

## Introduction: A Postmodern Situation

There is now a need for the rediscovery of the God who provides breath, flesh, and life to Christian doctrine and theology. There is a need for the God who stands by his creation even at the darkest of times, when all lights have gone out. The eradication of entire ethnic communities or of humankind as a whole has become an immediate possibility (witness Auschwitz<sup>1</sup> and Hiroshima). Human beings inhabit a world which does not appear to testify to God's design, presence, and action. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes,

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion. For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. A scientist or physician who sets out to edify is a hybrid. . . . And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God.<sup>2</sup>

Human beings are to live a “secular” existence, that is, a life where all events, circumstances, and situations are accounted for, without

1. The term “Auschwitz” is here used to denote systematic large-scale genocides (planned destruction of a particular ethnic group or community, which could ultimately result in the complete decimation of humankind) perpetrated during and since World War II. See Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder: Westview, 2009) for seminal studies on the comparative study of the Shoah and other genocides, contemporary and ancient.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller, Frank Clark et al. (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 360.

explicit reference being made to God. Bonhoeffer continues: “Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. He must live a ‘secular’ life, and thereby share in God’s sufferings.”<sup>3</sup>

Postmodern philosophy confirms Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s assessment of the current human predicament. Jacques Derrida claims that the radical separation of the church from the state, and more broadly, of religion from politics, is an essential aspect of postmodern life and society; a sure sign of progress over previous stages of European civilization that must never be given up. “We also share . . . an unreserved taste, if not an unconditional preference, for what, in politics, is called republican democracy as a universalizable model, binding philosophy to the public ‘cause,’ to the *res publica*, to ‘publicness,’ once again to the light of day, once again to the ‘lights’ of the Enlightenment, once again to the enlightened virtue of public space, emancipating it from all external power (non-lay, non-secular), for example from religious dogmatism, orthodoxy or authority.”<sup>4</sup> Faith must be completely emancipated from religion and historical revelation—that is, from given historical forms of life and institutions preserving and ensuring the transmission of God’s self-manifestation to humankind in history. Immanuel Kant stands as a pioneer in defining faith independently from institutional religion. Faith is to be understood as distinct from any form of knowledge or science.

Faith has not always been and will not always be identifiable with religion, nor, another point, with theology. All sacredness and all holiness are not necessarily, in the strict sense of the term, if there is one, religious. . . . “It is not essential and hence not necessary for everyone to know what God does or has done for his salvation, but it is essential to know what man himself must do in order to become worthy of this assistance [Derrida is here quoting Kant].” Because it does not depend essentially upon any historical revelation and thus agrees with the rationality of purely

3. *Ibid.*, 361.

4. Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 8.

practical reason, reflecting faith favours good will beyond all knowledge. It is thus opposed to dogmatic faith.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, morality and ethics are to be defined as if God did not exist. Human existence, in regards to ethics, has nothing to do with knowing, but only with obtaining salvation from God. Religion has no contribution to offer in the realm of morality where, for all practical matters, God is dead and human beings take upon themselves the task of deserving their own redemption.

In order to conduct oneself in a moral manner, one must act as though God did not exist or no longer concerned himself with our salvation. This shows who is moral and who is therefore Christian, assuming that a Christian owes it to himself to be moral: no longer turn towards God at the moment of acting in good faith; act as though God had abandoned us. . . . Is this not another way of saying that Christianity can only answer to its moral calling and morality, to its Christian calling if it endures in this world, in phenomenal history, the death of God, well beyond the figures of the Passion? That Christianity is the death of God thus announced and recalled by Kant to the modernity of the Enlightenment?<sup>6</sup>

Authentic freedom, in Western postmodern society, can only reach transcendence in and through the definitive overcoming of metaphysics, religion, and systematic thinking. “Dogmatic philosophies and natural religions should disappear and, out of the greatest ‘asperity’, the harshest impiety, out of kenosis and the void of the most serious privation of God (*Gottlosigkeit*), ought to resuscitate the most serene liberty in its highest totality.”<sup>7</sup> The act of retrieving divinely informed ethics entails taking a step backwards, revealing the individual’s and society’s inability to address their present situation and context by themselves. As Gianni Vattimo explains, “to react to the problematic and chaotic character of the late-modern world with a return to God as the metaphysical foundation means, in Nietzschean terms, to refuse the challenge of the over(hu)man(ity); and, moreover, to condemn

5. *Ibid.*, 8–10.

6. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

7. *Ibid.*, 15.

oneself to that condition of slavery which Nietzsche regarded as inevitable for all those who, precisely, do not accept the challenge.”<sup>8</sup>

Postmodernity presupposes the rejection of such concepts as objective foundation and understanding of reality. Vattimo speaks of “the dissolution of the great systems that accompanied the development of science, technology and modern social organization, but thereby also with the breakdown of all fundamentalism. . . . Philosophy and critical thought in general, having abandoned the very idea of foundation, are not (or no longer) able to give existence that meaning.”<sup>9</sup> There is no reality, there is no truth that can be known outside the interpretive relationship that the knowing subject entertains with it. All human knowledge is mediated knowledge, which can find no fixed referent beyond itself. “The ‘real,’” argues John D. Caputo, “is precisely what eludes or withdraws from us whenever we think we have gotten it in our grips, whenever we imagine we see it (phenomenology) or can claim ‘there it is’ (ontology) or think we can anticipate it (hermeneutic fore-structures).”<sup>10</sup> Hence, human life, marked by finitude, is unable to find any stable referent in the absolute, the intelligible, and the transcendent. In the words of Martin Heidegger: “The pronouncement ‘God is dead’ means: the suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. . . . If God as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself.”<sup>11</sup> Caputo’s own assessment essentially reiterates Heidegger’s classic statement: “One important thing we mean by the death of God is the death of the absolute center, of inhabiting an absolute point of view. . . . The very nature of living, being alive in time and history, means that what we affirm, what we desire, will never come.”<sup>12</sup>

8. Gianni Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” trans. David Webb, in *Religion*, 82–83.

9. *Ibid.*, 81.

10. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 79.

11. Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche ‘God is Dead,’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 61.

Indeed, a systematic understanding of reality, human nature, and life no longer seems possible due to the intimate awareness human beings now possess of their intrinsic finitude and absolute limitations. Finitude's self-awareness, leading to fragmentation and pluralism in knowledge, is also one of the central themes of postmodernity. As John G. McEvoy, referring to Lyotard's foundational work on postmodernism, spells out:

In his seminal study *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard defined "postmodern as incredulity toward [the] metanarratives" of modernism, which deployed such "grand narratives" as the dialectic of the Spirit, the emancipation of humanity, and the progress of science to unify and legitimate the separate sciences and their separate practices. Loosening the all-embracing grip of philosophy's grand narratives, postmodernism identified science as a particular "language game," incapable of legitimating, or being legitimated by, any other language game. . . . Fundamentally opposed to essentialism, historicism, realism, and the associated problematic of reference and rationality, this image conveyed a sense of "the fragmentary, heterogeneous, and plural character" of thought, language, reality and the self. . . . In this manner, postmodernism called for the "deconstruction" of the rational distinctions between true and false, subject and object, knowledge and power, reality and appearance, past and present, and all the other modernist dichotomies.<sup>13</sup>

Revealed and theological truths are, thus, per definition, historically conditioned, culturally determined, and subject to continual evolution.

All reasoning is historically conditioned; all historical understanding is new interpretation; new interpretation creates new meaning which is both continuous and discontinuous with the past. . . . On the one hand, a uniform mode of understanding Jesus Christ by all Christians in the world is historically impossible, so that, on the other hand, it is readily intelligible that the pluralism that characterizes all historical understanding also obtains in Christology. Pluralism is a consequence of the historicity of all human knowledge, including the interpretation of reality resulting from divine revelation.<sup>14</sup>

12. John D. Caputo, "On the Power of the Powerless: Dialogue with John D. Caputo," in John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. J. W. Robbins, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religions, Politics, and Culture Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 117, 122.

13. John G. McEvoy, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Historiography of Science," *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 37, no. 2 (2007): 397–98, 400.

## Human Reason Derailed

Abstract ideas and ideals, the pretention to universal validity, and human reason itself have, moreover, shown themselves, throughout the twentieth century, to be killers, mass murderers. “Gone is the confidence in progress, goals toward which history is heading, a *telos* that provides a destiny and gives a meaning to movement. The twentieth century, moreover, has added to this sense of sheer contingency of history a new sense of evil and collective human sin: it has been a century of war and human destructiveness.”<sup>15</sup> The problem, argues Albert Camus, is that human reason itself is involved, as a necessary and fundamental cause, in all this evil and destruction:

Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges. . . . As soon as crime reasons about itself, it multiplies like reason itself and assumes all the aspects of the syllogism. . . . Slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy or by a taste for the superhuman, in one sense cripple judgment. . . . Our purpose is to find out whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved in action, can avoid committing murder. . . . In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder. If murder has rational foundations, then our period and we ourselves are rationally consequent.<sup>16</sup>

Human rationality and its products—ideas—can no longer be trusted without hesitation. Since the rationally orchestrated massacre of millions of human beings at Auschwitz, reason itself has fallen under suspicion of intrinsic corruption. Worse still, Christian rationality (at least, in its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms) also has fallen into disrepute. Were not the perpetrators of such horrendous crimes Christians? Had they not been raised in an environment significantly influenced by the Christian religion, values, and way of life? “The

14. Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 474, 426.

15. *Ibid.*, 331.

16. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1991), 3–4.

master killers of the twentieth century, were they not all, or almost all, born in and baptized by the church?"<sup>17</sup> Do the Christian religion, values, and education have anything to do with the cultural, historical, political, psychological, and social conditions inducing human beings to commit mass murders and genocides? Why do they so utterly fail to prevent these large-scale denials of human dignity from happening?

These denials of the sanctity of human life are so profound that the victims can no longer distinguish good from evil, and exercise their free will adequately. The victims' humanity has been extinguished. Jean Améry describes the inhuman conditions prevailing in concentration camps:

In any event, it is clear that the entire question of the effectiveness of the intellect can no longer be raised where the subject, faced directly with death through hunger or exhaustion, is not only de-intellectualized, but in the actual sense of the word dehumanized. The so-called Mussulman, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions.<sup>18</sup>

How could the victims of extreme dehumanization ever have deserved such treatment? How could human beings be guilty of so great a sin that they would have to undergo the destruction of their personal identity?

Theodor W. Adorno insists that, having emerged from within the heart of Western civilization, Auschwitz constitutes the most extreme form of denial of civilization. It is barbarism, no less.

Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat—Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favoured that relapse continue largely unchanged. . . . If barbarism itself is inscribed

17. Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969-*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 168.

18. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sydney and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 8-9.

within the principle of civilization, then there is something desperate in the attempt to rise up against it.<sup>19</sup>

One of those favorable conditions, in Adorno's mind, is none other than modernity's unilateral emphasis on human reason as the source of technological innovation. By focusing only on means (that is, on that which is, by nature, instrumental and morally equivocal), global perspective is lost, the consideration of ends and of the purposeful use of reason becomes incidental, paving the way to the denial of human dignity. Reason is estranged from its foundation in the affective and existential dimensions of the human person.

A world where technology occupies such a key position as it does nowadays produces technological people, who are attuned to technology. . . . People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means are fetishized, because the ends—a life of human dignity—are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people. . . . With this type, who tends to fetishize technology, we are concerned—baldly put, with people who cannot love.<sup>20</sup>

Coldness and indifference expressed toward the person and predicament of others are trademarks of Western societies.

If coldness were not a fundamental trait of anthropology, that is, the constitution of people as they in fact exist in our society, if people were not profoundly indifferent toward whatever happens to everyone else except for a few to whom they are closely bound and, if possible, by tangible interests, then Auschwitz would not have been possible. . . . Every person today, without exception, feels too little loved, because every person cannot love enough. The inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of more or less civilized and innocent people.<sup>21</sup>

This coldness directly ensues from the objectification of reality, thereby determined, measured, and controlled by the subject. Having

19. Theodor W. Adorno, "Education after Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191–92.

20. *Ibid.*, 200.

21. *Ibid.*, 201.

turned the world into a picture of its own making, the modern subject is unable to experience genuine alterity. Standing alone, the modern subject explains everything in and as relation to itself.

The interweaving of these two events, claims Martin Heidegger, which for the modern age is decisive—that the world is transformed into picture and man into *subjectum*—throws light at the same time on the grounding event of modern history, an event that at first glance seems almost absurd. Namely, the more extensively and the more effectually the world stands at man's disposal as conquered, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively, i.e., the more importunately, does the *subjectum* rise up, and all the more impetuously, too, do observation of and teaching about the world change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology. . . . The name "anthropology" . . . designates that philosophical interpretation of man which explains and evaluates whatever is, in its entirety, from the standpoint of man and in relation to man.<sup>22</sup>

In the face of human suffering and death, human reason and truth, even when inspired by and grounded in faith, collapse and lose most of their convincing power. Albert Camus, in *The Plague*, has the main character, Dr. Rieux, reject rational accounts explaining (away) human misery and suffering: "Paneloux is a scholar. He has not seen enough people die and that is why he speaks in the name of eternal truths. But the least little country priest who administers to his parishioners and who has heard the breath of a dying man thinks as I do. He would treat suffering, not try to demonstrate what a fine thing it is."<sup>23</sup>

At this darkest of hours, at the time of Auschwitz, in Auschwitz, where is God to be found? Elie Wiesel's famous answer to this question, at the sight of a hanging child, dying slowly, too slowly, must here be recalled: "Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'For God's sake, where is God?' And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where he is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows. . . .'"<sup>24</sup> Jean Améry sarcastically evokes the Christian idea of the incarnation of God. The incarnation, he argues, actually took place in Auschwitz where, as

22. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology*, 133.

23. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2001), 97.

24. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 65.

absolute good, the Word of God assumed and suffered death, having been turned into the radical opposite of a salvific principle. “We had the chance to observe how the word became flesh and how this incarnated word finally led to heaps of cadavers.”<sup>25</sup> At and since Auschwitz, God’s absence and silence have become unacceptable and unbearable outright. In the poignant words of Elie Wiesel:

In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty and so I pleaded for forgiveness. In those days, I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended on every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers. But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. In the midst of these men assembled for prayer, I felt like an observer, a stranger.<sup>26</sup>

Pure strangers in a foreign world, forced always to wander alone and away, burdened with a condition they can never leave behind, human beings are lost. “In one terrifying moment of lucidity, I thought of us as damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion without any hope of finding either.”<sup>27</sup> When such evils are experienced firsthand, faith in God is shaken in its deepest foundations. The victim’s relationship to God can never be the same.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.<sup>28</sup>

25. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, x.

26. Wiesel, *Night*, 68.

27. *Ibid.*, 36.

28. *Ibid.*, 34.

Perhaps, in such times, it is better not to believe in God—that is, not to believe in an explicitly manifest God—because “the harshness of the world that crushes one’s spirit makes it impossible to believe anything,”<sup>29</sup> in order precisely to be able to act and behave in a manner more faithful to God.<sup>30</sup> The condition of the human person who, having experienced (and, most certainly, still experiencing) both radical forms of evil and suffering (Auschwitz, again) and the absence (latency/hiddenness) of God, yet refuses to give up on herself, is one of absurdity. For trying to live and respect the life of others in a world where everything (including human life) is morally indifferent, and the final and plain truth about the human condition cannot be accessed, certainly, is absurd. In the words of Albert Camus: “If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. . . . The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Doctrine of Grace Revisited

For Christians, the challenge posed by Auschwitz and all forms of radical evil and suffering is directed essentially at the doctrine of grace, freely offered by God through Christ’s complete and infinite merits. The traditional Roman Catholic theology of divine grace unequivocally asserts that the performance of good actions requires the infusion and operation of divine grace. Subsequent to the fall, human beings

29. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 126.

30. See, in Camus, *Plague*, 98–99, the following conversation between Rieux and Tarrou illustrating the clear awareness human beings possess of both their finitude and absolute dignity, and who, as a consequence, commit themselves to the protection of the latter in spite of God’s hiddenness and silence: “Since the order of the world is governed by death, perhaps it is better for God that we should not believe in him and struggle with all our strength against death, without raising our eyes to heaven and to his silence. ‘Yes,’ Tarrou agreed, ‘I can understand. But your victories will always be temporary, that’s all.’ A cloud seemed to pass over Rieux’s face. ‘Always, I know that. But that is not a reason to give up the struggle.’ ‘No, it’s not a reason. But in that case I can imagine what this plague must mean to you.’ ‘Yes,’ said Rieux. ‘An endless defeat.’ . . . ‘Who taught you all that, doctor?’ The reply was instantaneous. ‘Suffering.’”

31. Camus, *Rebel*, 5–6.

have become irremediably incapable, with respect to their personal salvation, of meritorious acts. All they can do on their own is miss the mark, that is, sin. The ultimate consequence of the fall is, in just punishment and sentence for the reliance on and misuse of free will, morally helpless and enslaved to evil (sin), no longer being able to enact the good. For Augustine, whose theology lies at the heart of the Western church's understanding of sin and grace, humankind's condemnation in Adam and Eve is strictly universal (it applies to all human beings, even to those not yet born), and liberation from this condition can only come to humans from above, in and through the person of Christ: "As the truth says, no one is set free from the condemnation which Adam brought about except through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> Only with the assistance of divine grace, then, can human beings act meritoriously. As John M. Rist explains, "unless he is helped by God's grace, fallen man's freedom of choice is only the freedom to sin. We are free and able to do evil of our own accord, but we are unable to choose the good freely."<sup>33</sup> Properly speaking, fallen human beings are, at once, claimed to be the sufficient principle of the evil they commit and completely unable to generate good.

When the Fathers of Trent, in the *Decree on Justification* (1547 CE), the most explicit official document promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church on this topic, assert that Christian converts contribute to their own conversion by acting alongside divine grace in effecting change within their own being—and, more particularly, their free will—reorienting both toward God,<sup>34</sup> they do not depart from Augustine's teaching. When the Fathers say that converts collaborate to their own conversion, they mean that the converts merely refrain from opposing it, not that they positively contribute to what is being

32. Augustine, *Rebuke and Grace*, 7, 11; English translation taken from *Answer to the Pelagians IV: To the Monks of Hadrumetum and Provence*, trans. Roland J. Teske, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century Series*, vol. 26 (Hyde Park: New City, 1999), 116.

33. John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 424.

34. See Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, ch. 5. A reference edition and translation of this text is found in Henri Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 43rd ed., ed. and trans. Robert Fastiggi and Anne E. Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), par. 1525, 376.

done. Grace effects and provides for everything. Similarly, when the Fathers insist that good works, following from justification and sanctification, effectively contribute to the individual's salvation by procuring merits necessary to obtain salvation,<sup>35</sup> they do not allow for merits to be attributed to human agency and will. Since redeeming merits only result from grace (created and uncreated) operating within the individual, they cannot be attributed to the individual's nature or will itself.

Traditional Roman Catholic doctrine also presents divine grace as being completely irresistible and invincible. Grace, as expression of divine power, cannot be opposed by human freedom and will, which are, rather, transformed by it from within and apart from any action or awareness of theirs. As grace is bestowed upon humans, God not only awakens desire, but also, the act of willing itself. Augustine teaches that "the Lord has our heart in his power so that the good which we have by our own will we would not have at all unless God also produces in us the willing."<sup>36</sup> When God offers his grace, God so infuses the being and induces the act of a new will that there is nothing one can do to prevent being altered at the heart of their personal identity: "Human wills cannot resist [God's] will so that he does not do what he wills, since he does what he wills and when he wills even with the very wills of human beings."<sup>37</sup>

During the twentieth century, Roman Catholic theology and doctrine came to conceive of divine grace not as being granted only to a select few, but rather, as being offered and made available to all. Karl Rahner and the Second Vatican Council strongly advocated for the universal scope of God's redeeming grace. As Roger Haight states, "in the light of Rahner's and the Second Vatican Council's theology, one should reverse the Augustinian presupposition that grace, because it is absolutely gratuitous, is also rare in human history. If love abounds in the world, it is because all human existence unfolds within the context

35. See *ibid.*, canons 24, 26, and 31–32 (Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, par. 1574, 1576 and 1581–82, 387–88).

36. Augustine, *The Gift of Perseverance*, 23, 63 in *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, 234.

37. Augustine, *Rebuke and Grace*, 14, 45 in *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, 139–40.

of God's love that impels human freedom toward self-transcendence."<sup>38</sup>  
Karl Rahner indeed clearly argues that

Every human being is elevated by grace in his transcendental intellectuality in a non-explicit manner. This entitative divinization, which is proffered to freedom, even if it is not freely accepted in faith, involves a transcendental divinization of man's fundamental subjective disposition, the ultimate horizon of man's knowledge and freedom, in the perspective of which he accomplishes his life. Consequently, for absolutely every human being this supernatural existential itself constitutes a revelation of God through his self-communication in grace.<sup>39</sup>

The Second Vatican Council also makes plain that God's offer of grace is made to all human beings. Passages from two of the sixteen official documents produced by the Council confirm this assertion:

What has revealed the love of God among us is that the only-begotten Son of God has been sent by the Father into the world, so that, becoming human, he might by his redemption of the entire human race give new life to it and unify it.<sup>40</sup>

Humanity forms but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all humankind.<sup>41</sup>

This revised account, though, now appears to be in serious doubt. If the world and humankind have been redeemed in Christ once and for all, how can such events as Auschwitz occur? Where is God's healing and elevating, justifying and sanctifying grace to be found at work in a world where the exploitation of human beings is widespread and permitted (at least, in the sense of not being prevented)? Why have the human agents, social-political structures and institutions involved,

38. Roger Haight, "Sin and Grace," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. Francis S. Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 122.

39. Karl Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 5, ed. K. Rahner et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 350.

40. Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, par. 2. English translation taken from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 1996), 500, hereafter referred to by page number between brackets.

41. Vatican II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, par. 1 (569).

producing and suffering these atrocities, not been empowered by the grace of Christ to successfully resist and oppose their perpetration? The problem runs deep into the fabric of the human heart and soul. How was it possible for ordinary human beings to become capable of the abominations perpetrated in Auschwitz? Can the propensity for evils of such depth and extent be acquired early in the constitution of personal identity? Can human beings hinder the formation and exercise of other human beings' free will, and therefore, successfully oppose the action of divine grace? Human beings do not come into this world equipped with mature moral and spiritual personal identities. They rather build and fashion their character within relationships of dependence upon authoritative mentoring figures (such as close relatives and teachers). In this context, the fact that well before they have gained the ability to exercise inner moral criteria of conduct (that is, conscience), children can, by integrating external norms, forge their personality in a manner that is not conducive to their own flourishing appears quite obvious.<sup>42</sup> Jennifer E. Beste argues that some individuals are so morally and spiritually deprived and hurt that they can neither hear nor freely respond to God's gracious self-communication.

The extreme degree of suffering experienced by incest victims leads us to question specifically the power and efficacy of God's grace. We may wonder why we do not see more "evidence" of the healing quality of God's grace in the lives of persons who experience severe threats to their bodily and psychological integrity. Rahner's claim that God's self-communication brings about ontological, transformative changes in human consciousness that enable our freedom to respond to God's grace can appear incredible when confronted with the realities of many incest victims who are ensnared in the cycle of traumatization and may resort to suicide as the only escape from their unbearable suffering.<sup>43</sup>

42. See M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 60: "Children are seldom able to objectively compare their parents to other parents. They are not able to make realistic assessments of their parents' behavior. Treated badly by its parents, a child will usually assume that it is bad. If treated as an ugly, stupid second-class citizen, it will grow up with an image of itself as ugly, stupid and second-class. Raised without love, children come to believe themselves unlovable. We may express this as a general law of child development: Whenever there is a major deficit in parental love, the child will, in all likelihood, respond to that deficit by assuming itself to be the cause of the deficit, thereby developing an unrealistically negative self-image. . . . When a child is grossly confronted by significant evil in its parents, it will most likely misinterpret the situation and believe that the evil resides in itself."

It is within and as a response to such a context that the present book proposes a theology of the God of grace—at work in this world and within the human heart and soul, through latency and hiddenness. This theology of divine grace finds in the categories of obedience, weakness, and suffering the privileged channels for the expression of God’s being and power as active in this world, in history, and in each human existence. In weakness and suffering resides the locus where divinity and humanity meet, providing the latter with hope, meaning, and renewed freedom. This theology of grace procures a glimpse of light in utter darkness.

Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. . . . We must speak of [God] in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.<sup>44</sup>

In the gloom of a godless world, where human beings are crushed by the burden (guilt) of their freedom<sup>45</sup> and trapped within their finitude (in its epistemological, emotional, and historical aspects), only a God who suffers finitude and takes on the burden of human freedom as they are experienced by ordinary human beings can speak to today’s people (be they Christian or not). The abstractly transcendent God of power must give way to the most human vulnerable redeemer. Following John D. Caputo, “to propose a postmodern theology of the Cross, to meditate the event that transpires in the death of Jesus, is to try to think a certain death of God, the death of the *ens supremum et deus omnipotens*, the death of the God of power, in order to release the event of the

43. Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom*, American Academy of Religion Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88.

44. Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, 360–62.

45. In light of Auschwitz and the other genocides that followed it, Albert Camus’ bold words do not seem to be out of place in this discussion: “In that every action today leads to murder, direct or indirect, we cannot act until we know whether or why we have the right to kill” (*The Rebel*, 4).

unconditional claim lacking worldly sovereignty that issues from the Cross.”<sup>46</sup>

In the night of human morality and spirituality, light cannot come from without, but must be found within the darkness of the human heart and the wasteland that is a world apparently deserted by God. Grace must be found at work in the dark, from within darkness, under a certain type of spiritual obscurity, bringing about a radical transformation of the whole of creation and humanity. Again, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “to be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man—not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.”<sup>47</sup> Such a God is a God who incarnates divinity in an act of free self-denial, letting go of divinity itself. In the apt words of John D. Caputo: “If we . . . think of a Jesus who really is crucified and who really feels abandoned, then the icon of God we find in Jesus on the cross is not an icon of power but of powerlessness. . . . In Jesus there is kenosis: the divinity lies in the emptying of divinity.”<sup>48</sup> It is precisely in the midst of, through suffering and death that in and with Christ, the greatest and purest expression of goodness and love is made. Jacques Derrida states the conditions for the occurrence of such a pure donation:

On what conditions does goodness exist beyond all calculation? On the condition that goodness forget itself, that the movement is a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love. Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death, or rather the apprehension of death, can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self, of myself, and so on.<sup>49</sup>

46. John D. Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event,” in John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 66.

47. Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, 361.

48. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 82.

In and through the free and pure undeserved sacrifice of himself, Christ has incarnated and revealed the divine as infinite love. John Caputo argues:

Whenever one would expect an exercise of power from a classical hero, Jesus displays the stunning power of powerlessness—of nonviolence, non-resistance, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, generosity. The divinity that shows through Jesus consists not in a demonstration of might but in a complete reversal of our expectations culminating in the most stunning reversal of all. . . . The key to the kingdom is to love those who do not love you, who hate you, and whom you, by worldly standards, should also hate. . . . The only measure of love is love without measure. Love is not measured by a rule, but rather love expends itself without return on behalf of the other. Love will stop at nothing, which is the excess that is ingredient in love.<sup>50</sup>

### Our Way of Proceeding

The present volume brings theology straight into the trenches of everyday absurdity where human beings continuously struggle to decipher a purpose to their existence in a world that rejects transcendent norms and references. Following in the footsteps of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sergeï Bulgakov, Karl Rahner, Dorothee Soelle, and Simone Weil, the present endeavor is not meant to replace the traditional presentation of the doctrine of grace, but rather, to provide twenty-first-century postmoderns with a suitable interface, enabling them to relate to Christian tradition in a manner that is both meaningful to them and respectful of the tradition. This interface allows for God to be seen at work—more exactly, points to the working of God—in this world right now for the salvation of human beings and creation. By opting for this methodological approach, I do not intend to deny the importance and fruits of Jewish-Christian ecumenical dialogue and constructive theology accomplished since World War II. The success of these dialogue and theology directly

49. Jacques Derrida, "Beyond: Giving for the Taking, Teaching, and Learning to Give, Death," in *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, 2nd ed., trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 51.

50. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 84 and 86.

depends on the ability of all partners involved to appropriate in their own terms the input of others. Interpreting Auschwitz with the help of Christian categories constitutes, for Christians, an important moment of this appropriation, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the Jewish experience of Auschwitz. Such interpretive appropriation need not imply the forceful Christianization of Auschwitz. The aim pursued here, rather, is to contribute to both ecumenical dialogue and constructive theology by enabling Christian believers and theologians to perceive the God of Jesus Christ present and at work in Auschwitz, in and through the Jewish identity of the prisoners. The present monograph, thus, provides Christian ecumenists and theologians with new approaches and insights to further interreligious dialogue and theology. The use of testimonies from survivors of the Shoah enables us to retrace and respect the eminently Jewish character of their experience and witness. The use of the Christian categories of kenosis, affliction, discipleship, and self-sacrifice entitles us to recover the Jewish element and foundation of Christian faith and theology. When they fully recognize the Jewish identity of their savior, Christians are led to assume their own spiritual Jewishness, and thereby, empowered to relate in positive and meaningful fashion with Jewish believers.

### **Part I: Entering Auschwitz**

The first stage on this intellectual venture is the encounter with radical evil. To be able to relate to God in positive fashion in a world whose atmosphere still is permeated with the presuppositions, conditions, and effects of Auschwitz, we must first subject ourselves to the highly disturbing task of going to the source. We must retrieve the experience of Auschwitz through the testimonies of those who directly had undergone this ordeal. The challenge before us is that of gaining, through the persons and testimonies of survivors, positive awareness and understanding of the human predicament as well as of the nature and modalities of the relationship to God in Auschwitz. The careful study of landmark literary, philosophical, and theological works on Auschwitz, produced by the individuals and communities who suffered

it, allows for the monitoring of the condition, experience, and evolution (in themselves and in relation to the transcendent) of its victims before, through the event, and after the recovery of freedom. What did living in Nazi concentration and extermination camps mean and entail for the prisoners in regards to their physical, psychological, and spiritual identity and integrity? What were the inmates compelled or forced to do in order to enhance their chances of survival? Where did they find the motivation and will to struggle for their survival? How did their experience of Auschwitz affect the ways in which they feel and think about themselves? How did this experience impact their ability to relate to others? How do Auschwitz survivors characterize their personal relationship to God? Who is God to them and how is the meaning of their life as survivors influenced by their stance toward God? Is it possible to remain human and believe in God in Auschwitz? In order to be able to retrieve, from the testimonies of survivors, elements of an answer to the previous questions, we must address significant methodological difficulties. The first of these has to do with the selection of the appropriate method to use to gain access to and analyze the data. The traditional concept and understanding of scientific history need to be broadened and redefined to meet the requirements of the proposed study. This research demands a theological history—that is, a historical analysis, not limited to the systematic consideration of objective facts, events, and artefacts. The proper object of theological history is the human person, a free agent able to generate new events, who always finds herself part of complex relationship networks dynamically evolving over time. Theological history studies the human person and her relationships as they continually adapt to and are transformed by their interactions with other persons and their surrounding environment. And this, theological history does in light of their most radical and undergirding condition of possibility: the human person's fundamental openness to transcendence.

The first chapter of this book, therefore, demonstrates the possibility of and need for theological history to gain a faithful

understanding of the Auschwitz experience. Auschwitz constitutes an event and experience which involves the redefinition of human identity and its intrinsic relationship to God, forced onto the prisoners by extremely inhuman life conditions, evil, and suffering. Historical treatments of Auschwitz, neglecting the spiritual and theological aspects and implications intrinsic to internment and life in the camps, fail to consider one of its fundamental dimensions. The Jewish personal identity is defined within the context of an intimate relationship with God. The dignity of the human person resides and is grounded in her God-given ability to relate with God as a friend and partner. To negate the humanity of a Jewish person, one must obliterate her relationship to the divine. The study of the human condition of Auschwitz inmates is so important for this particular reason. If it can be proven that human dignity could (at least, in particular instances) be preserved in Auschwitz, then that both human nature and a positive relationship to God could be maintained there would also have been established, and this, in the very place where their existence was systematically denied.

But let us not neglect a legitimate objection. The vast majority of the victims of the Shoah were of Jewish ethnic and religious background. The proposed theologically focused historical analysis of Auschwitz can, thus, only yield interpretive accounts of the nature and evolution of the relationship Jewish prisoners entertained with the Jewish God. What would and could be, for Christians, the implications of such a study? The key point is to remember that to Christians, the God of the Jews is the same God as their own; no other. Christian believers and *a fortiori* theologians can, therefore, profoundly relate to the religious experience of Jewish survivors and thinkers, and draw from the latter's experience of and relationship to their God at and after Auschwitz to shed more light on their own experience and relationship to God. The second chapter consequently conducts and presents the results of the analysis of testimonies from Auschwitz survivors using the approach and method developed in the first.

## **Part II: A Conversation in Kenotic Mode**

Like the first, the second part of the book opens with a chapter adopting and proposing creative approach and content. Chapter three provides the resources and tools necessary to operate the positive and successful correlation of the Western theology of grace with the human condition and relationship to God as they have been, and still are, experienced in the persons of Auschwitz survivors, their descendants, and Western society more broadly conceived. Hence, the challenge consists in the elaboration of a theological interface successfully transposing the categories of the traditional accounts of grace into ones accessible to twenty-first-century Westerners. To respect the event and experience of Auschwitz, the theoretical foundations of this theological interface must be laid in an existential and spiritual situation correlative and corresponding to that observed and suffered in Auschwitz. Chapter three, therefore, opens with the study of affliction—the most radical form of suffering and detrimental spiritual situation in which human beings can find themselves. With the help of Simone Weil and Dorothee Soelle, we enter the realm of human spiritual darkness and despair in order to decipher and delineate there modalities for possible manifestations of the God of Jesus Christ. Such manifestations, we then find and analyze in the experience and testimonies of two Christian ordained ministers who personally suffered years of imprisonment and eventual execution by the Nazi regime: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp. In their lived embodiment and experience of martyrdom, obedience, prayer, and self-surrendering, we perceive powerful expressions of Christian spirituality and discipleship, themselves grounded in and undergirded by a profound theological understanding of the life, ministry, and person of Jesus Christ. Drawing from the work of two important twentieth-century theologians—namely, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergeĭ Bulgakov—we then critically expose the tenets of this undergirding theology, which we consider apt to provide a coherent systematic approach to the question of grace for our day and age. This

approach centers on the vulnerable Jesus Christ. This Christ, powerful in his very weakness, suffering, and self-surrendering is the God who can relate to the victims of Auschwitz and infuse freedom and meaning into their lives. This chapter is composed of three sections, respectively dealing with the spiritual context and situation in which a kenotic theological interface ought to and can only be developed (affliction), its concrete (demonstrated) application (the cases of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp), and the systematic exposition of its theological categories, principles, and foundations.

In chapter four, the kenotic theological interface is first tested for its faithfulness to the Western tradition of grace in terms both of content and spirit. The function of the kenotic theological interface is not to replace an essentially inadequate Western doctrine of grace, but rather, to provide the latter with a fresh presentation and reformulation meaningful to twenty-first-century Westerners. To be correlated with the experience of Auschwitz, the interface must have proven beyond doubt its faithfulness to the tradition—that is, its ability to act as a genuine representative for the tradition (for what concerns the question of grace) as the latter attempts to relate with the reality of radical evil, itself definitional of the postmodern identity and life. We propose to accomplish this task through the consideration of teachings which have become inevitable landmarks in the landscape of the theology of grace—namely, those of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Council of Trent, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions are represented in an attempt to convey and respect the substance of the theology of grace in relation to human freedom characteristic of the Western world. We will consider in chronological sequence these key moments in the evolution and history of the Western doctrine of grace.

Once the kenotic systematic framework will have shown to be faithful to the gist of Christian tradition, an encounter with the human condition and the relationship to God as they were embodied in Auschwitz will then be orchestrated. The aim being to determine ways in which the Christian tradition could provide spiritual sustenance

to people who (still) have to live with Auschwitz today and see how the Christian tradition could be enriched, revealed, and find original expression in Auschwitz. A fruitful, reciprocally nourishing, instructive, and empowering encounter between Auschwitz (as it exists and survives in its victims and their descendants, but also, in Western society in general) and Western Christianity would constitute no small accomplishment and yield remarkable results benefitting all parties involved. Let us now tackle the first important point on our agenda: finding a proper entry into Auschwitz.