



Religion and the Other

A Post-Holocaust Warning to Religious People

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This article was written for all those who, during the events of the Second World War in Nazi Germany, preferred to keep silent. For those who found it irrelevant to protest because of these words of Jesus: “My kingdom is not of this world.” For those people who did not feel concerned by worldly affairs and who, by principle, do not engage in politics. This article was written for the Church. In answer to its silence.

Too often Christianity has been a religion of other-worldliness. As Christians, we often believe that the affairs of the world are of no concern for us. Our goal is to preach the “eternal gospel” and the hope in an after-life. The atrocities that occur around us are but the signs of Satan’s hold on the world. Nothing can be done. We do not feel that we have a share of responsibility in these atrocities.

The fault is rejected onto Satan. Besides, life on earth is just a passage. It is only a transition. What matters is eternal life. Indeed, we believe it is better to die a saved man, rather than to save a dying man. This mentality comes from Saint Augustine. In the *Confessions*, he speaks of the bitterness of life on earth and of how man’s purpose lies in hoping for a better life. It is this mentality that has been the ferment of the Church’s silence when faced with the atrocities of Nazi Germany.

But Christianity has also been an individualistic religion. One can be saved even if the whole world is crumbling around us. Our individual salvation does not depend on our surroundings. Our personal destiny is not affected by our neighbor’s destiny. Christianity has often been good for the soul, while not necessarily being good for society. We believe that as long as we do

not sin, we will be saved. As long as we are right with God, as long as we are pure and blameless, everything will be all right. We don’t see how our individual purity ties in with responsibility for others. Christianity has often anesthetized us to the atrocities surrounding us. God matters more in Christianity than other people. Worship is more important in Christianity than justice. The vertical dimension has become more important than the horizontal dimension. It is also these tendencies in Christianity that must be rethought after Auschwitz. Christianity can never be the same. We must radically rethink all our categories. We have chosen the prophet Amos as the basis of our reflection on post-Holocaust Christianity.

The Prophet of Exile

“Words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa, what he saw

concerning Israel two years before the earthquake” (Amos 1:1). This is not another pretty story. It is not a beautiful psalm. We penetrate here the ghettos of Israel. No beautiful gardens. No long-awaited promised land. No mention of a beautiful afterlife. This here is real life. In the sordid and dark alleys of Israel. In a world where injustice and corruption flow like water.

Downtown Jerusalem is, however, prosperous. The reign of Jeroboam marks the golden age of Israel. But outside the walls of the city we can see the ghettos of the poor. The palaces of Jeroboam are built from the flesh and blood of the wretches of Israel. Dark ages in Israel. The words of the prophet are like black soot. Ashes of despair. How can we dare hope in such a situation? How can we praise God? How can we be at peace? When blood flows like water and injustice reigns, how can we sing? This is no time to sing. There is a time for everything. A time to sing, and a time to despair. This is no time to praise. This is no time to be at peace. It is a time for despair and anguish.

“Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria” (Amos 6:1). Revolt against the Pure, the Separate of Israel. Those who have been set apart for God. Those who have given Him their lives. Who live only for Him. The words of the prophet are for them.

The book of the prophet Amos teaches us to despair. But it also teaches us to hope. Light and darkness. The ashen words lead to the light of a new dawn. “In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its bro-

ken places, restore its ruins” (Amos 9:11). In spite of his knowledge that there will be no “happy end” for his people. I will not turn back my wrath, the

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prophet hopes. Israel is lost, and yet . . . There is no more hope, and yet . . . We are inhabited by evil, and yet . . . A time for despair, of anguish.

The Mockery of God

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them. Away with the noise of your songs” (Amos 5:21-25). Don’t turn to Me. Turn to your neighbor. To love your neighbor is to love God. God is present in the other person: the dimension of the divine opens up in the human face. This invisible God, this absent God, He is present in the face of the other person: “Invisible God does not only mean unfath-

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omable God, but a God accessible in justice.”¹

“But let justice flow like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24). God is found in justice. In ethics, not in the gates of official religion. Love, hesed, is more important than ritual and liturgy. The hold of official religion, of its rituals, its principles, must

never be greater than the respect and the good of others. The rituals and principles are just means. To consider them like an end in themselves, like something immutable and absolute, is idolatry. Religion can become an idol, keeping us from seeing the true God manifest in the other person. We must be able to live without official religion if we truly want to escape idolatry. The person who feels threatened, who feels his very life is at stake, when his principles, his religion are put into question, is idolatrous and his life is attached to that which is not God. We must become capable of living without a roof, without a place to rest our heads. We must learn to live in that which has no place. In the essential. Official religion, with its rituals and principles, must never become indispensable . . . and yet . . .

It is quite pretentious indeed, to think that we can learn to love others without acquiring some of the wisdom of the ancients, without acknowledging the religion, principles and rituals, which are taught us by official religion. For learning to love is no easy thing. It is not innate. We must learn *how* to love. Love

is an acquired trait. In love it is not the intention that counts. To cause suffering to somebody is to not love them. This is the role of official religion: to teach us how to love. But official religion gives us the technique. It does not give us the essence of love. We must at some point go beyond the prescriptions of official religion to the true essence of love. Of love

which is not given by duty or by charity, nor out of love for God. Of love that is not “God’s love” anymore, but true and disinterested love of the other for himself, without reasons or ulterior motives.

To love the other not because we have pity on him, nor because we want to help him, which is like loving the other like an angel would, as though our world were not his world, as though our destiny were not his destiny, his suffering not ours. But good as well as evil inhabits us all. Our God is their God. No one has the monopoly of either good or evil. We are all in the same boat. There are no saviors among us. We fight against evil not for the needy but for all of us. For evil inhabits us all. To love others, to live with them. Solidarity. To love him because there is only him. To love him because he is by our side, and because, through him, God also is by our side. And because without him, in spite of God’s presence, we would be alone. “It is not good that man should be alone.” Solidarity. Because his evil is our evil, because his suffering is our suffering. Because his culpability is ours.

The Silence of the Lambs

“I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest its fortresses. I will deliver up the city and everything in it. If ten men are left in one house, they too will die” (Amos 6:8). “Few are guilty, all are responsible.”² There is no individual innocence. When we live together, what happens to others becomes my business. There is no neutrality possible. If I close my eyes before injustice, I become a silent accomplice. My

silence is a guilty silence. “If a person sins because he does not speak up he will be held responsible” (Leviticus 5:1).

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In such a context, the help we bring our neighbor does not arise from my own superiority, but from the fact that if I do nothing, I become guilty of a crime. The help we bring to our neighbor does not come from our sufficiency but from our lack, from our fault. By helping my neighbor I fulfill a debt. Not charity, but justice. The help I give is not a favor, but a due. It is a commandment: “Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice . . . when you are harvesting in your field and overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it” (Deuteronomy 24:17).

The pure is not he who preserves himself from evil, nor he

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who avoids the scene of the crime. If he says nothing, if he does nothing, he is guilty. The pure cannot wash his hands. He must on the contrary soil them, and mix with the scum of the earth. Such is the price of his purity. We cannot be “holy,” separate, from others in this context. Evil has become so universal that purity can be attained only at the price of engagement. We must fight, we must become

soiled, to preserve our purity. Such are the words of Amos, prophet of doom. To the silence of the lambs, answers the roar of the lion of Judah: “The lion has roared, who will not fear? The sovereign Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8).

Indeed, post-Holocaust Christianity must give heed to these ashen words. While it is good to promote serenity in times of trouble, hope in despair, Christianity must take care not to erase the rage one has to feel before injustice. Instead of proposing individual solutions for the individual soul, separating it from the destiny of the world, Christianity should remember that the purity the soul aspires to comes from contact with the world and not withdrawal from it. Worshiping God is indeed the main purpose of Christianity, but this worship entails concern for others. As Jesus himself said: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. . . . Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers, you did for me” (Matthew 25:34).

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. By A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), p. 77.

²Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 14.