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# THE MEANING OF SUFFERING IN THE 'THEOLOGIES OF THE BOOK' THE DESTINY OF PASTORAL REFLECTION AFTER AUSCHWITZ

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## **Abstract**

The study reflects on God's image in the post-Auschwitz culture and theologies: how could God allow such a tragedy to happen to the chosen people? If we, as Christians, self-criticise, we notice that Auschwitz demonstrates how absent Christianity can be from people's lives, even if theoretically it is accepted as the dominant religious 'theory' in the public space. Then the study explores the theology of suffering in the other 'religions of the book', ascertaining that in none of them is suffering regarded as a value. Finally, we conclude that pastoral psychotherapy constitutes a practical theology of psychosomatic healing, as the experience of encountering God, when it is of maximum intensity, involves the soul, the psyche, the body, the whole being, having ontological therapeutic effects.

*Keywords:* Auschwitz, theologies of the book, Islamism, Hebraism, pastoral psychotherapy

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## **1. God of the Bible, a God sensitive to suffering**

We live in a world in which suffering is ignored; only the spiritual man becomes sensitive to the problematic of suffering. The people who are not spiritually advanced do not have eyes to see the immense pain effused into the world around them, nor do they see the people who are in pain; *they enter the world leisurely and unabashedly without stopping to watch the ones who suffer*, as if the latter did not exist. In the present-day *society of success*, hardly anyone looks at the suffering people. Their existence denies the dominant ideology of society: the conviction that one can be happy through oneself and against the others. In order to be happy – one considers – you do not need others or love; you can be happy displaying your success. There is no need for communion, there is no need for the energy of love. The others only have to admire you, not love you. You do not need anyone's love in order to be fulfilled. This dominant

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ideology in the society of meritocracy is explicitly anti-Christian and anti-Christic, and it needs hardened hearts in order to survive. To sum up, we consider that in such a society, *no one encounters suffering any longer, except those suffering itself seeks*. The ‘spiritual’ man is spiritual, has become spiritual, because in the past, somewhere in the course of his human evolution, suffering sought him and changed him. We all flee from pain instinctively, but often in life it is an experience impossible to avoid, and thus we remain deeply marked within ourselves by our helplessness concerning this reality. Suffering has a great power to change us, to reorient our thinking, to present us acutely with the essential problems of life.

Christianity seems – from the outside – to be a religion that loves suffering, not because the theory, the Christian theology, would put forward such a doctrine, but because *the Christian God always focuses His attention on it*; He focuses on the suffering centres in the world, He is very present in the places where someone suffers. The Christian God Himself was subject to agony, dying as a human on the Cross. Therefore, between the Christian God and suffering there is a special connection. In the same way, the God of the Old Testament, of Judaic configuration, has a particular sensitivity towards suffering.

For example, the book of Exodus narrates about the afflictions of the Hebrews who were slaves in Egypt, about the Pharaoh’s order for all the male babies to be killed by the Egyptian midwives immediately after birth. Reading this account with modern rationalist exigencies, we would assiduously look for the name of the Pharaoh; however, this is not mentioned, although we infer from historical research that it is Ramses II from the XIX<sup>th</sup> Egyptian dynasty; instead, we easily find the name of the two midwives traumatised by the order of the Pharaoh: Shiphrah and Puah. *A modern rationalist author would do exactly the opposite: he would mention the name of the Pharaoh and would neglect that of the midwives, greatly tormented by the betrayal of professional deontology that had been imposed. The God of the Bible always remembers the one who suffers.* In the book of the Exodus we also read: “And God heard their groanings and God remembered his covenant made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And God looked at the sons of Israel” (Exodus 2.24-25). The direct intervention of God in history is narrated: the ten plagues, how the people departed from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea. At a certain moment the people faced the immensity of the sea and behind them came the menacing soldiers of Pharaoh; there seemed to be no way out. And the Lord said to Moses: “Why do you cry to me?” Rabbinic theology highlights that the biblical text does not mention any cry of Moses, at least not in this case. How do we interpret this situation? *Suffering is a cry that reaches God’s ears*. It is enough for someone to suffer and God already hears a cry, an inward lament. And God intervenes, parts the sea for the Hebrew people, and unites it over Pharaoh’s army [1].

Very often, the salvation of some means the tragedy of others, which is why God does not always intervene in history. It is enough to remember the exile of the Hebrews in Babylon (587 BC). However, even if He does not intervene, the God of the Bible is always there when someone suffers. The

words of the Saviour on the Cross are to be noted in this respect: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" (Mark 15.34). If God Himself suffered on earth, it means that suffering is an essential ingredient in the course of salvation. "God is with us!" must not be seen as a hymn of triumphalism, but as a spiritual ascertainment of the fact that in any suffering God accompanies us. And we become great not through our achievements, but through our sufferings, as scholar Nicolae Iorga said.

## **2. God's image in the collective consciousness after Auschwitz**

Auschwitz, this minor locality from Poland, has become the sinister symbol of the extermination of six million Jews, the subtle attempt to extirpate the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from history by making His chosen people disappear. There were forty-two attempts on Hitler's life, but only the forty-third was successful, the last, which was actually orchestrated by himself in the Berlin bunker after his marriage to Eva Braun: a suicide attempt. All the other attempts did nothing but reinforce Hitler's conviction that he was Messiah, that he was immortal, that he had a prophetic role in the world's history. Why did God allow things to go in this direction? He allowed the failure of 42 attempts to suppress the life of a dictator who led a whole country to destruction, shattered the peace of three continents, and, through his decisions, caused the death of millions of people. Auschwitz does not exhaust or end the series of human sufferings throughout history, but it constitutes a culminating point in the history of mankind. There has been enormous pain *before* that moment and there will be *afterwards*. However, Auschwitz has remained up to this day the paradigm moment of an absolutised, maximalised, hysterised, demential suffering.

Many refer to a new 'concept' of 'God', a new vision of God after Auschwitz. The traditional concept referred to a triangle, formed of three attributes specific to God, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition: God is good (man-befriending), almighty, and intelligible (can be understood by man). *Auschwitz makes it obvious that there is an incompatibility among these three attributes:*

1. If God is good and almighty, one cannot understand why He did not intervene in favour of the chosen people; this cannot be understood, therefore theology enters a crisis as a science presenting a coherent vision of God; yet, God revealed Himself, because He wanted to be understood by man.
2. If God is almighty and intelligible, it follows that He is not good, He did not intervene when He could, thus allowing an excessive evil into the world.
3. If God is good and intelligible, then it follows that He is not almighty, He could not intervene; it is difficult to believe He is evil [2].

*Auschwitz has interpellated even Christian consciences up to this day.*

The theatre/location of these horrible deeds was Europe, the continent with the longest Christian tradition. The testimony of the European Christians did not measure up to the challenges of evil: the Christian teaching did not have enough impact on people and on their leaders and did not influence in any way the decisions made by public personalities, chosen democratically by citizens. The public space was not influenced by far as much as it should have been by the Christian message. The events constituted, inevitably, a huge failure of Christianity. *Auschwitz demonstrates to us how absent Christianity can be from people's life, even if, theoretically, it is accepted as the dominant religious 'theory' in the public space* [3].

It is indubitable that *suffering confers a certain spiritual authority on the ones who suffer*. We might say that this authority is in heaven, it is definitive and transfiguring. *Along the centuries, Christianity has slowly, unpredictably, and (in certain components such as Catholicism) radically changed, from a religion sensitive to pain and suffering into a religion sensitive to sin*. Roman Catholicism developed a very entangled, punitive, juridical-canonical system, foreign to the preoccupations of Orthodoxy. The Eastern world remained much more fascinated by the experience of grace than by quantifying penances corresponding to each sin committed by somebody. Orthodoxy has maintained its strength and spiritual dignity through the very interest manifested in the fight ('the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force') to acquire grace than to 'condemn' sin. It did not allow itself to be overtaken by evil, but was perpetually transported by goodness, in its multiple forms.

The Orthodox icon of the Saviour's descent into hell, actually the icon of the Resurrection, is eloquent in this respect. The icon presents our Savior descending into the depths of hell in order to pull out the ones condemned there, represented by Adam and Eve. We have the power to look with affection at our fellow-creature's suffering, not minding his previous sins, only if we believe that the Savior died on the cross for the redemption of everybody's sins. *Orthodoxy teaches us that God never sides with the executioner, but always with the victims*. The authentic Christian is the one who knows the difference between the persecutor and the oppressed, between the victim and the executioner, and when confronted with suffering, he often discovers that the best attitude is compassion, silence, suffering together with the other and not the theoretical reflection on the motivations of suffering. This reflection is useful only to the extent in which it aims at ending evil completely, to stop its perpetuation or repetition.

### **3. The theology of suffering in the other 'religions of the book'**

Hebraism focuses its attention not on the suffering as supreme questioning and challenging reality on earth but on the Creator's goodness, and is annoyed by the presence of evil into the world. Thus, it is not as interested in the binomial suffering/pain-happiness as in the binomial good-evil, justice/correctness-injustice/unfairness. Prophet Habakkuk wonders: "How long, O Lord, shall I cry out and you will not hearken? How long shall I cry out to you being injured and

you will not save? Why then have you shown me troubles and griefs to look upon, misery and ungodliness?"(Habakkuk 1.2-3). In Hebraism, unlike Christianity, there is no mention of 'the original sin': Adam and Eve's sin is the first sin from a chronological point of view in the history of mankind and it has nothing special [1, p. 31].

On the other hand, exacerbated monotheism makes Hebraism *consider that both good and evil derive from God*: "For I am the Lord God and there is no other God beside me; I strengthened you and you have not known me. That those who come from the east and those who come from the west may know that there is no God but me. I am the Lord God and there is none beside. I am he that prepared light and formed darkness; who make peace and create evil; *I am the Lord God, that does all these things*" (Isaiah 45.5-7).

Suffering – according to Hebrew theology – is generated by the lack of consenting to God's will, a will expressed in the commandments. Rabbinic theology distinguishes in man *the instinct of good and the instinct of evil*. *The study of the Torah, more important than prayer*, has the purpose of helping man know God's will in order to dominate the instinct of evil more easily [1, p. 131].

Just as in the case of Christianity, in Hebraism suffering has an expiatory role. In the world there is always someone who suffers in order to expiate his own sins or those of others. *The difference from Christianity is that expiation cannot occur once and forever*. Hebraism is a religion of earthly vitality, and in general suffering is not seen as a value. Nevertheless, there are cases of martyrdom, of assumed suffering, even if they are not eulogised in the official theology afterwards. We mention here the exceptional case of the Maccabee brothers.

In Islam [1, p. 132] God reveals Himself in a book, in the Quran. This is how Islam views the other religions: Judaism and Christianity are religions of the book, too. *If in the Quran the Word made himself a book, not body as in Christianity*, the Muslim can experience the encounter with God only by reading and listening to the Scripture. The Arabic language emerged at the same time as the Quran, and the Arab identity and the Islamic one are closely connected, even if they are not identical. Moreover, the majority of the Muslims do not know the distinction between religion, culture, institutions, and political power. Everything is subject to Allah, and this is the significance of the term 'Islam'. The objective of the Muslim is not orthodoxy, 'to believe', but *ortopraxia*, 'to practice' [1, p. 132].

In Islam, evil is incarnate in the actions of Iblis (terminological equivalent of the Greek *diabolos*), also called *al-saitan* and enemy of Allah, which constitutes *a materialisation of explicit, dynamic, and voluntary disobedience to Allah's will*. Something similar is found in the folk Hebrew and Christian traditions in the person of Lucifer, the fallen angel, enemy of God and master of demons. In Islam, unlike in Christianity, man is superior to the angels, and Iblis refuses to bow to the first man created by Allah. Just like in the Christian Bible, in the Quran, Iblis urges the first man not to obey Allah (Sura 20,116-121). All people are tempted by Iblis and are saved only if they follow the right way

indicated by the Quran. Thus, for Islam both good and evil originate in Allah, who is omnipotent. The Quran is very careful not to attribute to evil the dignity of secondary power next to that of Allah. For Islam the evil is part of Allah's incontestable will, and *the Quran does not admit any expiatory and purifying value of suffering*.

#### **4. Favouring the rational and neglecting the emotional in the contemporary Western culture**

Watching the surrounding reality with spiritual eyes, we notice that we live in an epoch characterised by uncertainty and confusion in all the spheres of social life; today the three elements that *conferred stability and confidence in the past (family, religion, and community)* are losing their cultural relevance and the force of expression in the public space. The rapidity of the social changes, the crisis of ethical values, and the public diminution of 'respect' towards man (in medical technique, in genetic engineering, etc.) display a growing weakening of the human being, especially in the most delicate stages of existence (childhood, adolescence, and old age). Thus, the pillars of resistance, of stability, man's landmarks disappear, the very ones that have helped him overcome many crises and frustrations in the past [4].

While changing the world's outlook totally, the technological era asks man to have a new self-awareness. He understands he is no longer master, but a being tormented by inward convulsions, strong on the outside, fragile on the inside; a king without significance, torn by loneliness, lacking enthusiasm, and without motivational dynamism. *The term God in Western theology has become a word without a clear corresponding reality, being only a hypothesis of thought*. The one who declares this is a Western analyst [5].

*The uncontrolled increase of neuroses* is a natural reaction to the type of society we live in: a society that has lost traditional values, unable to replace them with new ones. The false values of Western civilisation, power, success, and progress do nothing but increase the number of neurotic people, of those who are afraid of living, and of those who do not know how to live their life to the full. People become *hypnotised only by success, power, and prestige, forgetting to appreciate fundamental values, such as love, peace, inward joy, recollectedness, and self-achievement*. Everyone wants to become what he cannot be; everyone wants to live according to an image of himself he has built through neurosis and which is not natural. The purpose of life becomes not fulfilling some wishes according to man's measure, but satisfying neurotic needs.

In today's world *the rational is still favoured and the emotional is neglected*. Imagination, fantasy, creativity, and emotivity are not practised starting with childhood. Even if the myth that science is omnipotent were annihilated, *the future generations would be more eager to use the computer than to seek and find the profound meaning of man's life*. Consequently, they are not prepared to live a serene life as a dignified human being. *The computer can*

*offer solutions only for previous problems, not for new ones, because it does not possess intuitive or creative capacities, only deductive ones* [4].

For those that believe life must have a meaning, psychology, just like any other science that studies man and his behaviour, cannot but *insist on the vast problematic of human values and ideals*, as well as on identifying and professing in the world the way that leads to finding and applying them in real life. That is why authentic Psychology is not a simple description of phenomena, but a search and an identification of the structures and dynamisms of the human psyche, in order to show that these can be useful for man's mental health and are absolutely necessary for his *becoming mature in faith* [6].

## **5. Pastoral psychotherapy – a practical theology of psychosomatic healing**

The relation between depth Psychology and Theology should emphasise the fact that action at a spiritual and at a psychic level should be unitary. Unfortunately, today *Psychotherapy and pastoral theology are not a unity in theory or practice*. Their divorce causes much suffering, for many wounds have become chronic.

Luke 9.2, Matthew 10.7-8, Mark 16.17-18 present us the moment in which the Savior sends the disciples to preach, urging them to put their hands on the sick people and heal them, to cast out devils and announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Sending them indicates a few things that pastoral theology and Psychology might do together. It is very important, both in pastoral theology and in Psychotherapy to create *a safe space of protection and mutual acceptance*. Pastoral activity always means lending a helping hand to one's fellow creature, a protective hand that receives with affection the one who calls for help. Drewermann considers that our inner, intimate *self* feels really good when it no longer experiences a paralysing anguish, when it no longer has feelings of guilt, *when it is accepted with love and delicacy by an immense Goodness*. The contact with such an infinite Love, this experience of endless love, gives the timorous person the feeling that he is 'authorised' to live. At the same time, the previous psychotic sensation – according to which through another person speaks, in fact, a foreign and superior person – becomes positive. God, the infinite Love, allows us to live, approves us, wants us, loves us [7].

According to Drewermann, not only neurotic and psychiatric cases, but also organic diseases have a unique cause: *human anxiety, existential despair*, and the attempts to escape them. The book of Genesis describes the experience of the fundamental anxiety of existence by appealing to *the archetypal symbol of the serpent*. Against existential despair there is only one way to fight: to keep the faith in the power of the One who is the Creator and Sustainer of all. When they fall into despair, people *perceive the world as being foreign and hostile to them*; they start to feel ashamed of each other; they are compelled to work to exhaustion; their final horizon is only death, which annihilates everything, making all the dedication invested become useless [7, p. 40].

However, if death reveals to us only how insignificant the whole existence is, if illness shows us only how useless life is, then death is a real curse. Thus, death becomes the punishment for a life which, estranged from the existential centre, really ‘ex-centric’, is in ruins. *On the contrary, living with the tree of life in the middle of the garden as a landmark means living safely, without anguish in the world*, understanding the world as a garden in which God Himself placed man. Then, *death becomes a part of life*, and life ceases to be a constant escape from pain and death. Because *existential despair is the origin of all psychic diseases*, the New Testament puts forward *faith as the universal therapeutic force* [8].

Neoliberal New Testament exegesis has often regarded the miraculous neotestamentary healings suspiciously, identifying something pagan, something non-Christian, even something magic, as they would not mention a faith out of which could appear an explicit profession of the faith in Christ.

All the Sacraments of the Church attempt to retrieve the way to earthly paradise; all are symbols of a lost and redeemed life, a life marked by trust in opposition to despair; only *those who have accomplished in themselves a victory over suffering and illness, grace to faith, can act by virtue of a healing, therapeutic ‘priesthood’*, as ‘experts’ in pastoral medicine. Their faith arises out of overcoming their own existential despair, their therapeutic potential arises out of reconverting their own destructive force, their truth, out of the purification from lies.

## 6. Conclusions

The study asserts that the Christian God, the God of the Bible, is a God very sensitive to pain, to suffering; He is always present where there is distress, even if sometimes people are not aware of this. In the Holy Scripture there are numerous such situations, all of them culminating in Golgotha.

The study also reflects on God’s image in the post-Auschwitz culture and theologies: how could God allow such a tragedy to happen to the chosen people? If we, as Christians, self-criticise ourselves, we notice that Auschwitz demonstrates how absent Christianity can be from people’s lives, even if theoretically it is accepted as the dominant religious ‘theory’ in the public space. Then the study meditates on the theology of suffering in the other ‘religions of the book’, ascertaining that in none of them is suffering regarded as a value. Finally, we conclude that pastoral psychotherapy constitutes a practical theology of psychosomatic healing, because the experience of encountering God, when it is of maximum intensity, involves the soul, the psyche, the body, the whole being, and has an ontological therapeutic effect.

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Auschwitz: The Nazis and 'The Final Solution' is a BBC six-episode documentary film series presenting the story of Auschwitz concentration camp. It combined interviews with former inmates and guards with authentic re-enactments of relevant events. It was first televised on BBC Two on 11 January 2005. In the United States, this series first aired on PBS television stations as Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State in early 2005 and was released, under that title, in a 2-DVD box set (Region 1), by BBC Warner