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A Passion for God

The Mystical-Political
Dimension of Christianity

Johann Baptist Metz

Edited and translated, with an introduction by
J. Matthew Ashley



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The Church After Auschwitz

I. AUSCHWITZ—A SIGN OF THE TIMES?

Since the last council there has been a great deal of discussion in the Catholic Church about the so-called signs of the times that have to be understood in the light of faith and processed with the power of hope. But what would these signs of the times be? What marks the countenance of our century? What will people of the twenty-first century remember, if they still remember? What monuments, what time-signs of this saeculum of ours, coming to a close? It would be well worth a poll. Would "Auschwitz" be among them? I doubt it. Do ecclesial pronouncements on the signs of the times talk about Auschwitz? Not to my knowledge. The title of this essay recognizes Auschwitz, recognizes the Shoah, as such a time-sign for the church, the church after Auschwitz. This obviously rather untimely sign of the times should be the topic of discussion here, so the comment Elie Wiesel has made (not in a denunciatory tone, but more with a note of sadness) will not be true of the ecclesial lives of Christians: "Yesterday it went: Auschwitz? Never heard of it. Today: Auschwitz. Oh yes, I already know about that." Do we really know about it? Do we know what happened as a result of Auschwitz, what happened to us, to our Spirit of Christianity and our often so forgetful, so clever talk about God and the world? From Elie Wiesel comes a statement that sounds awful to Christian ears: "The thoughtful Christian knows that it was not the Jewish people that died in Auschwitz, but rather Christianity." We can

only stand firm before this pronouncement if we do not simply ignore the experiences that prompted it.

II. AFTER AUSCHWITZ

What does it mean to grasp and characterize our situation as a situation after Auschwitz?

There is Theodore Adorno's dictum that "after Auschwitz there can no longer be any poetry." Who still dares cite this saying today without irony or without a shrug of the shoulders? For has not the course of time long ago proven it false? Was it not really wide of the mark? Does not this saying sound as if, after Auschwitz, birds would be forbidden to sing, the flowers to bloom, the sun to shine? Yet what is it that distinguishes human beings from birds, flowers and the sun? Is it not the terror, dismay over the revelation that occurred in Auschwitz at the inhumanity of human beings? Is it not the horror striking them dumb, interrupting their singing, making the sun go dark? Are we human beings really more humane when we are able successfully to forget such a horrible fact about ourselves?

What does *after Auschwitz* mean for the church? Where Auschwitz is concerned one can hardly be too radical, but can very easily be too ingenious or too *original*. And so it must not be too much on our minds, even (especially) among theologians. When it comes to the church and to being a Christian after Auschwitz, one thing occurs to me above all; I have often repeated it through the years, and ask your indulgence if I begin here by talking about it again. It concerns the memory of a conversation from the sixties. At that time a panel discussion was held in Münster between the Czech philosopher Milan Machovec, Karl Rahner, and myself. Toward the end of the discussion Machovec reminded me of that saying of Adorno—"After Auschwitz there can no longer be any poetry."—and asked me whether after Auschwitz there could be any prayer anymore for us Christians. I responded in the same way I would today: We can pray after Auschwitz because even in Auschwitz there were

prayers—in the songs and in the cries of the Jewish victims. To be sure, not every victim was a Jew, but every Jew was one of the victims. Being a Jew meant *per se* being condemned to death, *per se* being excluded from the community of human beings. Thus Auschwitz stands for the Jewish fate in the Western and European world, in the Christian world.

We Christians will never return to a time before Auschwitz; we will never get beyond Auschwitz alone, but only together with the victims of Auschwitz. In my view, this is what it will cost if Christianity is to continue on the other side of Auschwitz. Do not say: But after all, there are for us Christians experiences of God other than those of Auschwitz. Certainly! However, if there is no God for us in Auschwitz, how can there be a God for us anywhere else? And do not say: Such a notion violates the heart of the Christian teachings that tell us how in Jesus Christ the nearness of God is irrevocably guaranteed to Christians. Because the question remains: For which Christianity is this promise valid? For example, does it hold for a Christianity that identifies itself with anti-Semitism and is among the historical roots of Auschwitz? or does it hold exclusively for a Christianity that can only understand and proclaim its own identity in the face of this history of Jewish suffering? For me the recognition of this (as it were) salvation-historical dependency is the test of whether we are prepared as Christians to grasp the catastrophe of Auschwitz precisely as such, whether we are ready to do more than merely exorcise it ethically, as is commonly done, and instead take it seriously both ecclesially and theologically.

Can our horror be trusted, our confession of guilt, our shame that we have lived and prayed with our backs to Auschwitz? Can our dismay be trusted, our horror over our secret or even open complicity with the murderous persecution of the Jews carried out by the Nazis, horror at the indifference with which we Germans thrust the Jews, along with those few of us who stood with them, into deadly isolation? Can one trust that Christian theology has finally learned its lesson, that it is on guard against that veiled anti-Semitism that indeed hardly ever emerges in theology in the

form of a crude racism, but rather in metaphysical or psychological garb? Is it on its guard against an anti-Semitism that has accompanied Christian theology as a constitutional temptation from its very beginnings, since the time of Marcion and since the irruption of Gnosticism? Has the memory of Auschwitz transformed us in our existence as Christians? Are we in fact a church after Auschwitz? Or are we as Christians, as a church, the same as we were yesterday? As Christian theologians do we speak the same way today we spoke yesterday, before Auschwitz?

III. GOD AFTER AUSCHWITZ

The small town in the Upper Palatinate where I was born belongs to the Archdiocese of Bamberg. In Bamberg Cathedral, where I was ordained, there is, besides other famous works of art, the symbolically rich pair of women representing Church and Synagogue. And just as in Strasbourg Cathedral, in Bamberg the synagogue is depicted as a woman with blindfolded eyes.

When I look upon this image of the synagogue with blindfolded eyes today I am deeply troubled by the question of what her eyes have seen, what they know of God, and what we in Christendom—frequently with extreme violence—have theologically made invisible and silenced. For instance, when I see this image today I ask myself whether during that night when the synagogues burned in Germany a wisdom about God was reduced to ashes, a wisdom without which today we Christians cannot know our own hearts or minds when we say “God,” nor when we say “Jesus” (who, as everyone knows, was not a Christian but rather a Jew). Reflecting on the figure of this woman today, I see it as a symbol and monumental memory of the biblical Israel, and then ask myself, as a Christian and a member of my church, how I must understand and value Israel’s election by God, by the one God of Jews and Christians. I ask myself how I must understand and value the unfinished covenant between God and “his” people. What is it then (so I have often asked myself, in complete accord with Paul) that makes even us Christians see Israel as

unsurpassable and irreplaceable? What is it that allows us to see the finger of God over this people?

What really distinguishes biblical Israel? What distinguishes this small, culturally rather unremarkable and politically insignificant desert people from the glittering high cultures of its time, from Egypt, Persia or Greece? Israel knew no mythical or ideational riches in spirit with which it could transcend or console itself when it faced its own fears, the alienation of its exile, the history of suffering continually breaking out in its midst. It remained, in its inmost essence, mythically and idealistically mute. It showed little gift for forgetting, and at the same time little gift for the automatic, idealistic handling of disillusionment, and little gift for soothing its anxieties. It remained poor in spirit.

Even when, infiltrated by foreign cultures, Israel imported and mimicked myths and idealizing conceptions, it nonetheless was never completely and finally consoled by them. I could almost say that Israel’s election, its capacity for God, showed itself in this particular incapacity, that is, the incapacity to let itself be really consoled by ahistorical myths or ideas. Compared with the glittering high cultures of its time—in Egypt, Persia and Greece—Israel remained in the final analysis an eschatological landscape of cries, a landscape of expectation as did, incidentally, early Christianity. The latter’s biography, as everyone knows, ends with a cry (Rv 22:20), a cry now christologically intensified, a cry we have since then virtually reduced to silence, either mythically or idealistically-hermeneutically. Yet even over Christianity there lies a trace of something unreconciled. Even Christians’ Christology is not without eschatological uneasiness. Not vaguely wandering questions, but passionate and insistent interrogation belongs to that passion for God that Christians—according to Paul—must come to terms with in the Jewish traditions.

Could it be that there is too much singing and not enough crying out in our Christianity? Too much jubilation and too little mourning, too much approval and too little sense for what is absent, too much comfort and too little hunger for consolation? In its moral teachings, is the church not too often on the side of Job’s friends

and too little on the side of Job himself, who thought faith could include even insistently questioning God? Do we believe in God—or do we believe in our faith in God, and therein in our selves, or in what we would like to hold about ourselves? If however we believe in God, can we remove from that faith the elements of crying out and expectation? Here one of the constitutional temptations of Christianity is rooted. I am reminded of Jesus' cry from the cross. From the very beginning the Christian community has found it difficult to deal with the fact that at the center of Christian faith there is that cry of the Son, abandoned by God. The history of the tradition shows how the shock this cry occasions was later attenuated, and the cry replaced by more pious farewells: in Luke, for example, by the words from the evening prayer of Psalm 31:6, "Into your hands I commend my spirit" or in John, by "It is finished." Only in the Letter to the Hebrews (5:7) is the great cry with which Jesus died again recalled (as J. Moltmann does).

This is true even for Christians: Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that in it the cry of the crucified has become inaudible, hears not the Gospel but a myth of the victors.

Elie Wiesel reported of his reencounter with Auschwitz in 1987 that "on the walk to the place where the slaves had built their gas chambers and crematoria it was necessary to clamp one's teeth. And every wish to wail, to cry out, to weep, had to be suppressed. At one point, at which we were in the antechamber of death, we who had been here once before felt the need to reach out to each other. The need to support one another? For an endless stretch of time we kept very still. Then, very quietly at first, but finally crying out louder and louder, like madmen we began to speak that eternal prayer of the Jews: *Shema Israel*—"Hear oh Israel, God is our God, God is one"—once, twice, five times. Did we do this because the victims, who sensed that the end was near, began to speak the same prayer? Because, in the end, on the threshold of death, all words turn into prayers, and all prayers come down to that one?"

Obviously religion is a primordial phenomenon of humanity;

the history of humanity has always been also the history of religion. In the *Shema Israel*, for the first time and in a unique way in the religious history of humanity, the name *God* was laid upon human beings. What later comes to be named biblical monotheism is rooted in Israel's passion for God—in the dual sense of a passion for God and as a suffering unto God. This monotheism is not, as its despisers like to caricature it, a totalitarian ideology of domination. It is, if I understand it aright, much more a pathic monotheism, with a painfully open eschatological flank, than it is a monotheism of power politics. I ask myself, again and again, How is it that what Jesus prophesied of himself can be more clearly discerned in the fate of Judaism after Christ than it can be in the destiny of Christianity itself?

As long as we are only talking about religion, as that is understood in our mythically enthralled, proreligious postmodern world, one can certainly dispense with Israel and the Jewish traditions. But if it is God and prayer that are at stake, then Israel is indispensable, not only for the Jews but also for us Christians. Israel, rejected and persecuted, is and continues to be the root for us Christians, and also for Islam. And thus Auschwitz is and continues to be an attack on everything that must be holy to us.

IV. AUSCHWITZ AND GERMANY

Auschwitz must not be functionalized; it must not be instrumentalized—not religiously, and not politically. I would agree with the Jewish historian Wolfsohn in this: since Germany was not geographically divided on account of Auschwitz, but rather because of power politics and ideological motives, it need not continue to be divided on account of Auschwitz. Pressing questions arise, of course, given our rewon unity. Now that what belongs together has come back together, will the wound that bears the name of Auschwitz be opened? With the passing of the so-called postwar period, will we also bury the memory of Auschwitz? Is there not the danger that with our unification we will return to an allegedly seamless normality and continuity in

our German history? But that would not be a unity built on a responsible awareness of history! It would only stir up new fears, and not exclusively for the Jews among us, though in a very particular way for them.

Do we have enough sensitivity and respect for new fears arising among the Jews in our midst, the few who were able to save themselves and have risked remaining among us or returning to us? For a church that wants to understand itself as a church after Auschwitz, a new arena is opening up in which the church must prove itself. It is precisely the church that must insist that our newly won unity not forget the horrified faces of our Jewish fellow citizens. It must insist that we cannot encourage any understanding of German unity that overlooks anew, or even secretly excludes, our elder brothers and sisters in faith, as John Paul II calls the Jews. This is what Christians among the Auschwitz-generation must pass on to the next generation.

It may be that everything comes down to this: It is precisely because of unification that we are confronted once again with our recent history, that we will all together be drawn anew into history, a postwar history in which the memory of Auschwitz was too often repressed in the West, while in the East it was, at best, ideologically functionalized. This recapitulation harbors an opportunity, but also a growing danger against which we must be on our guard. For it is precisely repetitions, lags in political history, that can quickly lead us astray into *ressentiment*, into zealously sharpened attitudes; they easily promote aggressiveness and latent violence. So we must not be in any way indifferent to a rising anti-Semitism or, more generally, to a growing xenophobia among us. German unity must never gather beneath these banners. Such signs of the times would have to be particularly resisted by the church in Germany, from their very beginning and without compromise, if it is to understand itself as a church after Auschwitz. Such a stance does not preclude critical questions for the contemporary State of Israel; a wholesale suspension of critique would be here more a withdrawal from solidarity, containing (as do so many varieties of vague philo-Semitism) once again the germ of

new anti-Semitic thinking. Two points seem important to me for a German critique of political Israel:

1. No German critique of the State of Israel must be made unless such criticism is present in Israel itself.

2. It is precisely as Germans that we should be the last to object to an exaggerated need for security and preservation among the Jews, given the fact they were brought to the verge of annihilation in our recent history. And we should be first in giving them the benefit of a doubt when they assert that they defend their state not out of Zionist imperialism, but rather as a shelter against death, as the final refuge for a people that has been persecuted down through the centuries.

V. AUSCHWITZ AND EUROPE

Over the past year German television ran a four-part series by journalist Lea Rosh on the fate of the Jews in Europe under Nazi rule, with commentary by the historian Eberhard Jäckel. The final line in the last installment was "Europe—a cemetery for the Jews." Those concluding words were not meant to deflect German guilt for the mass-murder of millions of Jews, which is what the name Auschwitz stands for. After all, the whole series appeared under a title borrowed from Paul Celan: *Death is a Meister from Germany*. Nor did it intend to throw doubt on what the series itself documented: that in many of the countries allied with or occupied by Germany, especially in Italy, there was highly courageous resistance against this tidal wave of annihilation.

"Europe—a cemetery for the Jews." Can we come to terms with such words at a time when Europe has once again become the focus of our interest? I will try to discuss that question from the perspective of a church after Auschwitz.

In a rather abbreviated fashion it may be said that what we today call Europe, as we have come to know it from its 2000-year history, was shaped by the Greek spirit on the one hand and Christianity on the other. The Jewish spirit, so it would seem, does not belong to this definition of Europe, and has no right to

reside [*Heimatrecht*] there.¹ The emancipation of the Jews carried on since the Enlightenment was only supposed to be possible under the presupposition of their emancipation from the Jewish spirit. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, exponent of a German Idealism that influenced and defined not only the German spirit but the European spirit, said it thus: "They [the Jews] must have human rights...but I see no other way of granting them civil rights than this: one night all their heads have to be removed and replaced with others that contain not even one Jewish idea."²

Here is where my question arises for Christianity and for the church. Should not the Jewish spirit, together with the Christian spirit, have been propagated in Europe by the Christians? If for no other reason than the fact that Jesus was a Jew, and that his disciples were Jews? Very early on, a problematic and momentous strategy for spiritually disinheriting Israel set in, both ecclesiologically and theologically. (1) The church understood itself too exclusively as the new Jerusalem, as the authentic people of God. The foundational significance of Israel for Christians, as Paul so emphatically urged it in his Letter to the Romans, was too quickly suppressed; the root of Jesse was reduced to a now-surpassed presupposition within the church's salvation history. (2) Very early on something I call the bisection of the spirit of Christianity set in in theology: one could certainly appeal to Israel's faith tradition, but the spirit [*Geist*] is drawn exclusively from Athens, from the Greek-Hellenistic traditions. Had Israel and the Jewish-biblical traditions, then, no spirit to offer to Christianity and therefore to the European spirit as well? But there is such a Jewish spirit, offered to the spirit of Christianity and to the European spirit; and only when this Jewish spirit has the right to reside [*Heimatrecht*] within the European spirit will the synagogue as well be not merely endured, but recognized and appreciated.

I would describe the Jewish spirit as the power of memory, a power unknown or continually repressed in Europe. Jewish memory resists forgetfulness, even the forgetfulness of the forgotten. In the final analysis, for it, wisdom is a form of sensing absence. It

does not resist just the forgetfulness that wants to wipe away every trace, so that finally nothing can be remembered (as, for example, the Nazis tried to do with the demolition of the death-chambers). It does not resist just this intentional suppression, but as well even the forgetfulness that lies hidden in every pure historicization of the past. Such remembering is not only a matter of individual ethics, nor a matter for science alone; it is a concern for culture, the expression of an anamnestic culture that is at home in Judaism. This Jewish culture of remembering is lacking both in European Christianity and in the European spirit as a whole.

Are we European Christians blind to the dignity of this anamnestic culture? Have we already placed ourselves too far beyond it and cast it off as archaic or premodern? Yet it is true also for the faith of Christians that it not only *has* a remembrance, but *is* a remembrance: the memory of the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We Christians have certainly preserved this remembrance-structure of our faith in our cult ("Do this in remembrance of me."). But have we cultivated it enough also in the public sphere? Have we formed it and defended it in the intellectual and cultural spheres? Or have we not in those places continued to be latter-day Platonists?

And have we forgotten that Christianity is not only deeply indebted to the Greek spirit, but has also again and again foundered against it? We know of this foundering from the earliest history of the church in Christianity, from the Acts of the Apostles, where it tells of Paul on the Areopagus in Athens. Paul was certainly able to find common ground with the Greeks there concerning an "unknown god." However, when he spoke to them of what ties us absolutely to the Jewish traditions, when he spoke to them of eschatology and apocalypticism, of the God who raises the dead, then it says "some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them" (Acts 17: 32f.). The spirit of remembering that is at work in the biblical stories of hope cannot simply be sublated [*aufgehoben*] into the Greek spirit. But who then has saved and preserved this spirit of remembering—for Christianity, for Europe?

Are we not totally lacking the Jewish culture of remembering here in Europe? Is not the modern European person less and less his or her own remembrance, and more and more only his or her own experiment? Are we thereby to conclude that authentic progress is the progressive loss of remembering? The recent dispute among historians over the evaluation of Auschwitz always aroused in me the question whether we were dealing with this catastrophe in such an uncertain and divisive way because we lacked the spirit which was supposed to have been definitively extinguished in Auschwitz, if it was not because we lack the spirit of memory which would be needed to perceive what had happened in a catastrophe of this sort, even to us, to Europe, and finally to us Christians?

On the eighth of May 1990, participants in the Jewish World Congress gathered in front of the so-called Wannsee villa in Berlin, in order to commemorate the liberation from Nazi rule forty-five years earlier. At that meeting a text by Elie Wiesel read in Hebrew, German and English recalled the plan for annihilation conceived in Wannsee. Here is the final passage: "But Wannsee also means for us Jews that memory is stronger than its foes. It means that the hope of the Jews has triumphed over their fear. It means that coming back to Wannsee and listening to the hard, dark echoes of those voices, we Jews want to save coming generations from having our past become their inheritance for the future." This is the Jewish dowry for Europe, for humanity, for a church after Auschwitz.