

## Preface

This book is the result of a spiritual journey undertaken more than ten years ago, when my wife and I were living and studying in Belgium. Acting then as postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Namur, I learned about the Auschwitz Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the memory of the Shoah and the education of generations of Belgians about the defense of human dignity and rights against all forms of denial and intolerance. From April 8 to 13, 2006, I was granted the opportunity to take part in a five-day onsite seminar on the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp under the guidance of six Belgian survivors and a number of experts (historians, anthropologists, and psychologists), founders and members of the Auschwitz Foundation. Morning sessions were dedicated to lectures and discussions about particular aspects of the operation of and living conditions in the camp. Afternoon sessions were devoted to visits of the sites with the survivors who, assisted by Polish guides from the Auschwitz museum, would relate their reminiscences of the camp as we passed through the entrance gates, strode along the pathways, visiting the preserved barracks, prison, and crematoria.

Thanks to the living witness of Baron Paul Halter, Lydia Chagoll, David Lachman, Marie Pinhas-Lipstadt, Jacques Rotenbach, and Paul Sobol, I have been able to experience the human dimension of Auschwitz. In their memories, their lingering pain and guilt, their spiritual brokenness, but also, their extraordinary courage, resilience,

and ability to put words on the horrible, mustered anew each year to help prevent Auschwitz from happening again, I have come to sense human greatness and misery in life-changing fashion. This week-long visit of Auschwitz-Birkenau brought home the fact that I, as a philosopher and a human being, had to undergo a profound transformation. I could no longer practice philosophy like any other trade, as a technician or expert. I had finally discovered that ideas could kill—that they have killed and are still killing millions of people. No more could I make use of ideas as mere material for abstract thought experiments. Nothing could endanger the future of humankind more than the kind of armchair philosophy I was training myself to practice and teach professionally. The experience and reality of radical evil washed over me, determining the nature and orientation of my research thereafter.

From the philosopher of nature and science, thus, emerged a systematic theologian wishing to explore the depths of human freedom and sin, but also, and more importantly, the ways of divine grace providing redemption to those most in need. Having laid foundations with a thesis on the reinterpretation of the doctrine of original sin for the twenty-first century, I felt the need to tackle the greatest challenge: finding God in Auschwitz. I had known for years that my faith, the Christian faith, could no longer avoid this challenge. Christianity finally had to take its share of responsibility for Auschwitz and be put to the test of radical evil. In good conscience and integrity, I knew I had to find a way to immerse myself into the darkness of Auschwitz, and by so doing, allow my Christianity to pass through the crucible of evil. I never dared to pretend, however, that I could do this myself. In a crucial insight, I foresaw that I had to invoke the intercession of people who had already completed this phenomenal task. In the same way that six survivors had opened the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau to and for me, these same and other survivors could manage for me an access to God in and from there. Deep in my heart, I felt that if I were to meet with Christ, the God who saves in poverty, suffering, and death, it would be in and through those

who suffered and survived the most profound experience of death and resurrection. Who else than the survivors themselves, then, could bring God to me and me to God?

A number of prominent philosophers and theologians inspired and provided much needed materials and tools to build bridges between Auschwitz and grace, between survivor testimonies and scripture. In the prison theology and martyred lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, I found the embodiment of true Christian discipleship and self-sacrifice. These two ordained ministers remained true to their Christian vocation to the end, giving a voice to Christ and inspiring others in Nazi Germany. In the writings of Simone Weil and Dorothee Soelle, I found theologians who, in order to encounter the crucified Christ, dared to explore the dark side of human nature. In the night of affliction, the cross stands and shines. At the foot of the cross, Christians are called to take a stand and remain. In Sergeĭ Bulgakov and Hans Urs von Balthasar, I found theologians who conceived of a divine love truly without bounds, extending to and overcoming even eternal damnation and forsakenness. God is love and love self-gives, turning meaningless suffering into a gateway to eternity. Self-donation epitomizes and fulfills being and spirit. Kenosis is and leads to God.

With this book, I now share the fruits this insight has yielded. What follows is an attempt to open to, believe in, and follow God in the post-Auschwitz world. With heartfelt humility and respect for the testimonies, experiences, and persons of the victims of the Shoah, and profound reverence for Christian doctrine and tradition, I submit to you this frankly tentative, daringly provocative, and, hopefully, constructive proposal for a conversation between the Jewish experience of the Shoah and the Christian experience of redeeming grace. May this book foster discussion, and, if necessary, a bit of controversy to help Christian theology finally come to grips with the reality of the Shoah in ways that will lead Christians to believe, act, and teach responsibly in and for the twenty-first century. May it be of assistance to those who, like me, are looking for a glimpse of light amidst the darkness of human violence and suffering. Consider the

following a venture into the unknown, grounded in the sure hope that Jesus Christ himself has preceded us on the path to true life and freedom, summoning us to follow in his footsteps like faithful disciples. Consider the following an attempt to turn postmodern philosophy into living theology.

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