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**The Hidden God and History:
Philosophical and Theological Perspectives on the Holocaust
(Summary)**

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The concept of “hidden God” (*Deus absconditus*) and the image of a weak or absent deity in history have been the subject of philosophical and theological debate after the tragedy of the Shoah. One question in particular has emerged: “Why did God allow Auschwitz?” A fact that has further fueled this question is that most of the victims belonged to the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, with whom God had made a treaty (*Berit*). The most dramatic events of the 20th century have undermined every justification offered by the theodicy.

The scandal of evil is linked to the omnipotence of God and therefore to the relationship between God and mankind. So the presence and action of evil in history seek an answer to a fundamental question that touches the very meaning of creation, not only of the existence of each man. Man has to respond to evil’s challenge with responsibility and the awareness of not being able to reach a certain answer.

The philosopher Hans Jonas noted that about God we can only say a babbling, after that too many things have been said with metaphysical certainty. This hermeneutic perspective, proposed in Italy by the works of the biblical scholar Paolo De Benedetti and adopted by some exponents of the contemporary Jewish thought, is methodologically very significant for this dissertation.

Chapter 1

The Holocaust has challenged the concept of an Almighty God. The relationship between Jewish people and history has always offered a paradox. God in Judaism is infact considered the Lord of history, the *revealed God* who manifested himself to Abraham, Moses and Jacob. God according to the Bible is a permanent presence among the mankind, on whom falls the duty of having to imitate him (Leviticus 19.2).

Despite this commandment, the faith in the Almighty God has revealed itself insufficient not to call into question, in the face of evil in the world, the covenant. A question is resulting: is the human existence, in general and in particular the Jewish one, closed or open to the incursion of God?

In the thought’s tradition that goes from Meister Eckhart to Cusa, from Pascal to Dostoyevsky, to reach the italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, religious experience has infact strong philosophical implications, discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. The risk or the paradox of the revelation in the monotheistic religions was driven by the fact that an historical event is projected into an eschatological future, made in good part by promises not yet fulfilled.

So, which perspective offers the revelation to man and what a “philosophy of the absence of God”? I have dealt with this possible parallel path in the first part of the dissertation. Paradoxically, the deity is so precisely revealed in his absence, when it becomes, thanks to the religious experience, immanent in a given interiority. The resulting risk is the extremized Self which in Baruch Spinoza’s thought becomes World, Nature, Reality. So God, who is no more revealed presence in history, is *Deus sive Natura*. In this regard, I used the analysis of Karl Löwith.

This disappearance of the Trascendance from the existential horizon doesn’t reconcile man, even in the face of evil in the world. A truly eschatological perspective will be back in the 20th century with Franz Rosenzweig, for whom God, man and the world can be known as real only by the revelation. But when they manifest themselves as knowable, they are already rejected in the past. Consequently the question about God and the world is difficult to exhaust by the reason, even if constantly fed on a rational level.

If every religious expectation is part of an eschatological horizon, also the discussion about the origins of the relation-ship God-world cannot ignore the mythological and mystical element, which is a constituent part of a religious experience rooted in the Jewish vision on history and man. For this reason it is common in this dissertation the reference to the Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah, and in particular to the vision of rabbi and mystic Itzhaq Luria (1534-1572) and his conception of divine omnipotence in relation to the creation, whose themes are taken for example by Schelling and Jonas. According to the Kabbalah, after the creation God contracted himself (*Tzimtzum*) to allow the world to exist.

The evil would in turn be the result of the breaking of the divine vessels happened during the creative act. The world is so filled by divine sparks mixed with the shards of these vessels. To recover those sparks, men are called to cooperate with God, even in the face of the possibility of divine absence from the world. With a metaphor that is part of the hermeneutic perspective which I adopted, we can say that the evil in the 20th has spread further up the fragments of creation. The Holocaust has distributed six million fragments so as to compromise or at least undermine the credibility of God’s plan for man and the world.

The freedom of the human condition in front of God and his presence/absence, is a central topic in this work. The free man, in a world ordered by God in which he is similar to God (Genesis theomorphism: mythical image with a great philosophical impact), is a ground theme. Man is sometimes Job at other times Prometheus, he lives the condition of defiance to the gods and the tragic condition of suffering with the abandonment by the God revealed.

The Nothingness in the Western thought is another of the significant themes of the dissertation. If the classical metaphysical contingency of the world is guaranteed by God, only

necessary Being, in the contemporary thought paradoxically the contingency of being (all what is possible and remains) seems to be assured by the Nothingness. For this reason I have discussed the topic of God's closeness to the Nothingness, with particular attention to the figures of Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, who predicted some instances of the philosophical crisis in classical metaphysics.

The hidden God, who is close to Nothingness, is a scandal for the reason and an hard test for any theodicy. Even on the level of philosophical reflection there's no doubt that the "absent presence" of God is seen as paradoxical. Does Auschwitz represent the culmination of this dangerous annihilation of transcendence as well as non-knowability of God? This dissertation has therefore dealt with the "philosophy of transcendence," as it's configured for example in Karl Barth's thought, for whom God is not only hidden but unknown, and only wisdom is a true source of insights, which, even if mediated by rationality, are increasingly inadequate to represent what is inexpressible (God).

Philosophy as hermeneutic of religious experience has led me to the onto-theological thought of Hegel. Hegel's desire to remain in connection with God, however, leads to the identity of finite and infinite, a God's humanization and a denial of his transcendence, raising man to the sphere of the divine. This outcome contrasts with the Judeo-Christian revelation.

The eclipse of God is another of the issues examined in this dissertation. On this topic I referred myself to "the eclipse of God" theorized by Martin Buber, as opposed both to the category of "death of God", popular in the 60s of the 20th century, and to the later version of the "silence of God." The book of Isaiah 45.15 speaks of a God who hides himself. In Buber's work the eclipse explains the silence of God during last past century's tragedies. It's a duty of man acting to prevent that the excessive subjectivism of modern history excludes the divine horizon, eclipsing the light of God in history. The eclipse is a temporary condition, which man has to stop.

Concluding the first chapter I have devoted great attention to the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson. He has written that the truth always goes beyond the historical formulations. The metaphysical concepts with which we conceive God (Being, Principle, Cause) are essentially anthropomorphic. To the God of the philosophers, who reflects the will of total understanding of reality, Pareyson has opposed the *God of religious experience*. The thought of Pareyson, especially in relation to the problem of evil, which he introduced in the philosophical debate in Italy after having been ignored for decades by optimistic idealism of Croce and Gentile, is not intended to eliminate the contradictions.

This is a peculiar aspect of contemporary thought, which is not afraid to interpret hermeneutically also the mythical past (or in this case the Bible). God therefore is seen by Pareyson

as power of freedom, as who has freely created the world and man, and in whom *everything is possible*: even evil.

This is because God is the *being which wanted to be*, and so he is the victory on the Nothingness but at the same time he contains the Nothingness' possibility. Pareyson also notes that about the problem of the existence of evil it's necessary to adopt a hermeneutic perspective that takes into account not only the philosophical tradition, but also the religious, mythological, literary ones, aware of pre-existing knowledge and with the intention of understanding the hiddensten meanings, to clarify what is being raised by philosophical reflection.

So, against uncritical and dogmatic adherence to the God of metaphysics, lord of the world and history, from sometime the need *to think otherwise God* has been imposed.

Chapter 2

In the second part of the dissertation I've described the concept of God in the rabbinic tradition. God is the *Lord of life*, and the creation, renewed every day since *Bereshit*, is a becoming act of his power. God in creative project works in his goodness, but even before in his absolute freedom, and so he always calculates for the world the possibility of an alternative that is beyond himself, not excluding also the possibility of evil.

There are many attributes of God in Jewish tradition. God is *the One* and also *immaterial*. The Bodilessness is associated with the concealment. The God who hides himself (*El Mistatter*) is the God who created the world but that the world cannot see even though he is present. The rabbinic literature, however, must use anthropomorphisms in representing God. Therefore, he manifests himself through the words of man. God in Judaism remains a transcendent deity even if personal. Rabbinic literature also points out how God is *omnipresent*. Manifestation of God's omnipresence is the *Shekhinah*, which is in every place and wherever there's a righteous man. Despite his omnipresence, the Almighty allows, however, that the world exists in itself: he doesn't include it.

God is also *compassionate*, a central theme of the third chapter of this dissertation, because the inconsolable suffering of Auschwitz cannot disregard the divine empathy. The God of the rabbinic tradition is infact a "*Deus patiens*", involved in a relationship with the man and the world, and consequently his personality is complex, contradictory. The divine reality, due to the human participation to creation, presents aspects of mutability and weakness. *Fragility* and *becoming condition* seem to characterize the God who loves his creatures, but doesn't prevent (or cannot prevent) the evil freely enacted by the man.

Another question: in front of the presence of evil in the world, how to recognize God, his face and his presence in history? At Auschwitz God appears as *invisible*. In the tragedy of the

Holocaust God appears also *silent*, as the man was struck dumb by the violence of his fellows. God at Auschwitz ceases to be the Inexplicable that all explains in the Judeo-Christian religious horizon and becomes the Un-explaining, who doesn't more explain to man the meaning of life and creation. Concerning this absence of voice, I presented the thought of André Neher.

Neher wonders about the silence of God in history, from the Bible's times to Auschwitz. He proposes to read in parallel way the Biblical silence of God (in the face of Job's suffering) and the divine silence during the Holocaust. The Bible helps philosophy to decipher the silence of God in the Holocaust, but if the theophanic silence in the Bible is a tool of communication between man and the personal God revealed to Abraham and his descendants, the silence of Auschwitz is a mute fracture in the creative design. Neher writes that the silence of the Shoah annihilates every thought, causing a sense of loss, risk and universal failure. The risk characterizes since Genesis the relationship between God and man, conditioned by fear in the given freedom. The figure of Moses, brave and fearful at the same time, appears the model of the faith in God during the history.

In the second chapter I've also presented an overview of the Jewish thought on the concept of God after Auschwitz. Theodor Adorno wrote that in the face of Auschwitz the metaphysical capability is paralyzed. Nevertheless, Buber said that because of Hitler the Jews (and not only them) are forced to think God as a problem. Consequently, the reflection on the Holocaust, an event that is unprecedented in human history, involves a philosophical outcome, but also presents a theological assumption, which concerns not only the theodicy but also the same reflection on the nature of God. This is not a problem because philosophy and theology in Judaism are traditionally associated.

Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein (1924) has written that the Holocaust has challenged the content of the Biblical covenant, together with the concept of divine omnipotence. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) in his work has emphasized that the traditional philosophical and theological categories are insufficient to understand the Holocaust. In front of this tragedy It's required a reconstruction (*tiqqun*) similar to that one dueing to man in front of the scattered fragments of the creating divine energy described in the Kabbalah.

On the “nonsense” of Auschwitz I've mentioned the position of Arthur A. Cohen (1928-1986), for whom the Holocaust is an “anti-meaning.” According to Cohen, after Auschwitz God is no longer conceivable as a director of history. Rabbi Irving Greenberg (1933) defines the Holocaust an “orienteering event” which obliges us to review not only the past but also the future path of Judaism. The writer Elie Wiesel (1928) represents in his works a collective protest against the passivity of God before the Holocaust, because not only man but also God had to respect the covenant.

To the question “Why Auschwitz?”, the temporary absence for an answer, or the silence, may also follow. The Hebrew thought is midrashic in its own structure, that is a progressive interpretation of events (the story) and texts (the epic Hebrew Bible). So we have a dialectic of thought without the positive theoretical outcomes guaranteed by the philosophical dialectic. The truth reached through this route is fragmentary and temporary, in the awareness that every truth about God and man, even the so-called absolute truth, cannot be outside a complex and contradictory historical horizon. This is a hermeneutic perspective which I have adopted in this dissertation.

Chapter 3

After the philosophical “break” provoked by the Holocaust, the contingency of the world seems to be guaranteed by God’s creative freedom, with his infinite possibilities, also in permitting evil.

The Jewish thought offers an image of God different from that of Western metaphysics. This image has influenced the contemporary philosophy too. By the way I have dealt with particular attention to the thought of Hans Jonas and his relationship with the kabbalistic vision of Itzhaq Luria.

Infact this vision is closely related to the attempt to explain the existence and the cause of evil. In Luria’s vision, God, or rather the original divine reality, in order to allow the world’s existence in a physical space, had to shrink. Jonas explained this concept in the famous lecture about the *Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz* held in Tübingen in 1984. He pointed out the impossibility of God to be both omnipotent, infinitely good and comprehensible. An attribute exclude, infact, in the light of what happened in history (the Holocaust), the other two.

After what happened at Auschwitz, according to Jonas, we have to adfirm that an allmighty God or is not good or is absolutely incomprehensible. For this reason Jonas concludes that God, giving mankind the freedom, has given up his omnipotence, as well as creating the world has decided to contract himself (*Tzimtzum*) allowing it to exist independently. However Jonas points out that any explanation of the concept of God after the Holocaust is just an attempt to achieve the knowledge about the divine nature.

A similar approach, but more hermeneutic, belongs to the Italian biblical scholar and theologian Paolo De Benedetti (born 1927). In his works he has suggested an interpretation which harmonizes Western philosophical tradition with Jewish thought, Biblical and Talmudic sources. When man speaks about God, he must always have the knowledge that it’s not possible to answer to every question. Rather dogmatic assertions, it is preferable a doubtful approach directed to

discovering new shades of the truth. De Benedetti in his works has been inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, André Neher, Elie Wiesel, Paul Ricoeur and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the face of the Holocaust two questions raised: has God suffered together the man? And moreover, why didn't God prevent the death of the Jewish people? The Holocaust undertakes to review the relationship between God and evil, and De Benedetti doesn't see evil as a presence next to God (against all forms of Gnosticism and Manichaeism), but as the trace of a laceration inside to God himself, who recalls the opposition and division in God of Schelling. The result is a reference to the rabbinic understanding of the coexistence of a plurality of faces in the oneness of God, which seems to indicate a sort of a very different becoming from the divine immobility of the aristotelian God.

Even for De Benedetti with the creation and the beginning of history, God has lost, at least in part, his omnipotence, knowing that the price of freedom contained in the creation requires to meet the world and man (his image and likeness), for sharing the condition of suffering (*Deus patiens* and not apathetic). The divine pain, however, should not be a source of scandal: it is the confirmation of a relationship between the Creator and his creature that goes far beyond the quest for divine justification that had animated the theodicy. God is close to man, and helps him, precisely by his weakness.

The same *Shekhinah*, the immanent presence of the Most High, is a manifestation of divine sharing with man. According to Rabbi Akiba - wrote Abraham J. Heschel - the involvement of the Holy One in the life of his people is not simply a form of care, but an identification which touches God intimately, because affected by the misfortunes of his people.

This compassion of God and man in the world determines a size of shared responsibility between the Creator and the creature, to which it's possible to assign a meaning on the basis of ethical considerations of Levinas and Ricoeur, as well as thanks to the Talmudic and Kabbalistic tradition. Infact, the Jewish mysticism, as demonstrated by the studies of Moshe Idel, is not far away from these issues, that we find on the side of philosophy and theology in the works of Hegel, Schelling, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Küng, Luigi Pareyson, Sergio Quinzio, Massimo Cacciari. I am referring to the theme of eternal becoming of God that feeds the continuity of the creation of the world as a vital process.

So, I've approached the meaning of pain in the creation, based on a famous passage of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (8, 18-26), which often returns in the dissertation. It's perhaps the gradual penetration of the pain in God's experience, which generates a transformation in his relationship with men, to supply the continuous mechanism of creation? The becoming God is the

God who temporalizes himself (and even is incarnated, suffering and dying, as in Christianity) thanks to his absolute self-determination.

This is the God with many faces of the rabbinic tradition (they indicate his becoming), not the static idol of pagans away from time and history. In this context, the verse of Exodus 3.14 has a central role not only in theological reflection but also in philosophical one about the concept and nature of God. Franz Rosenzweig translated Exodus 3:14 (“*Eyèh asher Eyèh*”) not respecting the Latin version “Ego sum qui sum”, but in the following way: “Ich werde dasein, als der ich Dasein werde.”

For Rosenzweig, the verse doesn't indicate a static condition of the divine essence but a dynamic one, the condition of a Being who becomes and acts through a *being-there*, through his *Dasein*. God is therefore a “being present” in the development of history and creation, where every living thing engages in the universal living spirit which includes the condition of pain. In the Epistle to the Romans (8, 18-26), this cosmic participation is not impersonal. Infact, it reflects the relationship between man and God, constantly crossed by a mutual looking for, expression of a moral, *compassionate* will. Hence my assumption that the infinite possibility of God, by an act of freedom not affected by the mystery of the Incarnation, but animated by the same creative *agape*, can identify itself both emotionally and physically with the human condition even at the individual level.

If God in Christianity became incarnated in Jesus for the salvation of humanity through his death and resurrection, in Judaism has he been embodied himself in the victims of the Holocaust, for *reliving with each of them* the condition of earthly death in order to manifest not his glory but the face of defeat. That is because *being recognized in them* not in extraordinary condition as in Christ, but living the same pain and defeat not followed by the redemption of the resurrection, but only by a difficult and painful renewal of the *Berit*.

Conclusion

The *affirmative force of the creation* makes the Genesis (*Bereshit*) not a defined event, but still open to the life of every creature and in the first place to man, the image of God. The vital consciousness of the world, the existential awareness of man, are interrupted when an anti-creative process prevents God to renew his work every day since Genesis. This is the “break” caused by the Holocaust.

The divine providence cannot be therefore only a miraculous, prodigious, intervention in human affairs, but it is nourished by the consciousness of continuity in the creative process,

essential to human progress. The annihilation of this awareness is concomitant with the death-project of which Auschwitz was emblematic example.

It's significant that the term "*Erlösung*" (redemption) in German has got a resonance with "*Endlösung*" (final solution) as if the Nazis acted against life and creation in obedience and imitation of an anti-God.

They did not only annihilated the organic, vital, functions of a whole people, but also the creativity of the spirit. As Jean Amery wrote, a philosopher at Auschwitz could no longer believe in the reality of the spiritual world, because body and spirit were antagonists in the struggle for individual survival. In the nazi death-camp everything was calculation and nothing was creative. The Holocaust was, therefore, an anti-Genesis. The man wiped out (*vernichten*) his fellow and realized his full sovereignty against God, for the price of destroying the creation.

So he annihilated the "totally Other" (*das ganz Andere*) which is the guarantor of the created world: the *Deus absconditus* is the God who dies in the human heart and is replaced by an anti-God. The system-Auschwitz was infact an anti-God, that in the annihilating freedom of an anti-Genesis could only create *Menschen*, *Muselmänner*, *Figuren*, not free men. First of all Auschwitz took away creatures' name and then their life, because in the Jewish conception depriving somebody's name is already to deprive him of existence. Deprived of generativity and life is also the same anti-God, a deity that is not a "person", personal deity, but a personification of man in the implementation of the *possibility of evil*.

The challenge to God was to steal from him the creative project in order to determine it, perverting all that from Genesis is in progress until the end of time. The material and mental universe of Holocaust as anti-God, actually represents the attempt to perfect this project of death, even if Auschwitz was left unfinished like the city with the great tower of Babel (Genesis 11, 1-9). The pride of the men was at the end thwarted.

In conclusion, the man of the 20th century, the man of the Holocaust, confirms himself as the man of history, the result of the evolution of the initial model of Genesis, where God's work is a *work in progress* from the beginning, that involves the whole created universe and in which man is somehow co-author. In the Bible, this cooperation seems to be defined as a messianic, eschatological project, turned to the future acquisition of a perfection that corresponds to the genuine human being. Therefore, the assessment on man is still imperfect, and the myth of the *Bereshit* is actually a myth of the *Éschaton*. If the assessment on man, image and likeness of God, is suspended, it means that between God and man there's an open relationship, unfinished, crossed by the freedom that has prevented in the history, and also at Auschwitz, the close correspondence between human and divine image

Key Words

Shoah, Holocaust, Auschwitz, God, evil, theodicy, metaphysics, divine attributes, concept of history, Nothingness, final solution, pain, freedom, Jewish thought, Kabbalah, hermeneutics, Bible, anti-Genesis, anti-God, revelation, messianism, eschatology.

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