1992. 187.

Keeping the personal faith in God, prayer, and actions of solidarity towards other victims helped victims to survive. The whole psychological system of Viktor Emil FRANKL is based on this experience. To keep through was not only important for personal survival, but for the community as well. The examples survived also.

Johann B. METZ's Political Theology

Johann Baptist METZ's political fundamental theology¹³ is probably the one most concerned with the tragedy of the Shoa in Christian thought. Political theology emphasizes the fate of the innocent victims and the voiceless oppressed.

Narratives are necessary against the cultural amnesia of modernity. METZ criticizes the modern consumer society with its sole focus on the present. He speaks about the consumer society as one that "undervalues the intelligible power of recollection and thus stabilises the cultural amnesia of modern and postmodern society."¹⁴ This amnesia gives a chance for the return of the Shoa.

METZ also emphasizes the influence of the Shoa on Christian Christology. He speaks about the weak language of the Holy Saturday. Christianity cannot allow itself the triumphal language of Easter regarding all the suffering around.

Traditional Christian terms are many times too triumphal to express the desperate human situation of tragedies like the Shoa. He has a strong eschatological understanding, however, speaking about the Biblical narratives.

The situation of the Last Supper, the strong community with the "shared hope for redemption"¹⁵ and Holy Saturday with the uncertainty of the transition, are also important parts of the Holy Memory.

Christian View of Jews after the Shoa

The history of Jewish–Christian relations has been full of rivalry, suspicion and desire for hegemony. After a short period Christianity became the dominant state religion. The liberty of the Jewish community depended upon the tolerance of the ruler in power.

13 PINNOCK Sarah K., *Beyond Theodicy*. Albany, 2002. 81.

14 MANEMANN Jürgen – METZ Johann Baptist (eds.), *Christologie nach Auschwitz*. Münster, 2001. 99. 102.

15 PINNOCK Sarah K., *Beyond Theodicy*. Albany, 2002. 91.

Anti-Judaism in theological statements from AUGUSTINE to Martin LUTHER were common. Christianity understood itself as the new Israel. Having rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Judaism lost the role of the chosen people.

This understanding is expressed in the theory of the Christology of discontinuity. This theory was dominant throughout Christian history. The tragic consequences are well-known from discrimination to pogroms. The shameful misinterpretation of Christology prepared the cultural background of the Nazi ideology.

As Didier POLLEFEYT formulated clearly: “A major reason why the Nazis could go as far as they did was that Western culture had been so thoroughly steeped in a very negative theological understanding of the Jewish people.”¹⁶

A different understanding of Jesus Christ was also present in Christian thought. That is the Christology of *continuity*. This understanding has a strong New Testament base by Paul in Romans 11:

“So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, sisters and brothers, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, “Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; He will banish ungodliness from Jacob.” ... For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”¹⁷ (Romans 11,25–29)

Two theological interpretations of the continuing covenant thesis are possible. The first is the single covenant theory, which means that Christianity is the extension of the one covenant of God with the Jews. The other option is the double covenant theory. It means that with Jesus Christ something new has come to the first covenant without invalidating it.¹⁸

The Gift of Freedom and Responsibility: Ethical Catharsis

In Auschwitz the “culture-making catharsis” (KERTÉSZ Imre) happened in the narrative of the good as exceptional. Evil is common and Good is the exception. The majority remained passive or marched with the infernal bacchanalia of Nazism.

16 POLLEFEYT Didier, *Christology after Auschwitz: A Roman Catholic Perspective* (2002). <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=775>

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18 POLLEFEYT Didier, *Christology after Auschwitz: A Roman Catholic Perspective* (2002). <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=775>

Doing good under totalitarian power meant freedom from the state ethics. Only those who dared to be “unethical” could be ethical. To act as a human was only possible through radical danger or self-sacrifice.

For Christian faith that meant turning towards orthopraxis instead of orthodoxy. Our orthodoxy, with all the classical ontology and attributes of the omnipotent God, became more fragmented after the Shoa than ever.

The responsibility is rooted in our God-given freedom. It is fearful and magnificent. God put into human hands the fate of the Other. For Christianity this is acceptable because of our experience of God as the crucified.

The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ on Golgotha has shown how much closer God is to innocent suffering than being the cause of it. This experience does not solve the abysmal meaninglessness of the Shoa, but opens up space for human action in responsibility before the sight of God.

In this sense Christianity has to find its role in fighting against the long shadows of the past. In the Central European context it is especially delighting to hear Jan PATOČKA speaking about European responsibility:

“Because of its foundation within the abysmal profundity of the soul, Christianity represents to this day the most powerful means, never yet superseded but not yet thought right through either, by which human is able to struggle against her or his own decline.”¹⁹

Suggested Reading

- BRAITERMAN Zachary, *(God) After Auschwitz*. Princeton, 1968.
 COHEN Arthur A., *The Tremendum*. New York, 1981.
 DERRIDA Jacques, *The Gift of Death*.
 HELLER Ágnes, *Auschwitz és Gulág (Auschwitz and Gulág)*. Budapest, 2002.
 JONAS Hans, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz*. Frankfurt am Main, 1987.
 KERTÉSZ Imre, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. Vintage, 2004.
 MANEMANN Jürgen – METZ Johann Baptist (eds.), *Christologie nach Auschwitz*. Münster, 2001.
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 RUBENSTEIN Richard L., *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore, 1992.

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19 DERRIDA Jacques, *The Gift of Death*. 28.