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WALDEMAR CHROSTOWSKI

INTELLECTUAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE AFTER AUSCHWITZ AND GULAG

Auschwitz and the Gulag are the symbols of the two main totalitarianisms of our century – Nazism and Stalinism. Both of them swallowed up millions of human lives, but the real number of victims and the magnitude of the crimes probably will never be known. Such a totalitarianism is not only a political system, but a politically directed and implemented intention to take *complete control* over man in his physical, mental and spiritual dimensions by all available means. It is an all-encompassing violence, whose goal is the *ideological colonization* of man, depriving him of his own "I."

But Nazism and Stalinism were something even more terrible. They entailed the sanctioning of genocide and the perpetration of crimes on a mass scale, at the same time demanding *collective consent to them*. They searched for consent on the part of intellectuals, but were aware that there would be no consent on the part of religion. The atmosphere created and the absolute obedience required by the rulers had something in it that we know from religion. It is no accident that both totalitarianisms are regarded as parodies of religion, grotesque imitations of it. In opposing religion and openly combating it, the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies became forms of anti-theology. It was believers – religious people and theologians – who were the greatest enemies of the ideologists' attempts to create a world without God. Theologians were also among the first victims of repression and violence, both in Germany and in the Soviet Union.

1.

In Catholic theology, for a long time philosophy had a monopoly on transmitting to theology the analytical data of man's self-understan-

ding and his understanding of God and the world (K. Rahner). The last thousand years in the Catholic Church are the almost undivided reign of Scholasticism. It bore fruit through the application of Aristotelian philosophy to the conceptual expression of the Christian faith, and the systematic elaboration of many theological treatises. Scholasticism, developing from the 10th century, followed by post-Trentian Scholasticism (16th century) and then Neo-Scholasticism (the turn of our century), proved to be helpless, however, in the face of the hitherto unknown challenges of modern times. The language adopted from philosophy had the marks of timelessness, but it did not accommodate concrete and dramatic events whose monstrosity could not have been foreseen by ancient and medieval philosophers. With the accession to power of the Bolshevik regime in Russia and Nazism in Germany, the spiral of evil began to spin so rapidly that it revealed the tremendous distance between the actual state of theology and events it was unable to explain. The language that had been used for centuries was inadequate for describing and classifying facts that did not fit into any known categories of philosophical and theological pursuit.

In the face of the enormity of evil and its effects, theologians had to admit their helplessness, though most of them were unable to do so openly. Many of them, as their predecessors had done in the past, once again sought help from philosophy, though always treated as *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaiden of theology. With the onset of modern times, the gulf between philosophers and theologians became ever greater. Philosophers built elaborate mental constructions directed against God and religion and thus also against theology. The appearance of Stalinism and Nazism mercilessly laid bare the real directions and predilections of philosophers and philosophizing. Though their writings and declarations swarmed with assurances of intellectual independence, philosophers and their works were slaves to the new godless ideologies. Both in the East and in the West, philosophy – with rare exceptions – became *ancilla ideologiae*.

In assessments of Nazism and Stalinism, analogies in the magnitudes and methods of their crimes have often been pointed out. But the two systems had more than these in common. Despite all their differences, they were united in their striving to elaborate programs and slogans in such a way as to gain the support of the largest possible number of people. The

technical and technological preparation of the crime was accompanied by a parallel and no less intensive effort to create a suitable ideological base. Particular people were needed to carry out these tasks – intellectuals and philosophers, They were to explain the crimes and to convince people that they were not the goal in itself. The goal of the Nazis and Stalinists was not just to kill people but to carry into effect a vision of a new society, to change the world, to institute a "new order." To attain these goals, the enemies seen as "weeds," "lice," "a plague," had to be eradicated. The murder campaign was presented as the work of a careful gardener who wishes to free the world of misery and prepare a "clean" garden, to plant a new Garden of Eden, like the reestablishment of a lost paradise, but Eden without God, planted only by man, and the plants were not just trees but people. Also, the extermination of the Jews constituted a part of this task. In order to build a "new world," the Nazis decided to eliminate all those whom they perceived as an obstacle to implementing the utopian paradigm.

2.

Nazi and Stalinist crimes would have been unthinkable without the technological advances of our century. But these crimes also would have been unthinkable without unprecedented propaganda. Stalin and Hitler needed not only policemen, spies, informers, guards, execution squads and hangmen; they also needed doctors, philosophers and intellectuals. Stalin referred to the latter as "engineers of the human soul" and truly appreciated their usefulness. Already for Marx, an intellectual is a hired worker, someone who hires out his mind. The products he makes can be bought and sold like any other. Both Stalinism and Nazism had their loyal intellectuals. The most zealous ones worked indefatigably to justify the crimes, not even caring about appearances or the distortion of facts. They sometimes still had a loathing for blood and therefore worked all the harder to create a Nazism or a communism "with a human face." Here one should mention the courage and heroism of those intellectuals and philosophers who openly opposed totalitarianisms. However, even before they were silenced by the regimes, they suffered from the condemnations and sanctions of their colleagues and co-workers.

Intellectuals and philosophers assisted political leaders especially in mastering the past. After all, Stalinism and Nazism were supposed to be the crowning achievement of history. Whoever has power over the past may control the present and the future. The political rulers became "masters of forgetfulness" (Milan Kundera). Many obedient philosophers and intellectuals conspicuously participated in killing the collective memory of nations. In this way, the mechanisms of forgetfulness were set in motion, which led to a significant reduction of the authority of philosophy and the humanities.

And what about theology and theologians? To be frank, a group of theologians – fortunately a small one – was also in service to totalitarianism. Several theologians, especially in Germany, shifted to open cooperation with the regime. Many more others resorted to a solution tried and proven in such situations, namely, they changed the subject. Theological syntheses were written that had nothing to do with what believers were experiencing or what they needed. An extension of this attitude was the almost complete silence of Western European and American theologians about the degeneracy of communism, a silence that lasted long after World War II. If we were to re-create carefully the picture of the world as it appears in the theology textbooks written in our century in the free countries of the West, we would not have any idea of the existence of communism or the ravages this system caused.

One of the creations of Nazism is *Shoah* – the mass, planned, and carefully implemented destruction of the Jews. Catholic theology proved unprepared for this crime. The role and position of German intellectuals and scientists in preparation of mass murder of Jews has been widely described. In the Church and Catholic theology, the long existing vantage point must be turned around: instead of asking what theologians have to say about the Holocaust, it is asked what the Holocaust has to say about theology.

Since an important source of theology is tradition, one must reflect on what it contained in its teachings on Jews and Judaism. The Jews many times had been victims of various persecutions. Christian theologians explained the evil that befell the Jews as punishment for the sin of rejecting Jesus Christ and stubbornly refusing the Christian faith. The Holocaust fundamentally challenged such a point of view. If the immensity of the evil committed against the Jews were to be interpreted in the

same way again, such a theology would turn against God. The Holocaust laid bare the bankruptcy of the theological tradition in what it had taught about Jews and Judaism for centuries. But even more serious charges are directed against theology. The massacre of the Jews presents itself as the culmination of "Christian anti-Semitism," as a pathology that found expression in a Christian Europe fed on the "teaching of contempt" (Jules Isaac) for Jews and Judaism. There is no lack of voices saying that the Holocaust is the result of something pathological in religion itself, hence also in Christian theology. This pathology is the language of anti-Jewish prejudice and stereotypes recorded and preserved in this theology. Many Jews, and others who share their views, believe that it is not worth studying Christianity; and if it is, then only for the elements of anti-Jewishness accumulated in it. Thus the Holocaust – as the most serious accusation goes – belongs not only to the course of history; it also belongs to the history of Christianity.

Such thinking, illustrated by the quotation of anti-Jewish statements from classical sources of Christian theology, has many supporters. A large number of them are recruited from among the heirs and imitators of the devastating criticisms of religion that intensified from the second half of the 18th century, long before the Holocaust. This criticism quite often took the form of the postulate that "a civilized society" or "rational thinking" should protect people against "the aggression that religion carries". In practice, the appeals to "humanization" or "rationalization" of religion ended in the ruthless imposition of atheism and persecution of believers. Throwing the blame for the Holocaust on Christians was a continuation of this attitude. Though many anti-Jewish stereotypes can be found in Christianity and in Christian theology, the anti-Semitism of Christians was always a subject of criticism within that same Church. Christians were not convinced of the anti-Jewish attitude, especially when they became witnesses to the sufferings of Jews. The time of *Shoah* is also replete with numerous examples of sacrifices made for Jewish brethren, motivated by the Christian love for one's neighbour. If one insists on placing the Holocaust within the history of Christianity as its consequence, he eliminates the possibility and the need for reflection on an honest evaluation of European civilization in the last 200 years.

There is a gulf between the anti-Semitism of the Nazis and the anti-

Judaism of traditional Christianity. The Nazis undertook to eliminate every Jew because he was a Jew. The challenge for Christians was not the Jews as such, for Christianity accepted and united many nations, but the Jew as a follower of Judaism. There are elements of xenophobia and even hostility toward the Jews present in Christian doctrine and practice, but one cannot equate them with racism or genocide. To put an equal sign between the Church or Christianity and racism or *Shoah* is a falsehood that may influence the course of history. Instead, one should ponder why and how both religious communities, Christians and Jews, acted in concert to separate themselves from each other. It has been said that for ages this separation was necessary to both the Christians and the Jews. No one imagined that the time of such a trial as *Shoah* would come, when the separation and the mutual ignorance and antipathy that were its results would produce such extreme indifference with terrible consequences.

3.

One cannot avoid the question of how the Catholic Church behaved toward Stalinism and Nazism. The question is all the more urgent since the whole of this problem is generally reduced to an evaluation of the attitude of the Church toward the extermination of the Jews.

Many bitter and not always fair words have been addressed to the Vatican and individual local Churches. There is no doubt that more could have been done than was done. However, it must be emphasized that the Catholic Church was almost nonexistent in Soviet Russia, while in Nazi Germany it was decidedly in the minority. The repressive measures of both regimes severely restricted the activities of the Church and, what is more, achieved its marginalization. Stalin and Hitler acted according to the Roman/Latin principle *divide et impera*, "divide and rule," deepening long-standing social and religious differences and divisions. And in this they were willingly assisted by intellectuals and philosophers. The effects of this policy were eloquently described by Pastor Martin Niemöller:

„In Germany, the Nazis came for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came

for the Catholics and I was a Protestant, so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me... By that time there was no one to speak up for anyone".

The Catholic Church was not silent about Stalinism and Nazism. The unfortunate thing is that the statements of Pius XI, especially such an important encyclical as *Divini Redemptoris*, condemning communism (March 19, 1937), met with a cold reception in Western Europe and in the USA, and there were even voices of criticism. Pius XI strongly condemned the propaganda and press of those times: "It is hard to explain why the press, so assiduously seizing upon and noting less significant events, could remain silent for so long about the horrible crimes committed in Russia, Mexico, and in the end in a large part of Spain, why so little is written about such a vast world organization as the sect of communism directed from Moscow" (*Divini Redemptoris*, No. 18). In the same encyclical, we read: "For the first time in the history of humanity, we are witnesses to a carefully and systematically prepared rebellion against 'everything that is called God.' For communism by its nature is anti-religious and regards religion as 'opium for the people', since its teaching, professing life beyond the grave, draws the eyes of the proletariat away from the future Soviet paradise that must be built on earth" (No. 22), the pattern that was described at the beginning. In the age of the triumph of Stalinism, the Pope expressed solidarity with the suffering nations of Soviet Russia and condemned the leaders of communism, who "pretend to be ardent spokesmen and supporters of peaceful ideas, but at the same time incite the masses to a class struggle that will lead to a terrible blood letting; and on the other hand, not believing in the certainty of peace, they are resorting to a limitless arms building" (No. 57).

Comparing the statements of Pius XI, one can conclude that the condemnation of communism was definitely stronger than the condemnation of Nazism. But it was not so. The encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, issued on March 19, 1937, the first ever to be written in German, declared: "Whoever exalts race or nation or the State to the highest norm and worships them like idols perverts and distorts the divine order of things.. "True Christianity proves itself in the love of God and in the active love of one's neighbour." In the same encyclical, it was stated that "human laws which run counter to natural laws are not obligatory in conscience." Contemporary reactions of the Nazi Party show that the encyclical was only too well understood.

The Holocaust has become a subject for theology, but Nazism and Stalinism – still not yet. Meanwhile, both totalitarianisms give rise to theological questions and problems, especially questions of theodicy; that is, explanation of the presence of God in the world and His benevolence.

The inclusion of the Holocaust in Christian theology is the result of several factors. The most important are these: the feeling that traditional theologizing has been defeated, consideration of the anti-Jewish elements present in Christian teaching, the stiff language of scholastic theology, and also solidarity with the suffering Jews and a "return to the roots"; that is, a clearer presentation of the Biblical history of salvation. Christian theology has benefited from the experiences and ruminations of Jewish theology, in which not one but many theologies of the Holocaust have been elaborated. All of them in various ways attempt to come to grips with rationalization of the immensity of evil.

Auschwitz also has become the "impulse for reflection" (Franz Mussner). The fruit of these changes in Christianity is a new attitude toward Jews and Judaism that is slowly entering the consciousness of the faithful. This process must be reckoned long-term. Since mutual hostility and prejudices have risen over more than a dozen centuries, dialogue and true rapprochement will take several generations.

4.

Nazism, as such, and Stalinism are still awaiting their full evaluations on the part of intellectuals. Let me focus on theological considerations. While Central and Eastern Europe remained within structures of organized compulsion up to 1989, theologians in the West, where there were conditions for the free exchange of ideas, often chose ersatz subjects. The fate of their brethren in the East remained unknown there. So today it is all the more urgent to work out a new culture and a new theology – a culture and a theology after Auschwitz and the Gulag. But intellectuals are deprived of their authority. Theologians prove to be helpless. So new impulses must be sought. It turns out that help arrives with John Paul II. Examples can be multiplied. One of the most recent is the meeting of the Pope with repre-

sentatives of the world of culture in Vilnius (September 5, 1993). Referring to the "iron dictatorship" of communism, in whose shackles Lithuania and her neighbors long remained, John Paul II said:

"Analysis would be complicated. I think, however, that one of the most important reasons was militant atheism, which gave inspiration to Marxism: atheism, destructive of man as well, violating the foundation of his dignity and its most lasting guarantee. In addition, other errors appear, if only the materialist conception of history, a primitive, confrontational vision of society, ascribing a "messianic" role to a single party, as the owner of the state. It turned out that a system born from dreams about the liberation of man made him a slave in reality".

The Pope also referred to Nazi ideology:

„Marxism was not the only tragedy of our century, however. One must judge with equal severity what happened on the opposite side: regimes of the "right wing," which in the name of "nation" and "tradition" had similar contempt for the dignity due to every human being irrespective of race, beliefs, and personal characteristics. How could we forget here about the magnitude of the violence committed by Nazism, especially toward the Jewish people, singled out for the Holocaust in the name of supposed racial superiority and some insane plan of domination?"

Now, let us conclude: the intellectual analysis of the crime might easily lead to the banalization of evil, a recalling of the dramatic testimonies of a time of contempt for man. The basis for a new culture and a new theology is the requirement of solidarity with the suffering. Clemens Thoma, one of the most outstanding creators of the new Christian theology on Judaism, recalled a moving Jewish midrash: "Cain persecuted Abel, but God asked about the persecuted (...). Nimrod persecuted Abraham, but God asked about the persecuted (...). Ishmael persecuted Isaac, but God asked about the persecuted (...). Esau persecuted Jacob, but God asked about the persecuted (...). Saul persecuted David, but God asked about the persecuted."

Such a reevaluation of the suffering of the innocent creates a picture of God as an ally of the persecuted and an enemy of the persecutors. It makes possible a proper look at Auschwitz and the Gulag and at what they symbolize. The genocide committed by both regimes was an element of perverse social engineering and the realization of an insane vision of a "new order," Genuine culture and theology are a critique of

every ideology, especially of one that serves rulers claiming complete power over man.

The consolation that theologians can and should provide is to remind us that in our century God suffered along with the persecuted. The theology of "the suffering of God" is nothing new in Christianity. It has strong, though unappreciated, roots in the Scriptures and in the classical works of Christian theology. A theology of suffering developed on such a basis is the negation of every ideology.

This approach goes far beyond the frame delineated by one culture, nationality or religion. It lays the foundation under "dynamic ecclesiology" (Tomas Halik), whose support is solidarity with every human being, especially with the oppressed and the suffering. After Auschwitz and Gulag, such solidarity should be the assumption of each intellectual and cultural commitment, and also a form of religiously motivated love. It is from this source that cultures and religions should spring.

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