Grace in Auschwitz: 
A Glimpse of Light in Utter Darkness 

By 

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Abstract

Since the postmodern human condition and relationship to God were forged directly in the crucible of or in response to Auschwitz (the Shoah), the Christian theology of grace cannot elude the challenge of radical evil it paradigmatically embodies and symbolizes. The present dissertation attempts to provide a theology of grace that would enable twenty-first century postmoderns to meaningfully relate to the Christian tradition. A theological interface accomplishing the transposition of the theology and categories of the traditional account of grace into ones accessible to twenty-first century westerners is therefore constructed. By means of the study of landmark literary, philosophical and theological works on Auschwitz produced by individuals who directly suffered it, an attempt at monitoring the human (and ultimately postmodern) condition, experience and evolution (in themselves and in relation to the transcendent) through time from before, through the event and up to the experience of renewed freedom is made. This is followed by the consideration of the reality of grace as it has been experienced, reflected upon and understood by western Christianity. This survey tracks the development and evolution of this doctrine in the landmark teachings of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent (Decree on Justification, 1547 CE), Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. Drawing from the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergeĭ Bulgakov – we then propose, test (to prove its conformity to the western tradition of grace) and apply (interpreting in its light the results of our analysis of human condition in Auschwitz) a coherent and powerful kenotic systematic approach to the question of grace for our day and age.
This approach centres on the person of the vulnerable Jesus Christ. In the gloom of a godless world, where human beings are crushed by the burden (guilt) of their freedom 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 all ordinary human beings can speak to today’s people (be they Christian or not).
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In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:4-5 (NRSV)

To Rachel Cliche and Thérèse Dulac
my grandmothers – beacons and bearers of light
Introduction

A Postmodern Situation

There is a need now for the rediscovery of the God who provides breath, flesh and life to all Christian dogmas, doctrine and theology, of the God who stands by his creation at all times, even the darkest ones, who can still be found when all lights have gone out. Human beings live in a time where the eradication of entire ethnic communities or of all humankind is a real and immediate possibility (witness Auschwitz¹ and Hiroshima). They inhabit a world which in and of itself does not appear to testify of 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.²

All human beings are to live a “secular” existence, that is, a life where all events, circumstances and situations are accounted for without any explicit reference being made to God. “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.”³

Postmodern philosophy confirms Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s assessment of the current human condition or situation. Jacques Derrida claims that the radical separation of Church and state, of religion and 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

¹ The term “Auschwitz” is here used to denote all the 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 the Second World War. See Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), Is the Holocaust Unique? : Perspectives on Comparative Genocide (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009) for seminal studies on the relationship of the Shoah to other genocides, contemporary and ancient.
³ Ibid., 361.
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 ‘public-ness’, 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.”

Faith must be completely emancipated from religion and historical revelation, i.e.
from all given, determinate 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 the definition of 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 practical reason, reflecting faith favours good will beyond all
knowledge. It is thus opposed to dogmatic faith.

Morality and ethics are consequently to be defined as if God did not exist, meaning that
human existence, in regards to ethics, has nothing to do with knowing God, but only with
obtaining salvation from him. 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?

Authentic freedom, in western postmodern society, can only reach transcendence in and through
the definitive overcoming of all metaphysical philosophies, religions and systems. “Dogmatic

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4 Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,”
5 Ibid., 8-10.
6 Ibid., 11-12.
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.”

Going back to any form of divinely informed ethics means taking a step backwards, a move revealing the individual’s and society’s incapacity to address their present situation and context. 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 oneself to that condition of slavery which Nietzsche regarded as inevitable for all those who, precisely, do not accept the challenge.”

The fact is that postmodernity presupposes the rejection of the concepts of objective foundations and understanding of reality themselves. 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.” 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).” Hence, human life marked by finitude, is unable to find any permanent, stable referent in the absolute, the intelligible, 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.”

John D. 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

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7 Ibid., 15.
9 Ibid., 81.
view. ... The very nature of living, being alive in time and history, means that what we affirm, what we desire, will never come.”

Indeed, a systematic understanding of reality and of 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 also is one of the central themes of postmodernity. As John G. McEvoy explains, referring to Lyotard’s foundational work on postmodernism:

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.

What the previous considerations entail for the definition and practice of religion and theology is that revealed truths, theological truths are 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.

**Human Reason Derailed**

Abstract ideas and ideals, the pretention to universal validity, and human reason itself, have moreover shown themselves, throughout the twentieth century, as killers, mass murderers.

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“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.”15 The problem is, argues Albert Camus, that human reason itself is involved, as one of its fundamental causes, in all this destruction and evil:

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.16

Human rationality and its products – ideas – can no longer be trusted without hesitation; since the systematic and rationally orchestrated and justified 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 figures) also has fallen into disrepute: were not the perpetrators of such horrendous crimes Christians and had they not been raised in an environment significantly influenced by the Christian religion, values and life? “The master killers of the twentieth century, were they not all, or almost all, born in and baptized by the church?”17 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 did the Christian religion, values and education so utterly fail to prevent such large scale denials of human dignity and life from happening?

These denials of human life and dignity are so profound and decimating that the very distinction of good and evil or the exercise of freedom of the will are no longer possible and real for their victims; the latter’s very humanity disappears. Describing the inhuman conditions prevailing in the concentration camps, Jean Améry explains:

Il est clair que toute la question de l’activité de l’esprit ne se pose plus là où le sujet sur le point de mourir de faim ou d’épuisement est non seulement privé de son esprit mais cesse même d’être un homme. Celui qu’on appelait le

“musulman” dans le jargon du camp, pour désigner le détenu qui cessait de lutter et que les camarades laissaient tomber, n’avait plus d’espace dans sa conscience où le bien et le mal, le noble et le vil, le spirituel et le non-spirituel eussent encore pu s’opposer l’un à l’autre. Ce n’était plus qu’un cadavre ambulant, un assemblage de fonctions physiques dans leurs derniers soubresauts.\textsuperscript{18}

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

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 within the principle of civilization, then there is something desperate in the attempt to rise up against it.\textsuperscript{19}

One of those favourable conditions, in Adorno’s mind, is none other than modernity’s unilateral emphasis on human reason as source of technological innovation. By focusing only on means (i.e. on that which is by nature instrumental and in this sense morally neutral or equivocal), all global perspective, all consideration of the ends, of the meaning of the very use of reason become incidental, paving the way to the (rational) 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.\textsuperscript{20}

Coldness and indifference toward the fate of others are trademarks of western societies.

If coldness were not a fundamental trait of anthroplogy, that is, the constitution of people as they in fact exist in our society, if people were not profoundly


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 200.
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.\footnote{Ibid., 201.}

This coldness itself directly ensues from the reduction of all reality to the status of object, that is, to that which is determined, measured, controlled by the subject. Having turned the whole of reality into a picture of its own making, the modern subject is incapable of experiencing genuine alterity and therefore can only stand alone and explain everything in 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 \textit{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 importantly, does the \textit{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.\footnote{Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in \textit{The Question Concerning Technology}, 133.}

Lastly, in the face of human suffering and death, human reason and truth, even when inspired by faith, collapse and lose most if not all their convincing power. Albert Camus, in \textit{The Plague}, has the main character, Dr. Rieux, reject any rational account offered to explain (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.”\footnote{Albert Camus, \textit{The Plague}, tr. R. Buss (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2001), 97.}

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...’”\footnote{Elie Wiesel, \textit{Night}, tr. M. Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 65.} Jean Améry sarcastically evokes the Christian idea of the incarnation of God when he argues that it took place in Auschwitz where, as absolute good, the
Word of God assumed and suffered death, having been turned into the radical opposite of a salvific principle. “On a pu voir comment le verbe s’est fait chair et comment le verbe devenu chair a finalement formé une montagne de cadavres.”25 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.26

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.”27 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.28

Perhaps, in such times, is it 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,”29 in order precisely to be able to act and behave in a manner more faithful to God.30 The condition of the human person who, having experienced (and most

25 Jean Améry, Par-delà le crime et le châtiment, 18.
26 Elie Wiesel, Night, 68.
27 Ibid., 36.
28 Ibid., 34.
29 John D. Caputo, What would Jesus Deconstruct? 126.
30 See, in Albert Camus, The Plague, 98-99, the following conversation between Rieux and Tarrou illustrating the crystal-clear awareness human beings possess of both their finitude and the absolute dignity and value of human life
certainly still experiencing) both radical forms of evil and suffering (Auschwitz, again) and the absence (latency/hiddenness) of God, nevertheless refuses to give up on herself and her life is 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.”

**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 for any good human action to be accomplished, divine grace is absolutely necessary. After the fall of the first couple, all human beings are by themselves irremediably incapable, in regards to their personal salvation, of meritorious acts. All they can do, out of their own initiative, and when they are left to themselves, is sin. The ultimate consequence of Adam and Eve’s choice to put their trust in themselves alone was that humanity as a whole was to become, in just punishment and sentence for the misuse of their free wills, from a moral viewpoint, entirely helpless and enslaved to evil (sin), no longer being capable of accomplishing any good deed on her own. 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 and who commit themselves to the protection of the latter in spite of God’s hiddenness and silence (the explicit manifestation of a positive absolute): “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’.”

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31 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 5-6.
through faith in Jesus Christ.” Only with the express assistance of divine grace, then, can human beings accomplish meritorious deeds in regards to their redemption. 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.” Properly speaking, fallen human beings are the sufficient principle of the evil they commit and at the same time are entirely incapable of generating good on their own.

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, i.e. cooperate, to their own conversion, acting alongside divine grace in effecting change within their own being and more particularly their free will, reorienting both toward God, they do not depart from Augustine’s teaching. When the Fathers of Trent say that converts collaborate to their own conversion, this only means that they do not oppose it, not that they positively contribute anything to what is being done, which means that grace is responsible for everything. Similarly, when the Fathers of Trent insist that good works consequent and following from justification and sanctification do contribute to the individual’s salvation by obtaining real merits and that such merits are necessary to obtain salvation, it does not follow that any merit can be attributed as such to human agency and will. For those merits only result from grace (created and uncreated) operating within the individual and cannot be attributed, strictly speaking, to the individual’s nature or will itself. The traditional Roman Catholic exposition of the doctrine of grace also presents divine grace as being completely irresistible and all-powerful. Grace, expression of divine power, because God is omnipotent, cannot be opposed by human freedom and will which are rather transformed from within and apart from any action or awareness of theirs by grace. God, while bestowing grace upon humans, not only awakens desire, but the very 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.”

When God offers to human beings his grace, he induces the willing in

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35 See *ibid.*, canons 24, 26 and 31-32 (Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, § 1574, 1576 and 1581-82, 387-88).
accordance to his own will, and there is nothing human beings can do to prevent him from altering their own will: “Human wills cannot resist his [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.”37

Finally, during the twentieth century, Roman Catholic theology and doctrine has come to conceive of divine grace not as being granted to a select few only, but rather as being made available and offered to all. Karl Rahner and the second Vatican council have strongly advocated for the universal availability of divine 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 of God’s love that impels human freedom toward self-transcendence.”38 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 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.39

The second Vatican council also makes plain that God’s offer of grace is intended for all human beings. Passages from two of the sixteen official documents produced by the council will 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.40

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.41

This traditional account now appears to have been seriously put in doubt. If the world and all of humankind have been redeemed in Christ once and for all, how can such events as

37 Augustine, Rebuke and Grace, 14, 45 in Answer to the Pelagians IV, 139-40.
41 Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate), §1 (569).
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 by other human beings is widespread and permitted (at least in the sense of not being prevented)? Why have the human agents, the social-political structures and institutions involved, producing and suffering all these atrocities, not been empowered by the grace of Christ to successfully resist and oppose their perpetration? The problem runs very deep into the fabric of the human heart and soul. How was it possible, in the first place, for ordinary human beings to become capable of abominations such as those perpetrated in Auschwitz? Can the propensity for evils of such extent and depth be generated very early in the constitution of the identity and personality of a given individual? Can human beings hinder the development and exercise of other human beings’ freedom and, therefore, successfully oppose the action of God’s grace? Considering that human beings do not come into this world with ready-made moral and spiritual personalities and identities of their own, but rather develop, build and fashion these throughout their childhood and teenage years through a lengthy process of growth and maturation which implies being part of relationships of utter dependence toward authoritative figures (parents, older siblings, grand-parents, teachers, etc.), that children, even before they acquire the ability to exercise inner moral criteria of conduct (i.e. conscience), can determine themselves by the interiorization of external norms not necessarily oriented toward their own fulfilment and good appears quite obvious. Jennifer E. Beste even argues that some individuals are so hurt and prevented from becoming their genuine selves that they can neither properly hear nor effectively respond to the gracious self-offer and communication God makes to all human beings.

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

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’ behaviour. 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.”
of many incest victims who are ensnared in the cycle of traumatisation and may resort to suicide as the only escape from their unbearable suffering.  

It is within and as a response to such a context that the present doctoral dissertation offers to develop a theology of a God who is gracious – at work in this world and within the human heart and soul – through his latency and hiddenness. Such a 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 active in this world and in human history and life. For it is in obedience, weakness and suffering that is found the locus where divinity and humanity meet, providing the latter with hope, meaning and renewed freedom. Such a theology of grace provides 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.  

In the gloom of a godless world, where human beings are crushed by the burden (guilt) of their freedom and trapped within their finitude (in its epistemological, emotional and historical aspects), it is our profound conviction that only a God who suffers finitude and takes on the burden of human freedom as they are experienced by all ordinary human beings can speak to today’s people (be they Christian or not). As John D. Caputo explains, “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 unconditional claim lacking worldly sovereignty that issues from the Cross.”

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

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).
deserted by God. If grace there is, it must be at work in the dark, from within darkness, under a certain type of radical obscurity, bringing about a radical transformation of the whole of creation and of 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.”

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.” It is precisely in the midst of, through suffering and death that in and with Christ the greatest, the purest expression and gift of goodness and love possible are 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, etc.

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

Whenever one, argues John D. Caputo, 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.

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50 John D. Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* 84 and 86.
Our Way of Proceeding

The present research brings theology straight into the trenches of twenty-first century everyday absurdity where ordinary human beings continuously struggle to decipher a purpose to their existence in a world that seems to object to any transcendent norm or reference. Following in the footsteps of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sergei Bulgakov, Karl Rahner, Dorothee Soelle and Simone Weil, the present endeavour is not meant to replace the traditional presentation of the doctrine of grace as such, but rather to provide twenty-first century postmoderns with a suitable interface that will enable them to relate to the Christian tradition in a manner that will be both meaningful to them and respectful of the tradition as for what concerns the fundamental issue of divine grace. Such an interface will allow for God to be seen at work – more exactly will point at God at work – in this world right now for the salvation of human beings and creation. By opting for this methodological approach, we do not deny the importance and fruits of the Jewish-Christian ecumenical dialogue and constructive theology accomplished by Jewish and Christian theologians since World War II. The success of these dialogue and theology directly 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. We intend to contribute to both ecumenical dialogue and constructive theology by retrieving from their original sources the core meaning of Auschwitz and the doctrine of grace. The present dissertation will thus provide Christian ecumenists and theologians with new approaches and insights to further interreligious dialogue and theology. Using only the testimonies of actual survivors and the teachings of landmark Christian theologians, we will be able to perceive and follow the unique undergirding evolving history and meaning of these experiences and realities as they unfold and progressively take more differentiated forms.

Part I: Entering Auschwitz

The first stage or step on this intellectual venture is the encounter with radical evil as such. If we are to relate in positive fashion to God 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, that is, of retrieving the experience of Auschwitz through the testimonies of those who directly had to undergo and bear this ordeal.
The challenge before us is that of gaining, through the persons and testimonies of the survivors, positive awareness and understanding of the human predicament in Auschwitz as well as of the nature and modalities of the camp inmates’ relationship to God. By means of the careful study of landmark literary, philosophical and theological works on Auschwitz (and of all the forms of radical evil it symbolises) produced by individuals and communities who had to suffer it, an attempt at monitoring the condition, experience and evolution (in themselves and in relation to the transcendent) through time from before, through the event and up to the experience of renewed freedom) of its victims will be made. 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 or will to struggle for their own survival? How did their experience of Auschwitz affect the ways in which they feel and think about themselves? How did this experience impact on their ability to relate to other human beings? How do the survivors of Auschwitz situate themselves in relation 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 the survivors, elements of an answer to the previous questions, we will have to address major methodological difficulties. The first of these has to do with the determination of the appropriate method to use to gain access to and analyze the data we need. The traditional concept and understanding of scientific history need to be broadened and redefined to meet the requirements of the proposed study. What this research demands is a theological history, that is, an historical analysis which is not limited to the systematic analysis of objective artefacts, events and facts, but whose proper object is the human person, that is, a free agent able to generate new events who always is inserted within a complex network of relationships dynamically evolving in time. Such 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, it does in light of their most radical and undergirding condition of possibility: the fundamental openness of the human person to transcendence.

The first chapter of the first part of the present dissertation therefore demonstrates that such an historical science is possible and necessary to gain true understanding of the experience of Auschwitz survivors in its radicality. Auschwitz has been experienced by camp inmates as
essentially and primarily involving a redefinition of the human identity and of 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 simply omit to address one of its fundamental dimensions. The Jewish identity and person are defined by their insertion and life 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 with the divine. It is for this precise reason that to study the human condition of Auschwitz inmates is so important. If we can prove that human dignity could be preserved even in Auschwitz, we will have established that both human nature and a positive relationship to God could be maintained there, where their existence was systematically denied. At this point, a legitimate objection can be formulated: since almost all the victims of Auschwitz were of Jewish ethnical background and religion, what the proposed research would be working on are testimonies of Jewish survivors describing the nature and evolution of their relationship to the Jewish God, not the Christian one, a God that the Jewish faith does not conceive as triune. What would be the Christian theological implications of the propose study? To Christians, the God of the Jews is the very 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 of this first part consequently accomplishes and presents the results of the analysis of testimonies of Auschwitz survivors using the approach and method developed in the previous chapter.

**Part II: Grace in the Christian West**

After having met with Auschwitz survivors and learned about their experience of the human predicament in Auschwitz, we then aim at meeting the Christian God in his interaction with creation and more particularly with humankind. That is, we carefully consider the reality of grace as it has been and still is today experienced, reflected upon and understood by western Christianity. The second part of the present dissertation therefore exposes the central tenets of the traditional understanding of the Christian doctrine of grace in its western development and formulation. The purpose of this survey being to track the development and evolution of the western doctrine of grace, the focus is laid on key texts and theologians, fundamental either to
the definition of the doctrine itself or its reconfiguration at turning points in its history. The teachings of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent (Decree on Justification, 1547 CE), Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner on the topic of divine grace in interaction with human freedom are therefore carefully studied. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions are here represented in order to offer a more accurate and rich presentation of the western theology of grace.

Augustine’s theology of grace is the primary source and foundation of western Christianity’s doctrine of grace; all subsequent theological accounts of grace produced in the west are situated, inserted within the context of the questions and themes that the Bishop of Hippo Regius defined, formulated and defended. Aquinas’ doctrine undergirds Trent’s (Decree on Justification) and still constitutes today, for Roman Catholic theologians, the necessary point of entry into the question and study of grace. His highly systematic and comprehensive approach and treatment integrates and at the same time clearly delineates the multiple elements involved: the healing and elevating functions of grace, the nature-grace relationship, the human freedom and grace relationship, the action of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, etc. In the first chapter of this second part, we join together the contributions of these two doctors of the Church.

We then move on to consider the impact of the Reformation on the formulation of the doctrine of grace, taking into account both the Protestant and Roman Catholic inputs. In fact, the theological teachings and pronouncements on grace produced by the Council of Trent directly presuppose and respond to the teachings of Luther and Calvin on this fundamental question. The theology of Luther, Calvin and Trent (whose Decree on Justification constitutes a norm for the Roman Catholic theology of grace) profoundly contributed to the definition and expression of the modern relationship and sensitivity to God and his redeeming action and presence in human existence. Laying the focus on the individual’s personal identity, emotions and spirituality, this theology, in an original retrieval of Augustine’s emphasis on the confessing self, in a sense does away with the rest of creation, which it now conceives as an external object upon which the human must impose her own imprint. Hence, Luther’s, Calvin’s and Trent’s theologies of grace must be considered in relation to one another. This will form the content of the second chapter of part II.

Karl Barth can arguably be considered one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century to come from the Protestant tradition. The doctrine of grace plays a central role within his whole theological endeavour, systematically exposed in the Church Dogmatics. The
importance and influence of his teaching on this topic cannot be ignored or denied. Influenced by Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of the human self in terms of temporality, Barth—in deliberate opposition to attempts made at demythologizing (rationalizing) the Christian faith and religion—reformulated Calvin’s doctrine of election and predestination in highly subjective terms. For him, Christianity is about being chosen in Jesus Christ to accomplish a definite function in God’s design for creation and history. Grace is the foundation, milieu and power from, in and by which human beings exercise their freedom which takes the form of active and creative obedience. Lastly, Karl Rahner’s transposition of Aquinas’ teaching on grace in terms of the supernatural existential considerably influenced the Roman Catholic articulations of the theology of grace from the time of the second Vatican council onwards. With Rahner, the redeeming grace of God offered in Jesus Christ reaches out, beyond the visible confines of the Church, beyond the limits of the individual’s consciousness of herself as being in a relationship with the transcendent. God is at work in the heart and soul of every human being, independently from the latter’s explicit commitment to or denial of God, offering Godself to all in a way that transformationally elevates, opens and destines to the transcendent. Human beings are summoned and empowered by God to responsibly take a definitive, supernatural stance before themselves and God. With Rahner Christianity and the Church are found at work and encompass the whole world. The study of the perspectives of these two major twentieth century theologians forms the content of the third and final chapter of part II.

Part III: A Conversation in Kenotic Mode

Part III, like part I, opens with a chapter adopting and proposing a more creative approach and content. This first chapter aims at providing 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 more broadly western society as a whole. The challenge therefore consists in the development and articulation of a suitable theological interface accomplishing the transposition of the theology and categories of the traditional account 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 6 therefore opens with the study of affliction – the most radical form of suffering and detrimental spiritual situation human beings can find themselves into. 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 the modalities for possible manifestations of God in Christ. Such manifestations we then find and analyze in the experience and testimonies of two Christian ordained ministers who personally suffered years of imprisonment under and 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 very 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 Sergei Bulgakov – we then critically expose the tenets of this undergirding theology, which we consider apt to provide us with a coherent systematic approach to the question of grace for our day and age. This approach centres on the person of 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 of all forms of radical evil and infuse freedom and meaning into their lives. Like the suggested theological interface, this chapter is composed of three sections respectively dealing with the spiritual context and situation in which such an 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 the second and last chapter of part III the kenotic theological interface is first tested for its faithfulness to the western tradition of grace in terms both of content and spirit with the help of the results obtained from the analysis realized in part II. The function of the kenotic theological interface is not to replace an essentially inadequate and unnecessary western doctrine of grace, but rather to provide the latter with a fresh presentation and reformulation meaningful to twenty-first century westerners. Before it is 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. In a second step or time, once the kenotic systematic framework will have been shown 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 in order to determine the ways in which Christian tradition on grace could provide meaning and sustenance
to the people who have to live with Auschwitz today (still) and also to see how the Christian tradition could be enriched, revealed and find original and unique expressions in Auschwitz. We deeply believe that 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 at large) and western Christianity would constitute no small accomplishment and yield remarkable results benefitting all parties involved. Let us now tackle the first important task on our agenda: finding a proper entry into Auschwitz.
Part I: Entering Auschwitz
Chapter One

Interpreting Auschwitz:
For a Theologically Oriented Reading of History

The purpose of the present doctoral dissertation is to propose a formulation of the doctrine of grace appealing not only to Christians, but also and especially to non-Christians, be they believers or not, who are living in the postmodern post-Auschwitz world. The Roman Catholic theology of grace has not yet systematically come to grips with the challenge that Auschwitz embodies for Christianity. The problems of radical evil and of the human condition in a world where radical evil has become actual reality and always remains an immediate threat still have to be coped with responsibly and their impact on the relationship human beings share with God assessed. The word “Auschwitz” symbolizes and designates the experience of such radical evil undeservedly undergone by millions of persons interned in the Nazi labour and extermination camps during World War II. The evil, conditions and life experienced by the prisoners in these camps so far exceed and differ from those experienced by human beings living in peaceful time that their faithful analysis and description entails a serious re-evaluation of human morality and reason. In this regard, the evil, conditions and life experienced by the prisoners can be conceived as actually embodying the human condition, culture and nature brought to the asymptotic limit of both their denial and suffering.

1.1. Addressing the Challenge of Auschwitz

Theodor W. Adorno produced the seminal formulation of the challenge presented by Auschwitz to all forms of philosophical and theological discourse, and more broadly to western culture in general. After and because of Auschwitz, death has been extirpated from human life and existence in such a way that it is no longer possible for human beings to provide it with meaning. To make explicit and direct reference to transcendent sources of meaning in reference to human life and death is not permissible anymore. The evil of Auschwitz is such that it automatically permeates, corrupts and disqualifies all forms of positive justification offered to account for it. Any attempt to explain and justify Auschwitz implies as a direct corollary a profound disrespect for millions of victims.
After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence. Such a construction would affirm absolute negativity and would assist its ideological survival – as in reality that negativity survives anyway, in the principle of society as it exists until its self-destruction. ... The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals’ empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life.\(^51\)

Reduced to mere exemplars of a generic species unable to (re)claim their death, the survivors of Auschwitz are not entitled to life either. Creeping deep into the survivors’ hearts and souls and leaving there an indestructible imprint, Auschwitz takes away from their existence all legitimacy and induces everlasting suffering and pain.

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream. ... But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.\(^52\)

Auschwitz has proven – beyond all reasonable doubt – the breakdown and failure of European culture and civilization as principles and means of moral and spiritual formation of the human person. “Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed. That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them. All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”\(^53\)

The problem is not simply that of criticizing the European culture which has led to Auschwitz – as if its spurious elements could be removed without the remainder being contaminated in any way – or that of replacing the European culture altogether with another, more suitable, one. The problem rather is that of acknowledging the intrinsic corruption of human culture and, at the same time, of defending the legitimacy and necessity of culture for the formation of human identity and society. “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 363.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 366-67.
culpable and shabby culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.”\textsuperscript{54} What are the true functions served by culture and civilization in relation to the constitution of human identity and society? What is human nature that it at once is too easily informed by (detrimental) ambient culture and civilization and not durably determined by honourable and longstanding practices and traditions? How is it possible to go on thinking, rationalizing, conceptualizing after Auschwitz? Can ethical, metaphysical and theological discourses even be defined after and in light of Auschwitz? After Auschwitz, are there any linguistic expressions and forms, concepts and thoughts which can be positively defended? After, beyond and despite Auschwitz, can human beings still have access to truth?

Adorno’s verdict is clear: no word, no thought can be positively asserted or conceived after Auschwitz without having been subjected to a profound inner transformation. “After Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation.”\textsuperscript{55} After and because of Auschwitz, Kant’s categorical imperatives have been reformulated in order to reflect the first obligation all human thought and action must always comply with: never allow for Auschwitz to happen again. “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”\textsuperscript{56} If, following Adorno, we are willing to acknowledge the reality of Auschwitz and its fundamentally deleterious impact on human culture and reason (at least in their western, modern figures), how are we to define and justify the practice of history, philosophy and theology? How are we to justify the very use of historical, philosophical and theological approaches, concepts and methods to the very reality that is Auschwitz? Can Auschwitz truly constitute an object for scientific inquiry? Does Auschwitz as object of the historical, philosophical and theological sciences have anything to do with Auschwitz as it has been experienced by millions of victims? How could Adorno’s challenge be successfully met?

1.2. Finding a Voice

As he critiques Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history, Adorno proposes a basic methodological attitude and orientation to follow: if after Auschwitz any access is to be gained to

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 367.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 365.
truth and transcendence, the road leading to it will not begin with positive affirmation, but with the radical indwelling experience of negation. “No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.”

In similar fashion, Pierre Mertens argues that under the impact of Auschwitz, culture crumbled down and must be completely rebuilt. What remains of human language and expression is analogous to a high pitched scream breaking through the darkness. “Proférer l’essentiel du cri, compte tenu que la culture est totalement à reconsidérer après Auschwitz, et non pas seulement à restaurer – ce qui serait commode – après sa catastrophique faillite.”

In the face of Auschwitz, words, discourses, sciences and theories seem to lose all their capacity to signify, to reveal, embrace and comprehend their referents, giving way to (respectful) silence. “Les camps ont existé et ils existent. Et d’une si horrible destruction de toute la vie humaine, d’une si horrible abomination à qui faudrait-il demander raison, sinon à Dieu lui-même? Aucun problème de mal, aucune philosophie, aucune religion ne peut rendre compte de la souffrance des camps.”

After their liberation, and in order precisely to survive Auschwitz, many survivors had to force themselves to forget their own experience of the camps. For Jorge Semprun, the choice to make was that between writing and death and/or oblivion and survival.

I came back to life. In other words, to oblivion: that was the price of life. A deliberate, systematic forgetting of the experience of the camp. Of writing, as well. There was no question, in fact, of writing anything else. It would have been absurd, perhaps even ignoble, to write anything at all that would pass over that experience in silence. I had to choose between literature and life; I chose life. I chose a long cure of aphasia, of voluntary amnesia, in order to survive.

The problem is that after and because of Auschwitz, it is only possible to speak of or write about human life from within the memory and radical experience of death. The task of putting words on Auschwitz turns out to be a lethal undertaking. “I possess nothing more than my death, my experience of death, to recount my life, to express it, to carry it on. I must make life with all that death. And the best way to do this is through writing. Yet that brings me back to death, to the suffocating embrace of death. That’s where I am: I can live only by assuming that death through writing, but writing literally prohibits me from living.”

More problematic even is the fact that survivors cannot evade testifying to the experience of Auschwitz, for if they do not

57 Ibid., 360.
59 Micheline Maurel, Un camp très ordinaire, cited by Pierre Mertens, in Écrire après Auschwitz?, 44.
61 Ibid., 163.
do so by means of their actions and words, they inevitably do convey it through their silences. As Elie Wiesel explains, the survivors were afraid of saying what must not be said, of attempting to communicate with language what eludes language, of falling into the trap of easy half-truths. Sooner or later, every one of them was tempted to seal his lips and maintain absolute silence. As to transmit a vision of the holocaust, in the manner of certain mystics, by withdrawing from words. Had all of them remained mute, their accumulated silences would have become unbearable: the impact would have deafened the world.  

Despite their acute awareness of the sheer inadequacy of the medium and mediations they are using to produce their testimony (gestures, words or other), because, as Giorgio Agamben aptly coins it, “the survivor’s vocation is to remember; he cannot not remember,” the survivors need to speak themselves out of Auschwitz. To them, it is a life and death matter, for to survive by remaining in the abiding silence of the memory of death is impossible. “Survivors and witnesses have done their best to describe their experiences, yet their writings have perhaps no substantial relationship with what they have seen and lived through. They have written because they could not do otherwise: after all, one needed to lift the tombstone, however slightly, and grope one’s way out of the night. By speaking out, they have forced us to see that the mystery endures.” Precisely because the purpose of Auschwitz was to deny them all existence and voice, the survivors feel it is their “sacred duty” (Isabel Wollaston) to bear witness and preserve the memory of the deceased victims.  

1.3. Living Memory as History

From the standpoint of the survivors, the experience and reality of Auschwitz did not end with the liberation of the camps by the allied forces in late 1944 and early 1945. As an historical event, Auschwitz was of such a nature that it remained so alive within the body, heart, and soul of each and every survivor (in the form of a living death) that the survivors needed to learn how to live out Auschwitz outside of the camps themselves and this, till the end of their lives. One does not simply come back from Auschwitz. The survivor’s life is informed by the experience of Auschwitz to such an extent that Auschwitz survives and is transmitted through her. Again in the words of Agamben: “One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity, since in truth it has never

64 Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, 43.
ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself.” As he describes his repeated experience of the same dream (in terms of basic content and structure), Primo Levi manifests the truth of Agamben’s assertion in the most striking fashion:

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “Wstavac.”

The truth is that for the survivors, the experience and memory of Auschwitz constitutes the most determining and stable aspect of their lives, to the point that to them Auschwitz represents the most certain, reliable criterion of reality and truth. All other life experiences the survivors might have or have had after are measured against the experience and memory of the camps, by the angst that has taken root at the very centre of their soul and which from time to time manifests itself, demonstrating yet again the utter vacuity of everything else. Commenting on the previous passage from Primo Levi, Jorge Semprun explains that

It’s true that everything becomes chaotic, when that anguish reappears. You find yourself in the middle of a whirlwind of nothingness, a nebulous void, murky and grayish. From that moment on, you know what this means. You know that you have always known. Always, beneath the glittering surface of daily life, this terrible knowledge. Close at hand, this certainty: nothing is true except the camp, all the rest is but a dream, now and forever. Nothing is real but the smoke from the crematory of Buchenwald, the smell of burning flesh, the hunger, the roll calls in the snow, the beatings, the deaths of Maurice Halbwachs and Diego Morales, the fraternal stench of the latrines in the Little Camp.

Hence, certain persistent, recurring dreams are experienced by the survivors as endowed with much more reality than their own waked life which, to them, identifies with mere fancy. Again in

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67 Primo Levi, The Truce, tr. S. Woolf, in If This is a Man, The Truce (London, UK: Everyman’s Library, 2000), 454-55.
68 Jorge Semprun, Literature or Life, 236.
the words of Semprun, “I’d woken up with a start. Awakening had not brought comfort, however, had not swept away the anguish – on the contrary. It deepened the distress while transforming it. Because the return to wakefulness, to the sleep of life, was terrifying in itself. That life was a dream – after the radiant reality of the camp – is what was terrifying.”

1.4. A Change in Method

The significance, the scope of an historical event such as Auschwitz cannot be embraced and pondered properly if its enduring, life-defining effects on the survivors are not taken into consideration. The history of Auschwitz will forever remain incomplete if its embodiment in the survivors’ afterlife is not integrated within the historical analysis of the Auschwitz event itself. The survivors bear within their own bodies and souls the Auschwitz event as it is still in the making. In a profound sense, there is no return from Auschwitz. “Sometimes I felt certain that there hadn’t really been any return, that I hadn’t really come back, that an essential part of me would never come back, and this certainty upset my connection with the world, with my own life.”

Historian Annette Wieviorka characterizes the transformation in the understanding of history (and historical science) induced by Auschwitz and its survivors testifying at court trials (such as Eichmann’s):

At the heart of this newly recognized identity of the survivor was a new function: to be the bearer of history. And the advent of the witness profoundly transformed the very conditions for writing the history of the genocide. ... The witness became an embodiment of memory [un homme-mémoire], attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past. Concurrently, the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify.

Wieviorka acknowledges historical science’s dependence upon reliable sources and defines the historian in the following way:

The writing of history cannot take place without “testimonies,” in the broad sense that Marc Bloch gives to this term, that is, without traces – of which archives constitute the most basic form – that make that writing possible. Nor can history be written without men and women who, in the present time of their existence and of their experience, of their desire to know, seek to understand and to put this understanding into language in order to communicate it to others, interrogating the past based on the traces that past has bequeathed to them.

69 Ibid., 155.
70 Ibid., 115.
72 Ibid., 5.
Historians are individuals who, from the standpoint of their own subjective and finite experience of human existence and history, attempt to integrate particular events within a broader unifying framework of logical and temporal succession which provides these events with greater intelligibility and meaning.

History, as a science, can therefore be defined as a rational attempt, informed by the present situation of the historian, to construct, by means of the interpretation of past events with the help of objectively reliable documents and sources, a unique and coherent narrative. History, far from being a purely objective “discovery” of the meaning of historical events, rather consists in a meaning-building by means of storytelling enterprise. Criticizing Daniel Goldhagen’s conception of history as a science, Wieviorka “wonders ... whether the absence of the desire to think in more general terms is not in effect the very negation of history. It would signify the death of the intellectual operation that consists in constructing a story and which is called, precisely, the writing of history.” Historical science, according to Wieviorka, identifies with and produces “a narrative that seeks both to establish the facts of the past and to give them meaning.”

History, considered as both a scientific endeavour and the result of such an activity, does not substantially differ from testimony (in oral or written form), insofar as these two forms of inquiry and witnessing use the medium of narrative to construct and provide meaning to a given set of data (experiences). In both cases, the historical subject is directly involved in the meaning-making process. As Bernard Lonergan explains, “the historian starts out from statements he finds in his sources. The attempt to represent imaginatively their meaning gives rise to questions that lead on to further statements in the sources. Eventually he will have stretched a web of imaginative construction linking together the fixed points supplied by the statements in the sources.”

This constructive process is dynamic in nature and subject to constant revision, due to the discovery of new sources, the production of new analyses of the events studied and the fact that new events provide a wider context for the interpretation of past ones.

So, in general, history is an ongoing process. As the process advances, the context within which events are to be understood keeps enlarging. As the context enlarges, perspectives shift. ... New documents fill out the picture; they illuminate what before was obscure; they shift perspectives; they refute what was venturesome or speculative; they do not simply dissolve the whole network of questions and answers that made the original set of data massive evidence for the

73 Ibid., 92-93.
74 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Method in Theology (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 205.
earlier account. ... Only inasmuch as a context is still open, or can be opened or extended, do later events throw new light on earlier persons, events, processes.\textsuperscript{75}

More exactly, the historian acts as an interpreter reconstructing (that is, constructing again or anew) the sequence of events as it actually occurred in the past (then present). In so doing, the historian unveils aspects of the context, events, and actions under consideration which eluded the awareness (i.e., consciousness) of the agents involved. In this regard, history – as a reconstructive interpretive process – produces new intelligibility by shedding light on correlations and interactions of whose existence the persons involved were at best only implicitly aware. To illustrate this point, Lonergan uses the example of the development of Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on grace and its distinctiveness from its subsequent interpretation.

Thomas Aquinas effected a remarkable development in the theology of grace. He did so not at a single stroke but in a series of writings over a period of a dozen years or more. Now, while there is no doubt that Aquinas was quite conscious of what he was doing on each of the occasions on which he returned to the topic, still on none of the earlier occasions was he aware of what he would be doing on the later occasions, and there is just no evidence that after the last occasion he went back over all his writings on the matter, observed each of the long and complicated series of steps in which the development was effected, grasped their interrelations, say just what moved him forward and, perhaps, what held him back in each of the steps. But such a reconstruction of the whole process is precisely what the interpreter does. His overall view, his nest of questions and answers, is precisely a grasp of this array of interconnections and interdependences constitutive of a single development.\textsuperscript{76}

History therefore identifies with the attempt to make explicit the network of relations tying a series of actions or events together so as to unveil their intrinsic intelligibility and meaning as revealed and provided by their integration within a larger context and sequence. The witnessing survivors – by means of the production of their testimonies – attempt to accomplish the very same interpretive task in regards to their own lives, their own experience of the camps.

Historical accounts cannot elude the involvement of human subjectivity in the making of history as both event and the interpretation of that event. The way human beings interpret the events in which they are taking part directly influences how they actually do act and therefore generate history. The true perspective of the historical agent and interpreter thus identifies with “the uncanny middle voice of one who is in history and who tells it simultaneously, one who

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 165.
lives in history as well as through its telling.” In respect to Auschwitz and its historical interpretation, the decision to opt for such a perspective entails, as James E. Young explains, the “need to find a middle road by which the living memory of the eyewitness might be assimilated to the historical record without using it only rhetorically to authenticate any given narrative, without allowing it to endow the surrounding narrative with the seeming naturalness of the survivor’s voice.” Integrating the input and perspective of the witness and her testimony within the historical record does not demand from the historian that she give up her critical mind, but rather the opposite. If Wieviorka is right when she argues that “the imperative of an obstinate quest for the truth” constitutes “an imperative of the historian’s profession,” it is at least in part because the multiple eyewitness accounts, sources and the historian’s own perspective on her object of study all are intrinsically biased, incomplete and therefore stand in need of critical assessment and correlation with other similar accounts, sources and perspectives. The factual discrepancies existing within and between multiple eyewitness accounts of the same events do not contradict the more fundamental fact that human action always is inserted within the context of a predetermined anticipatory interpretation of the course of events directly impacting the very generation of historical events. According to Young,

Nothing can be more authentic than the ways in which the diarists’ interpretations of experiences gathered the weight and force of agency in their lives. Nothing is more “true” than the consequences for a life that issue from the manner in which this life may have been narrated the previous day. In this sense, diaries assume an historical importance beyond whatever facts they could possibly deliver. In the diaries of Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Ringelblum, Zelig Kalmanovitch, and others, we have incontrovertible truth of the ways in which their narratives of events may have constituted the basis for action within these same events. Thus, the narrative grasp of events might be said to have woven itself back into the unfolding course of events.

1.5. Surviving Auschwitz: An Unfinished Tale

Now, the narratives from and in which the survivors draw the power to live and be historical agents after Auschwitz do take a very particular form. Despite all the research already accomplished by thousands of historians and experts of all disciplines, from the standpoint of the survivors and their descendants, the historical narrative for the Auschwitz event has yet to be constructed. As Nathalie Zajde explains, “la Shoah, aujourd’hui, n’est pas uniquement l’affaire

78 Ibid., in Witness and Memory, 279.
80 James E. Young, “Between History and Memory,” in Witness and Memory, 282-83.
des survivants mais concerne tout autant les seconde et troisième générations. Tous ces phénomènes semblent s’expliquer par la nature même de la Shoah : un événement dont on ignore le sens – un événement à ‘construire’ à partir des faits qu’il produit.”

Beyond the more or less factual description (remembrance) of their experience of the camps, the survivors’ testimony and witness to Auschwitz is embodied in a quest for the meaning of this experience which itself questions the meaning of their entire existence. Before anything else, Auschwitz is to its survivors an unfathomable existential and spiritual mystery still to be resolved. The experience and memory of Auschwitz are profoundly traumatic in nature. “Les survivants de la Shoah se posent une multitude de questions parmi lesquelles, essentielles: Pourquoi cela est-il arrivé? Comment ai-je survécu? Pourquoi moi? ... Ils ont subi un traumatisme : c’est-à-dire un événement métamorphosant qui exige nécessairement une recherche de sens. Tant qu’ils ne trouvent pas de réponse, ils restent en suspens.”

This traumatically induced existential investigation of the foundation of human existence sets the survivors apart from the conventional, usual, regular course of events and life, estranging them from their communities.

Le traumatisé est un individu dont l’âme est tragiquement porteuse d’une question en train d’émerger et pour laquelle son groupe social n’a pas encore trouvé de solution, qu’il n’a peut-être même pas encore identifiée. ... De toutes les souffrances, de toutes les pathologies dont sont victimes les enfants de survivants, je dois avouer que je n’ai pu identifier à ce jour qu’un seul invariant : se penser unique, seul au monde – un singleton. ... Se penser seul au monde signifie qu’ils n’ont pas encore rencontré un univers capable de les penser, de leur répondre, un univers qui leur corresponde.

The act and process of witnessing to, of producing a testimony of their experience in the camps then becomes a way for survivors (and their relatives) to grant a meaning to the latter, to reclaim and reconstruct their own identity. As Wieviorka explains,

When former inmates know that they are at least being truly listened to, if not understood, testimony returns their dignity to them, in the very part of their identity that had been humiliated: that of former concentration camp inmates or ghetto survivors. ... Thus testimony re-establishes not only the identity of the survivors but also the identities of the descendants of those who died without graves, by allowing them to imagine the circumstances of their relatives’ deaths and thus to begin the work of mourning.

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82 Ibid., 246.
83 Ibid., 31 and 50-51.
Nathalie Heinich, sociologist, concurs with Wieworka: “Tout témoignage sur cette expérience met en jeu non seulement la mémoire, mais aussi une réflexion sur soi. C’est pourquoi les témoignages doivent être considérés comme de véritables instruments de reconstruction de l’identité, et pas seulement comme des récits factuels, limités à une fonction informative.” 85 The words of Sara Selver-Urbach, a survivor, confirm Heinich and Wievorka’s claims in poignant fashion: “Like everybody else, I was a human wreck, and writing was a futile attempt to pick up the pieces of my shattered life and faith, and to glue them anew.” 86

The instrumental relation of the production of testimonies to the reconstruction of personal identity follows from the fact that in order to preserve something of their identity, the inmates were forced to separate their inner affective, spiritual life (over which they had some control) from their material condition of inmates (over which they had very little influence). By witnessing, the survivors not only remain faithful, through the act of memory, to their personal identity as it was preserved in the camps, they also build bridges to unite this past with their present and to overcome the estrangement of their inner lives and selves from their outer ones. As Heinich explains,

En effet – la littérature des survivants des camps d’extermination le confirme – le maintien de l’estime de soi, d’une certaine liberté dans les pensées plutôt que d’une petite marge d’autonomie dans l’action découle, la plupart du temps, du dédoublement de la personne, de sa capacité à se penser à l’écart de la réalité à laquelle elle ne peut se soustraire. Mais une fois qu’il a été fait de nécessité vertu, l’habitude de ce dédoublement est l’hypothèque qui pèse sur l’adaptation à la vie civile après le retour. … Ne pas oublier, garder la mémoire, devient alors une condition pour éviter les effets destructeurs de ce dédoublement : assumer le passé au nom de la maîtrise du présent. 87

Lawrence L. Langer similarly argues that the behaviour of witnessing camp inmates demonstrates that their remembered past coexists in tension with their present to the point of leading them to simultaneously indwell two different moral worlds. “It is clear from the struggle of many witnesses, from their expressions as well as their words, that they inhabit two worlds simultaneously: the one of ‘choiceless choice’ then; the other of moral evaluation now. Harmony and integration are not only impossible – they are not even desirable.” 88 These considerations

86 Sara Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home: Memories from the Ghetto Lodz, tr. S. Bodansky (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1971), 133.
87 Nathalie Heinich, Sortir des camps, 95-96.
enable us to take note of the fact that witnessing camp survivors form a very distinctive group of people by reason of all the conditions that must be fulfilled for the production of a testimony to become possible.

En matière concentrationnaire, un témoin, avant d’être quelqu’un qui a décidé de témoigner, est quelqu’un qui en est revenu. ... Un rescapé qui témoigne est quelqu’un qui est revenu avec, non seulement, la possibilité physique de s’exprimer, mais aussi avec sa possibilité morale ; quelqu’un donc dont l’identité n’a pas été détruite au point de ne plus pouvoir s’autoriser à parler. Et enfin : un rescapé qui témoigne est quelqu’un qui a trouvé une écoute ou, au moins, la promesse, l’espoir qu’il y aurait un jour une écoute. 89

1.6. A Silent Witness

From a methodological standpoint, the extreme conditions and trauma to which the camp inmates were subjected incite us to investigate further the nature and status of the surviving witness. These conditions actually reveal that the primary purpose served by the camps was the extermination of the inmates, the mass killing of entire populations. The Nazis expected, planned and considered “normal” that internment in concentration camps would end with the inmate’s death. The full extent of the experience of the camps therefore comprises death as one of its central aspects and elements, both in the intention of the perpetrators and as the content of what the great majority of inmates actually had to suffer. Strictly speaking, therefore, it would seem that only the victims who died in the camps could offer an exhaustive and faithful testimony to Auschwitz. But how could these victims act as witnesses from within the realm of death? How could those who have survived the camps testify of the experience of death itself? Where would the survivors find the justification to witness on behalf of all those who are dead? Arguing that Auschwitz is in a sense deprived of authentic witnesses, Giorgio Agamben captures the gist of the problem: “The Shoah is an event without witnesses in the double sense that it is impossible to bear witness to it from the inside – since no one can bear witness from the inside of death, and there is no voice for the disappearance of voice – and from the outside – since the ‘outsider’ is by definition excluded from the event.” 90 The condition of surviving witness appears to be paradoxical, if not self-contradictory, in its very nature. As Orietta Ombrosi explains, the reality is that

Those who would have been able to bear witness directly – those who died in the gas chambers – are all dead, and those who survived cannot take the place of the dead. Nor do they have the right to testify, because their testimony is considered

89 Nathalie Heinich, Sortir des camps, 139.
90 Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, 35.
as false, given that they are still here, still alive. ... In other words, the fact of bearing witness runs up against the impossibility of being a witness, or rather, testimony revokes and invalidates the witness because the true witness has died, has been annihilated, and with him his possibility of speech, including the speech to provide testimony.  

For a survivor, then, the very fact of being alive and able to speak plainly contradicts the existence of the Shoah, whose precise purpose it was to extinguish language and life in all its victims. The problem thus becomes that of determining whether or not there could be such a thing as a witness to Auschwitz and if so, under which conditions such a testimony could be produced. This framing of the question presupposes the ability to distinguish human life from death in full clarity, entirely bypassing or neglecting the fact that in the extraordinary conditions of camp life, the frontiers between human life and death, human and inhuman, good and evil are blurred, if not completely erased. In Auschwitz existed what Primo Levi called a “gray zone,” that is, a “zone in which the ‘long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner’ comes loose, where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion. What is at issue here, therefore, is a zone of irresponsibility and ‘impotentia judicandi’ that is situated not beyond good and evil but rather, so to speak, before them.”  

The condition of most camp inmates ultimately reached a point where, while they remained biologically alive, they displayed no identifiable signs of a distinctive personal human identity. As Levi himself describes,

All the Muselmänner who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story. ... [They] form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. They crowd my memory with their faceless presence ... an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.

Here is how Władysław Fejkiel, an inmate physician, defines and describes the Muselmann:

The patient’s only symptoms were slowness of movement and debility. ... The second stage began when the starveling had lost one-third of his normal weight.

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93 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, tr. S. Woolf, in *If This is a Man, The Truce* (London, UK: Everyman’s Library, 2000), 105-06.
His gaze became clouded, and his face assumed an apathetic, absent, mournful expression. His eyes were veiled and his eyeballs hollow. His skin began to turn a pale gray, has a paper-thin, hard appearance, and started to peel. ... The patient’s hair became shaggy, lustreless, and brittle. His head became elongated, and his cheekbones and eye sockets stood out. The patient breathed slowly and spoke softly with a great effort. ... Edemas appeared, and their size depended on the length of the starvation. ... The patients became indifferent to everything that went on around them and detached themselves from all ties to their environment. If they could still move, they did so slowly and without bending their knees. As a consequence of their low body temperature, which was usually thirty-six degrees Centigrade, they shivered from the cold. Anyone who observed a group of patients from a distance had the impression of seeing praying Arabs. This accounts for the designation Muselmänner in the camp for starving prisoners.⁹⁴

One can therefore argue, with Agamben, for the existence of “a point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human. This point is the Muselmann, and the camp is his exemplary site.’⁹⁵

But then Agamben moves one step further and claims that the Muselmann’s inhuman humanity disqualifies traditional understandings of ethics and human dignity, because she evolves in a realm where these traditional conceptions do not apply. “To deny the Muselmann’s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture. The Muselmann has, instead, moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless. But if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see.’⁹⁶

Agamben’s solution to the previously formulated difficulty of defining a witness suitable to/for Auschwitz in the absence of its most complete victims (the millions of people who died in the camps), therefore consists in asserting that genuine witness can only be borne, not to Auschwitz itself, but to the Muselmann, to the human being who has effectively become non-human.

Let us, indeed, posit Auschwitz, that to which it is not possible to bear witness; and let us posit the Muselmann as the absolute impossibility of bearing witness. If the witness bears witness for the Muselmann, if he succeeds in bringing to speech an impossibility of speech – if the Muselmann is thus constituted as the whole witness – then the denial of Auschwitz is refuted in its very foundation. In the Muselmann, the impossibility of bearing witness is no longer a mere privation. Instead, it has become real; it exists as such. If the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the Muselmann, if he speaks only on the

⁹⁴ Cited in Hermann Langbein, People in Auschwitz, tr. H. Zohn (Markham, Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005), 91-92.
⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, 55.
⁹⁶ Ibid., 63-64.
basis of an impossibility of speaking, then his testimony cannot be denied. Auschwitz – that to which it is not possible to bear witness – is absolutely and irrefutably proven.

All survivors witnessing to Auschwitz, to its victims represented by the figure of the Muselmann, therefore act as “surrogate witnesses” or “by proxy,” witnessing as they do to that which lies beyond human language and thought. As Dorotha Glowacka explains,

Insofar as one is a witness, one is located in the victim’s place, vicariously entering the unimaginable site where speech ceases, in order to bring that silence to speech. ... The witness is motivated by an obligation to lend his voice and his talent as a storyteller to those who cannot speak. ... The survivors are never true witnesses since they cannot testify to the limit experience at which only those who were permanently silenced had arrived. Rather, the survivor is already a surrogate witness, borrowing the authority to speak from the dead.

1.7. Confining Languages

It is not simply that there is no language to speak Auschwitz, for in truth, Auschwitz possessed a language of its own, but rather that the language of the camp remains completely inaccessible to those who have not experienced it from within. Isabella Leitner, a survivor, writes: “There is an English language, there is French. There is Russian, also Spanish. There is Hungarian, there is Chinese. According to the Bible, God punished humanity in Babel with a madness of languages, but there is one language even God cannot understand – only we do, those of us who were prisoners in the shadow of the crematorium. I call it Lager language, and each word means a different kind of suffering.” The act of translating the language of the camp into other – neutral with respect to the camp – languages takes away the unique and extremely powerful emotional and existential impact it had on the inmates. “In translation, the fear that the sound of the German language strikes into the hearts of the inhabitants of the [camp], its harshness when it is used as a tool of torture, and the threat of betrayal sensed when it suddenly comes from the lips of their Polish neighbours, are neutralized and disarmed.” As the act of translation takes away the affective charge of camp language, it also provides – through the distance it sets and the mediation it operates between the reality of the camp signified and the linguistic universe into which this reality is being translated – the witness with greater freedom.

97 Ibid., 164.
99 Isabella Leitner and Irving A. Leitner, Isabella: From Auschwitz to Freedom (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 227. The word “lager” is the German word used to designate the camps; the phrase “Konzentrationslager Auschwitz” means “Auschwitz concentration camp.”
100 Dorotha Glowacka, Disappearing Traces, 82.
and independence from her own experience of the camp, and therefore, also with a greater ability to speak out. Again in the words of Glowacka, “in those cases, the distance afforded by another language is the enabling factor in telling the story. Not quite naming what the survivor is trying to articulate, foreign words act as a protective shield that allows the storyteller to master traumatic memories and translate them into a narrative.” Through their translation into other languages, however, “the survivor’s experiences acquired a universal dimension and became an existential reflection on the human condition.”

For the translators, the core stumbling block remains the translation of an intrinsically broken language, a language of brokenness – the language of the camp – into languages that have remained intact, whose cultural-linguistic worldview has not been put into question and profoundly, deleteriously altered by Auschwitz. In this respect, the reality of Auschwitz, as experienced by the survivors, always and irreducibly remains outside the scope of any language into which it is being translated.

The Holocaust is extraterritorial with respect to national languages, or, at least in the speech of survivors, it constitutes each language’s inassimilable remainder. ... Witnesses always translate the untranslatable into one of the comprehensible languages and familiar expressions, aware that their speech is a mistranslation. ... Paradoxically, to an extent, translation effaces the very thing it seeks to preserve, and in consequence, it fails to deliver what it has been consigned to bring forth. But what witnesses-translators succeed in conveying, perhaps often against their expressed intention, is both the experience of that failure to translate and the desire for further translation. Here translation is the cipher for witnessing.

The transposition of their experiences into words and expressions understandable to those who have not been subjected to a similar ordeal strongly incites surviving witnesses both to downplay the intensity of the affective, emotional tone of their testimony and limit the spectrum of suggested emotions they contain to those appealing to their intended audience. For the sake of objectivity and in order to be heard, witnesses exercise selective control over the form and content their testimony takes. “Testimonies,” Zoë V. Waxman argues, “are not spontaneous outbursts of information, but come from the careful representation of experience, or the perceived ‘appropriateness’ of experiences for publication.”

101 Ibid., 67.
102 Ibid., 66.
103 Ibid., 100-01.
1.8. Reconstructing Self-Narratives

This intentional adaptive reworking affects not only written testimonies, but also oral ones which, in the process of their retelling, come to take a more or less stable, standardized “effective” form. According to Henry Greenspan, “we have become used to the notion, repeated by a number of commentators, that spoken retelling is more ‘spontaneous’ and less ‘mediated’ than written memoirs. Of course, there are many variations. But it is probably accurate to say that many survivors already have an account that ‘works’ before they are asked to ‘give testimony’ for the record. To that extent, they do have a version that is ‘stored.’”¹⁰⁵ Most, if not all, survivors begin by relating orally their experience of the camps. The very act of retelling leads the witnesses to construct, to set their testimony into clearly delineated, self-integrated episodes easy to remember and recall. “Stories are particularly self-sustaining. Stories are memories in their most ‘storable’ form. It is not surprising, then, that the aspect of survivors’ accounts that changes least over the course of multiple conversations is their retelling of discrete, ‘storied’ episodes.”¹⁰⁶

Here, at last, we come to grasp why, in regards to the interpretation of Auschwitz it is so foundational to transcend the level of historical factual analysis and enter the realm of living testimony. Auschwitz, both as experience and reality, disrupts and absorbs all positive meaningfulness within its own darkness – not unlike the way cosmic black holes retain within a certain radius all forms of energy and matter – thereby preventing any decryption of its intrinsic meaning and its inscription within a larger interpretive contextual framework. As Greenspan explains, “it is only as we learn to follow survivors’ accounts as they become disfigured and finally fail – because the destruction is too vast, because the loss is too unbearable, because meaning becomes undone, because stories fall apart, because voice starts to strangle, because death again invades the recounter – that we begin to approach the Holocaust itself.”¹⁰⁷ Because Auschwitz – by definition – drains all positive meaning, incessantly absorbing it within the infinity of its unfathomable darkness, survivors, in order to witness to their experience of the camps, must therefore constantly insert meaning into Auschwitz from without, using materials extrinsic to the reality of Auschwitz itself. This construction of positive meaning defines and guides the making of their testimonial stories.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 227.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 14.
To produce their personal testimony, witnessing survivors draw materials from their life before and after Auschwitz. To them, making sense of Auschwitz is nothing else than their life story.

Immersed in recounting as a process, we begin to follow the creation and destinies of stories – survivors’ specific stories of the destruction as well as their own stories as survivors. We also discover that both these kinds of stories are contextualized, in turn, by the wider story of each recounter’s life story as a whole. The very act of “making a story” depends on using plots and meanings that are essentially alien to the destruction itself. They must be retrieved from elsewhere: from all the rest of who survivors are, what they have lived, and what they remember.

In other words, the testimonies from witnessing survivors of Auschwitz constitutes particular instantiations of what Nigel C. Hunt aptly names “autobiographical memory,” that is, the dynamic and continually renewed attempt by each human being to build an overarching narrative out of her own life in order to insert within an horizon of meaning each event of her past, and define a present enriched by its openness to a future rich in potentialities. “Narrative is about making sense of our lives, integrating the past with the present with a view to how we intend to live our lives in the future. Because our lives change, either dramatically, or in a slow evolutionary manner, we are constantly updating our personal narratives.”

While they are constructing their autobiographical narratives (or related selves), human beings determine what, about themselves, is to be remembered as well as what is to be forgotten. The active intervention of the individual in the construction of her own memory of herself positively contributes not only to the form and content her memory will take, but also – through this influence – to the definition of her personal identity as such.

We deliberately choose to emphasise certain memories and try to forget others. This is in order that we have coherence in our lives. We try to forget those things in the past which we perceive as bad and which do not fit our current concepts of the self. Just as remembering is important in understanding our narratives, so is forgetting. It is as important to forget as it is to remember. ... We all have many thousands of memories, and many ways of interpreting our memories. We cannot incorporate them all into our life story. We deliberately select particular elements of our past that fit with the way we want to perceive and be perceived in society.

When subjected to traumatic experiences, individuals are thus called to find a way to integrate this challenging experience within their self-narratives. They can even be led, when the evil and
suffering encountered and endured are too great, to reconfigure their whole narrative selves, in
their search for renewed coherence, integrity and horizon of meaningfulness.

Traumatized people lose the coherence of the life narratives; traumatic events
fundamentally alter the way people think, their views about their own strengths
and weaknesses, how they believe others should act and the nature of the world
generally. It is as though the written words of their lives are jumbled up and made
meaningless. Recovery from trauma means making sense of it all again, learning
to understand the world as it is in the light of the traumatic event, incorporating
the new trauma-related information into one’s own narratives.\textsuperscript{111}

The lives and testimonies of witnessing survivors therefore emanate, are produced from
within a space where knowledge and memory, reflexively applied to the self (the personal
identity of the witness), come together and mutually collaborate to the elaboration of an
integrative interpretive framework (or narrative) that defines the self in its singularity and
enables it to cope with events as they affect it. Austin Sarat, Nadav Davidovitch and Michal
Alberstein argue that

Trauma always entails a gap one must overcome through the mechanisms of
forgetting, denying, and enacting a new cognitive reality. At the same time,
trauma calls for a digging in and a finding of reasons, processes that entail efforts
to comprehend, to remember. The fertile tension between two ways of addressing
trauma – cognitive treatment, through which those experiencing this condition try
to forget or at least reconstruct an event into a meaningful narrative, and
psychodynamic analysis, which focuses on remembering – delineate one space in
which various responses to trauma can be elaborated upon.\textsuperscript{112}

The dynamic interplay between cognition and memory in the continuously renewed act of self-
interpretation results in the production of a self-narrative. The skilful use of language renders
palpable traumatic experiences and realities which by nature lie beyond the realm of what can be
told and rationally made sense of. The task incumbent upon the witnessing survivors is that of
making present and making sense of, for others to feel and grasp, what lies beyond the reach of
concepts. For what cannot be put into words does nevertheless affect their lives in the most
painful, persistent and profound way without necessarily disrupting their personal integrity to the
point of endangering their survival. As Dan Bar-On explains, victims of extremely severe trauma
develop what he calls “undiscussability,” a psychological process through which

The pain of the actual loss, the helplessness accompanying it, being too heavy to
endure, may all be buried deep inside. The discussable will be framed carefully,

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{112} Austin Sarat, Nadav Davidovitch and Michal Alberstein, “Trauma and Memory: Between Individual and
Collective Experiences,” in \textit{Trauma and Memory: Reading, Healing, and Making Law}, ed. A. Sarat, N. Davidovich
within the normalization strategies, avoiding the pain and helplessness. Still, there will be a feeling of suffering and mourning, maintained through a very delicate maneuvering between the undiscussable loss and discussable life experiences. It is very difficult to integrate the pain and the loss, since there is nothing to account for it, and to relate it to ongoing life experiences and hopefulness, all within one discourse, in a dialog with oneself and with others.113

1.9. Speaking from Beyond

Due to the extraordinary nature of the events and experiences they have been part of and subjected to, the witnessing survivors must make use of extraordinary tools in order to be able, in their navigation on the confines of the expressible and inexpressible, to shed as much light as possible on the darkness of Auschwitz and enable their audience to partake in the latter. Speaking of the image understood in a broad sense, “we must say,” asserts Georges Didi-Huberman, “that Auschwitz is only imaginable, that we are restricted to the image and must therefore attempt an internal critique so as to deal with this restriction, with this lacunary necessity. ... The very notion of image – in its history as well as its anthropology – is intermingled with the incessant urge to show what we cannot see.”114 To convey Auschwitz down to its core, it is necessary to have recourse to no less than literary fiction, to “the true lies of literature,”115 for only masterfully crafted fiction has the power to suggest and confer plausibility upon such unimaginable experiences and realities. According to Jorge Semprun, “the only ones who will manage to reach this substance, this transparent density, will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation. Only the artifice of a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony.”116

We here find ourselves closing in on the heart of the matter and the ultimate grounds justifying the use of a narrative, existential approach to Auschwitz and the testimonies of the witnessing survivors. The unveiling of the radical significance and truth of Auschwitz demands more, something else than factual accounts, descriptions and historical analyses. The fundamentals of Auschwitz are of an essentially emotional, existential and spiritual nature; that is why narrative and literature are the means most suited to their expression. Even before their liberation, some survivors had become acutely aware of this.

114 Georges Didi-Huberman, Images in Spite of It All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz, tr. S. B. Lillis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 45 and 133.
115 Jorge Semprun, Literature or Life, 182.
116 Ibid., 13.
I imagine there’ll be a flood of accounts. ... Their value will depend on the worth of the witness, his insight, his judgment. ... And then there will be documents. ... Later, historians will collect, classify, analyze this material, drawing on it for scholarly works. ... Everything will be said, put on record. ... Everything in these books will be true ... except that they won’t contain the essential truth, which no historical reconstruction will ever be able to grasp, no matter how thorough and all-inclusive it may be. ... The other kind of understanding, the essential truth of the experience, cannot be imparted. ... Or should I say, it can be imparted only through literary writing. ... Novels, preferably. Literary narratives, at least, that will go beyond simple eyewitness accounts, that will let you imagine, even if they can’t let you see. ... Perhaps there will be a literature of the camps. ... And I do mean literature, not just reportage.¹¹⁷

Hence, in testimonial accounts of Auschwitz, fiction and creativity – controlled, in their objective aspect, by factual accounts and their subsequent historical-critical analysis¹¹⁸ – are to be respected and looked upon as the very means by which the interpretation transcends factual descriptions and enters the properly human realm of inner emotional, psychological, existential and spiritual life.

1.10. Engaging History

Testimonies are by nature relational acts and documents, that is to say, their production intrinsically involves and calls for the input and participation of more than one person. Beyond the person of the witnessing survivor, all those hearing her testimony are summoned to receive, make theirs and respond with action and word. As Roger I. Simon explains, “testimony is a multilayered communicative act – a performance intent on carrying forth memories through the conveyance of a person’s engagement between consciousness and history. Thus, whether across generations or cultures, testimony is always directed toward another, attempting to place the one who receives it under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience not recognizable as one’s own.”¹¹⁹ The hearers (or readers) of a testimony are therefore enticed to become witnesses in their own right; being addressed, they must respond (i.e., assume the responsibility of a response) and enter in a relationship with the speaking witness. “To be present to testimony,” therefore automatically entails being “responsive as a requested witness.”¹²⁰ To

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 124-25 and 127.
¹¹⁸ See Zoë V. Waxman, Writing the Holocaust, 167 where the need for witnesses to consult other documents to assist them in the production of their own personal testimony is clearly asserted: “When describing their own experiences, survivors often have to read testimonies and works of history to fill the gaps in their memories; otherwise they risk making factual mistakes.”
¹²⁰ Ibid., 92.
enter in a genuine relationship in turn supposes, on the part of the summoned individual, the expression of authentic openness to the other and what she has to say in their otherness. Whoever responds to the summons of a testimony must therefore be ready to be challenged by the summoning other in her identity. “Disrupting one’s taken-for-granted sense-making practices ... the force of a testimonial address, if acknowledged, puts ourselves into question.”\textsuperscript{121} Forced to acknowledge the limitations of her knowledge and perspective, the summoned (responding) witness experiences her insufficiency and welcomes the person and message of the summoning witness as contributions to the constitution of her own identity and witness. By means of sharing in a communicational relationship with speaking witnesses, the summoned witness gains access to the latter’s experiences, even those exhausting the signifying power of language, hearing their message through and as the unspoken. “A ‘telling,’ a ‘speaking to’ of traumatic events ... will always exceed the words spoken. In this sense, no matter how many words we might read ... testimonies will manifest the marks of insufficiency. These marks are the scars that bear the difficulties of fully rendering the realities of human cruelty and suffering. It is in the practice of attuning to what is not spoken that the possibility for listening to become a way of thinking exists.”\textsuperscript{122}

From the previous considerations, it naturally follows that if we, twenty-first century postmoderns, are to understand anything at all of the experience and reality of Auschwitz, we must enter into a close relationship with the survivors themselves as they witness to their own firsthand experience of the reality of living in concentration camps. It is only by responding to their summons, by being faithful to their testimonies’ departure from merely descriptive and factual, historical accounts (becoming life-challenging, defining and encompassing narratives), to their use of literary artifice and fiction to shed light on and bring into presence aspects of the human condition otherwise impossible to convey, by displaying a radical openness to being challenged in the very fabric of our own self-understanding and by being ready to rewrite our personal self-narratives that we will be able to bear witness, in our own right and turn, to Auschwitz. Sharing in a common human condition, nature and existence with the witnessing survivors, and being confronted, just like them, with the necessity to constantly attune, update and even replace our personal self-constituting narratives, it is only in the medium of and by means of the careful study of the stories we and the witnessing survivors build to make sense of

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 97 and 99.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 96.
our lives, that we will be able to overcome the intrinsic flaws and limitations of our own personal self-understanding and enrich it through partaking, in a mediated way, in the survivors’ lifelong radical self-redefinition in light of Auschwitz.

1.11. A Theological Lens

In the context of a theological study of the doctrine of grace, our relationship with the testimonies of witnessing survivors will take a particular form, focusing on the nature and evolution of the relationship entertained by the surviving witnesses with God, their sense of his presence and action in their lives before, in and after the concentration camps. A theological study of testimonies from Auschwitz survivors is called for, first of all, because the strictly religious and spiritual aspect of their life-changing experience customarily is neglected or passed over by researchers. In order not to fall prey to “the sacralisation of horror,” as Glowacka coins it, most thinkers restrict their analysis to the consideration of the linguistic, cognitive, aesthetic, ethical and psychoanalytic aspects of Auschwitz’ so-called “unspeakability.” Such neglect is particularly surprising, considering how influential Auschwitz has been in the demise of modern metaphysics and meta-narratives and of the traditional understanding of God as an omnipotent, omniscient and omni-benevolent purely transcendent being. Are contemporary researchers and thinkers afraid of sacralising Auschwitz merely out of the ethical concern not to provide positive justification to/for Auschwitz or is the urge to secularise Auschwitz also partly motivated by the unspoken fear that Auschwitz might indeed be mysterious in nature and human concepts and words unable to contain it? What if Auschwitz did indeed possess an intrinsically religious and spiritual character and nature?

Auschwitz’ fundamentally mysterious character is evident to its survivors. Auschwitz unveiled the raw material of human nature, exposing for everyone to see how intricately evil is woven into the latter’s fabric. In Auschwitz, argues Jorge Semprun, one immediately experienced “the hunger, the exhaustion, the anguish, the blinding presence of absolute Evil – precisely insofar as it lies hidden in all of us, as the condition of our freedom.” Semprun speaks of absolute (or radical) evil, that is, of an evil whose effects and scope infinitely transcend what human freedom can oppose, transform or offer as reparation for wrongdoing. Semprun speaks of radical evil as something that is profoundly embedded in each human being, as an intrinsic potentiality of human freedom ready to be actualized. In fact, Semprun emphasises the

123 Dorotha Glowacka, *Disappearing Traces*, 11.
radical evilness of the human condition in such a way that evil finds its purest expression and manifestation when it becomes human, when it takes on a human face. Semprun speaks of absolute evil as human freedom. “Evil is not what is inhuman, of course. ... Or else it’s what is inhuman in man. ... The inhumanity of man, considered as vital possibility, as personal intention. ... As freedom. ... So it’s ridiculous to oppose Evil, to distance oneself from it, through a simple reference to what is human, to mankind. ... Evil is one of the possible designs of the freedom essential to the humanity of man – the freedom from which spring both the humanity and inhumanity of man.”

Auschwitz is the place where evil and the human condition identify. The experience of such raw evilness defines Auschwitz in its essence, undergirding all the horrors that the inmates were forced to endure and suffer on a daily basis.

The essential thing is to go beyond the clear facts of this horror to get at the root of radical Evil, *das radikal Böse*. Because the horror itself was not this Evil – not its essence, at least. The horror was only its raiment, its ornament, its ceremonial display. Its semblance, in a word. ... Because it wasn’t the accumulation of horror, which could be spelled out, endlessly, in detail. One could recount the story of any day at all, from reveille at four-thirty in the morning to curfew – the fatiguing labour, the constant hunger, the chronic lack of sleep, the persecution by the *Kapos*, the latrine duty, the floggings from the SS, the assembly-line work in munitions factories, the crematory smoke, the public executions, the endless roll calls in the winter snow, the exhaustion, the death of friends – yet never manage to deal with the essential thing, or reveal the icy mystery of this experience, its dark, shining truth: *la ténèbre qui nous était échue en partage*. The darkness that had fallen to our lot, throughout all eternity. Or rather, throughout all history.

An evil condemning all human beings to carry it within the very fabric of their free agency as an intrinsic, ontological determination, possibility and presupposition, an evil that renders all fight against it fruitless and futile corresponds to what theologians have always described as original sin.

Thus, the radical nature of the evil experienced at Auschwitz calls for a theological analysis and treatment.

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125 Ibid., 88.
126 Ibid., 87-88.
127 See the classic presentation of this teaching by John Henry Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, chap. V, in *Apologia Pro Sua Vita & Six Sermons*, ed. F. M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 322-24: “If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator. This is, to me, one of the great difficulties of this absolute primary truth, to which I referred just now. ... To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens so faint and broken, of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil.
The experience of Auschwitz in its raw evilness moreover elicits in the heart of the survivors if not profound doubt about, at least serious questioning of God’s presence, action and purpose in this world. God is not an addendum to the reality of Auschwitz, as if the question of God could be reduced to, conceived as a mere extraneous, subsequent by-product, incidental corollary of what happened there. The evil experienced at Auschwitz directly invokes, questions God. From the perspective of the millions of Jewish victims (and through them of all humankind), Auschwitz has everything to do with God’s concern for and involvement in human history and that is the reason why, at bottom, Auschwitz is shrouded with mystery. As Elie Wiesel explains,

And then, the big question, the most serious of all: How does one answer the person who demands an interpretation of God’s silence at the very moment when man – any man, Jew or non-Jew – has greater need than ever of His word, let alone His mercy? As a Jew, you will sooner or later be confronted with the enigma of God’s action in history. Without God, Jewish existence would intrigue only the sociologists. With Him, it both fascinates and baffles philosophers and theologians. Without God, the attempted annihilation of European Jewry would be relevant only on the level of history – another episode in another inhumane war ... and would not require a total revision of seemingly axiomatic values and concepts. Remove its Jewish aspects, and Auschwitz appears devoid of mystery.  

In truth, the heart of the problem resides in the fact that Auschwitz cannot be understood either with or without explicit reference being made to God. In this paradoxical invocation of the transcendent, Auschwitz uncovers its own intrinsic absurdity and sets humankind on a self-defining quest for God.

Remember Sartre’s phrase: in love, one and one are one. For us, contemporary Jews, one and one are six million. Six million times one is God. For just as one cannot conceive of such slaughter with God, it is inconceivable without Him. This is perhaps the final absurdity of the event: all roads lead to it; but all explanations fail. The agony of the believer equals the bewilderment of the non-believer. If God is an answer, it must be the wrong answer. There is no answer. If with the physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, 'having no hope and without God in the world,' – all this is a vision to dizzy and appall; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution. What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence. ... And so I argue about the world; – if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. This is a fact, a fact as true as the fact of its existence; and thus the doctrine of what is theologically called original sin becomes to me almost as certain as that the world exists, and as the existence of God.”

128 Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, 166.
holocaust God has chosen to question man, man is left to answer with a quest having God as object.¹²⁹

Nathalie Zajde, a psychologist who, for decades, assisted survivors of Auschwitz and their descendants to cope with this experience and its aftermath, concurs with Wiesel’s assessment: “Les Juifs survivants, les descendants de victimes et de survivants que j’ai rencontrés se posent tous la même question : quelle était l’intention du Dieu des Juifs au moment de la Shoah? Aucun, à condition de prendre le temps d’en discuter, ne cache d’ailleurs sa colère contre lui. Certains m’ont même confié qu’ils rêvaient en secret d’un procès où l’on verrait le Dieu des Juifs sur le banc des accusés et les survivants en nombre en face de lui pour l’incriminer et le dénoncer.”¹³⁰

The problem Jewish survivors and their descendants are confronted with is therefore not that of God’s existence – which is never put in doubt – but of God’s purpose, of God’s intervention (or non-intervention) in history in relation to Auschwitz. Because of Auschwitz, the Jewish survivors and their descendants (the entire Jewish people, in fact) are led to think anew their relationship to their God, redefining themselves in regards to the transcendent in light of their experience of Auschwitz.

La Shoah est une terrible contrainte faite aux Juifs à renouer avec leur divinité. Après avoir pensé que l’avenir du people juif dépendait de l’abandon de sa relation avec sa divinité, la Shoah vient au contraire imposer à ce peuple plusieurs fois millénaire, récemment devenu étrangement athée, un intérêt plus marqué pour son Dieu. Renouer avec leur divinité équivaut pour les Juifs à renouer avec l’intelligence. Car être en lien avec sa divinité signifie pour un Juif de savoir l’interroger. Un Juif aimant son Dieu est un Juif qui étudie, qui réfléchit et qui tient pour essentielle sa capacité à créer de nouvelles propositions et de dialoguer avec son texte. Un homme juif est avant tout un homme qui s’intéresse au Dieu des Juifs, à ses intentions; qui chaque jour, devant chaque événement nouveau, cherche des moyens originaux de le déchiffrer. Le Dieu des Juifs est exigeant, parfois généreux, souvent terrible, mais avant tout intéressant, énigmatique et source de concepts. ... Les manifestations d’indignation des survivants et des descendants des victimes en réaction aux propos tenus par les penseurs religieux au sujet de la Shoah nous indiquent la nécessité de trouver une autre manière, à la fois nouvelle et “juive,” d’interroger la divinité, de lire son texte.¹³¹

Yet again, then, the intrinsically theological nature of the experience and reality of Auschwitz is plainly manifested and corroborated. Auschwitz calls for a theological analysis and interpretation.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 166-67.
¹³⁰ Nathalie Zajde, Guérir de la Shoah, 39.
¹³¹ Ibid., 41.
1.12. Looking for Christ in Auschwitz

Now one of the peculiarities of the study here proposed is that it is a theological interpretation of the experience and reality of Auschwitz stemming from the Christian faith and tradition and not, as might be expected, from the Jewish ones. Auschwitz having originated and been perpetrated in the heart of Christian Europe, by people raised in the Christian spirit and values, Christianity must assume its share of responsibility and take part of the blame for the fact that Auschwitz occurred. The Christian faith and theology cannot elude self-questioning, criticism and re-evaluation in light of this experience and reality, for to determine how deep evil waters run inside Christianity itself is quintessential to avoid fostering conditions suitable to the repetition of Auschwitz and provide the Christian faith and traditions with fresh and sound articulation and embodiment. Christianity is called to contribute as best as it possibly can to healing the wounds of those having been and still in so many ways being subjected to Auschwitz. This Christianity can do because, from the standpoint of Christian belief, the Christian God and the Jewish God are one and the same, that is, a God of infinite love and mercy. Christians must undergo a critical self-reflection in light of Auschwitz in order precisely to remain faithful to their commitment to Christ. Who is Christ, today? How can the figure of Christ and Christian biblical motifs be inspiring and revelatory in our times, i.e. after Auschwitz?

The figure and person of Christ does actually speak to many survivors (even believing Jews) of the camps who explicitly refer to him to enlighten the extreme and unique character of particular aspects of the human condition and life in Auschwitz. Be it Jesus on the cross saying “Why have you forsaken me?” (Richard Glazar, Aimé Bonifas, Etty Hillesum, Charlotte Delbo, Jorge Semprun), Jesus in Gethsemane praying to God and asking to be spared undeserved suffering and death (Nelly Gorce), Jesus as the incarnation of God (Jean Améry), Jesus in his Passion (Robert Antelme), these properly Christian aspects and events of the life of Jesus speak to these survivors in such a way that through their affirmation (or negation) they are able to convey something of the nature of Auschwitz which other symbols cannot denote in as powerful a fashion. It is precisely the aim of the present doctoral dissertation to decipher how Jesus Christ speaks to Auschwitz and its survivors as well as how, through the latter, he speaks to everybody else (and more particularly all Christians) from Auschwitz. Reaching out to Christ and hearing

132 Nothing is hereby imposed upon the Jewish people, no presupposition of implicit Christianity or supersessionism whatsoever being here entailed.
him talk to us from Auschwitz in turn supposes that we listen to him from there, and this, we can only do by entering in a sustained conversation with witnessing survivors through the medium of their testimonies (written). As seen above, genuine hearing and listening suppose letting go of one’s own sense-making narratives and practices, opening oneself to the other in her otherness.

The universal significance of Auschwitz, of Christ’s relation to this radical experience can genuinely emerge only out of/from the complex and multifaceted diversity of voices, without the interference of any pre-imposed epistemological, metaphysical or theological filters. Each testimony provides a unique perspective on the life in the Nazi labour and extermination camps, coloured and determined as such by the unique personality of its author, the particular set of circumstances, conditions and events that led to her internment, the peculiar relationships she shared with other unique individuals defining the atmosphere and quality of their existence in the camps, etc. Far from being frightened of diversity and uniqueness that finds expression in both the testimonies and the witnessing survivors, the present study supposes that concrete universality exists and can be perceived (abstracted and grasped) in the midst of diversity as its undergirding fundamental principle. As Henry Greenspan – a psychologist who studied the same group of Auschwitz survivors over a period of 30 years – explains,

Sustained acquaintance also made it natural for me to consider each survivor’s recounting in the context of the rest of who they were; that is, within their wider life histories. Thus it never occurred to me to organize my thinking or writing according to some conceptual grid – types of Holocaust memory, for example, or facets of psychological trauma – and use brief excerpts of “testimony” as illustrative examples. Rather, just as I got to know survivors as distinct individuals, it was essential to me to write about them as particular people. Of course, generalizations emerge. The reflections of one person often “speak to” the reflections of another. Such generalizations are most inclusive (and reliable) precisely when they emerge from differences.133

We will therefore be drawing from a multiplicity of testimonies coming from survivors with different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, professional, political, social and religious backgrounds, formations and milieus in order precisely to pinpoint common characteristics and trends which could themselves reveal a deeper underlying common identity. Let us now hear what the witnessing survivors have to say concerning the human condition and its close ties with evil in Auschwitz and the living (or rather – in various senses – dying) relationship to God experienced there.

133 Henry Greenspan, On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, xii.
2.1. The Human Predicament in Auschwitz

2.1.1. Radically Redefined Space and Time

One of the foremost characteristics of the concentration camp system is its self-enclosure. Centred on itself, operating almost independently from other organisations and structures of the Third Reich, the labour and extermination camp system defined an environment and setting using laws, rules and practices of its own. The life of the inhabitants of the camps differed radically – in mode, rhythm and space – from life in the free world. As David Rousset, a Buchenwald survivor, explains,

The men huddle together in the dark in groups of five. Snow is everywhere. The floodlights of the main gate hoot through the blizzard like mighty and barbaric horns. Forty-five thousand prisoners flock toward the parade ground, every evening, without fail. Slowly, block by block, in ranks of ten abreast. The living, the sick and the dead. Curses gnaw at the lips and are silent before the gods of the main gate. The orchestra, ironic and comical, thumps out the slow march of a haggard people. It is a universe apart, totally cut off, the weird kingdom of an unlikely fatality. The depths of the camps.\textsuperscript{134}

Hardly locatable – because it denies and opposes any sense of orientation – and dilating time to the point of almost stopping its flow, Auschwitz arouses in the soon-to-be inmates eerie feelings of intrinsic strangeness and sempiternity. In the poetic words of Charlotte Delbo, “il est une gare où ceux-là qui arrivent sont justement ceux-là qui partent une gare où ceux qui arrivent ne sont jamais arrivés, où ceux qui sont partis ne sont jamais revenus ... longtemps c’est-à-dire des jours parce que notre cœur ne peut compter en semaines ni en mois, nous comptons en jours et chaque jour compte mille agonies et mille éternités.”\textsuperscript{135} Primo Levi describes the same aspect of time, that is, the effect produced by time spent in the camps: “With the end of the season when the days chased each other, vivacious, precious and irrecoverable, the future stood in front of us, grey and inarticulate, like an invincible barrier. For us, history had stopped. ... Anything would

\textsuperscript{134} David Rousset, \textit{The Other Kingdom}, tr. R. Guthrie (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 40-41.
be preferable to the monotony of the identical and inexorably long days, to the systematic and
dergarded squalor of the Buna at work.”

Time in the camps follows slow repetitive cycles that prevent the expectation of an end
through the eternally repeated regeneration and return of the same. Time is at a standstill and the
inmates must earn or win each minute of the day through forced work.

There is so little slack in our lives, writes Robert Antelme, we are so cut off from
the world where things happen, that, without the slightest difference, Tuesday is a
carbon copy of Monday, Wednesday of Tuesday, and so on. Sundays alone can
extricate us from this goo of homogeneous duration, introduce breaks into it, so
that some part of it can be clearly relegated to the past. ... Because the day
finishes, the week also finishes, the month finishes. But there is still thinner
slicing to be done: by nine in the morning at the factory three hours have already
gone by, half the time needed to get to noon; by noon, half the day is done. The
hours after noon become more and more precious, we literally gobble them up.
By four o’clock, only two more hours. It was another world this morning at nine
o’clock – how could we have been here at nine in the morning with another ten
hours in the factory yet to do? How can each hour have gone by? To begin with,
that first hour, between six and seven, when you have to accept the day, get into
it. It is a kind of reassurance to have managed to do so. The next hour is very
long; you still can’t assess what’s behind you, since it’s too brief. Then the break
at nine o’clock, and so on.

Time in the camps feels heavy, loaded with the burden of an inevitable fate: a never-ending
struggle over and against time. The only respite resides in sleep, which interrupts, puts on hold
the everlasting struggle to conquer one’s own past out of an indistinct, inexistent present. “I took
off my jacket and shoes and slipped under the blankets. René radiates only a small amount of
heat. We’ve been waiting for just this moment since this morning. Tomorrow, as soon as we hear
the wake-up shout, we’ll think about evening.”

The homogeneity of life and time in the camps induces the homogenization of the
inmates themselves, who become all alike in their physical appearance and personality. “We are
being transformed. Our faces and our bodies are going downhill, there’s no more telling the
handsome from the ugly. In three months’ time we’ll be more different still, we’ll be even less
distinguishable from one another. Yet each of us will continue, in a vague way, to maintain the
idea of his own singularity.” The inmates are only allowed to exist insofar as they display the
capacity to accomplish work, that is, as they are able to disappear behind and through their work.

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136 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, tr. S. Woolf, in *If This is a Man, The Truce*, 139-40.
“If we aren’t working anymore, we’re good only for killing. We can’t continue like this, doing nothing. We’re carriers for the stones, shoulders for beams, hands for hammers; if the stones, the beams, the hammers fade out of the picture, then there can be no further putting up with us, nothing justifies our existence, there is no excuse for us, we poison the factory.”

In fact, the operation of the workplace serves a purpose distinct from the accomplishment of useful work: the subjection of all inmates to an absolute external constraint which, through the progressive physical and spiritual destruction of the prisoners, ultimately leads them to their death. “The working relations, the orders given out, even the blows we receive, are only camouflage. The factory’s organization, the coordination of the work mask the real work being done here. It is being done on us, and it’s the work of making us die. They may now and then be distracted from it, they may doze on the job; but it’s enough for a guy to keel over from weakness at his bench to wake them up, and there’s the Meister kicking the man on the floor to get him back on his feet.”

Proof for Antelme’s claims is found in the fact that oftentimes, no evident purpose could be ascribed to the work being accomplished by the inmates, the work being undone as soon as it had been completed. As David Rousset explains, “if there was no work to do, they tore down what they had already built and built it over again. Thus the SS made it clear that the purpose of the prisoners’ labour was not the accomplishment of any given task, but to keep the objects of their ‘protective custody’ under the tightest and most stultifying restraint.”

For the inmates, the weight of perpetual constraint and terror is perceptible throughout the workday transmuting their lives into a relentless struggle for sheer survival.

Arrivé au chantier, il faut se précipiter, jouer des coudes, trouver jusqu’au premier rang, choisir sans hésiter l’outil léger qu’on tient bien. Chaque pelle, chaque pic a son poids. Manié douze heures de rang, ce poids compte. Veiller à ce que le fer soit convenablement emmanché pour éviter dans la journée les coups de poing et de botte du Vorarbeiter, apprécier d’un regard la courbure et le tranchant. L’outil choisi, savoir le conserver au travers de bagarres rapides et violentes, où les esclaves s’affrontent quotidiennement. Pelle ou pic en mains, photographier le chantier et deviner l’emplacement le meilleur, le plus à l’abri des surveillances, trouver la place où le travail s’affiche le moins, où l’on ne sera pas contraint, coûte que coûte, de suer à la peine. Enfin, plus difficile encore, s’entendre avec une équipe : question de langue, de nationalité, d’âge ; tout y entre.

The inmates face similar pressure before and after their work, all through the waking hours of the day. A whole set of daily constraints, obligations and chores to be complied with.

140 Ibid., 176.
141 Ibid., 99.
142 David Rousset, The Other Kingdom, 113.
and accomplished in haste deprive them of the opportunity to enjoy something akin to human freedom.

On se lève à quatre heures. À peine le temps de mettre ton froc et c’est le rassemblement. Ils mettent bien trois quarts d’heure à nous compter et recompter. Tu as juste le temps de prendre le café et tes cent grammes de pain qu’il faut être là pour la formation des Kommandos. En te grouillant tu peux aller chier, mais pas te laver. On revient du boulot à midi et demi. Le temps de passer prendre la soupe, de la bouffer, et les trois-quarts d’heure sont fous. À nouveau le rassemblement. Remarque que si tu renonces à cavaler au rab, tu peux à la rigueur, en bouffant vite, te passer un peu d’eau sur la gueule, mais te laver? ... Et le soir. On arrive. Faut rester sur les rangs. Appel, le discours. Après, la queue pour la becquetance. Ce sera presque huit heures quand on aura fini et, à huit heures, pas moyen de sortir dans la cour. Verboten. Maintenant, avec leur nouveau truc, on va encore faire la queue pour les couvertures. Et à neuf heures moins le quart, appel. Pas moyen de se coucher avant neuf heures et demie. Tu parles d’une existence.\textsuperscript{144}

The working cadence imposed on the inmates and the mistreatment and violence inflicted by the SS at the first signs of incapacity to keep up turns each day of work into the most oppressing ordeal. Rudolf Vrba relates the arrival of his working commando by train in Buna, showing how this seemingly benign operation entailed, in the camps, the suffering of pure torture and violence:

At last, however, we dragged to a stop. The doors were whipped open and the kapos fell upon us again, tearing us out of the wagons, lashing at us wildly, working at an insane speed, shouting over and over again: “Faster, you bastards! Faster!” The SS were there in force, too, with dogs and guns. They kept glancing at their watches, growling: “Quick ... we’re late! Get them moving! Get them into line!” They got us in line and they got us moving. The long line of battered zebras plodded towards Buna to the brisk music of constant blows and sporadic gun fire. In front of me a man stumbled. A kapo clubbed him and he staggered out of line. Immediately an SS man fired at him, missed and brought down the man beside him. Another kapo roared: “Pick up that bloody body! This is not a graveyard! Carry it with you!” The summer sun scorched the back of my neck. The Alsatian trotting beside me was panting. A man reeled from the ranks, fell and had the top of his head blown off by an SS man who did not even bother to stop as he fired. Farther up the line a man ran wildly into the road and was bowled over by a burst of machine gun fire. The SS were kicking the kapos now and all the time they were shouting: “Faster, you bastards! We’re late! We’re late!” This, I thought, must be the real hell of Auschwitz. Hell on the double.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 166-67.
2.1.2. The Art of Survival

Surrounded by such abiding terror, the inmates are quickly led to understand that, in Auschwitz, surviving must become an art whose acquisition and proficient mastery are not easily completed and obtained. Ever watchful, like animals in the wild, the prisoners must learn how to reduce as much as possible the amount and level of mistreatment, torture and violence to which they are subjected daily. Deprived of proper amounts of food, they must also tone down as much as they can the daily expense of energy through work and this, without being caught by the authorities, who would then automatically inflict severe punishment upon them. Richard Glazar, entrusted with the duty to unload the belongings of incoming prisoners from train cars at the Treblinka extermination camp, describes this essential “art of survival” in the following manner:

Sorting has become routine for me. I stay alert, most of all I stay alert, and that is how I work: continuously on guard, always sniffing the wind, sensing whence the next danger might come, where the warning sounds; yelled at from time to time to get working; staying alert to where the next dark green uniform with the death’s-head cap might appear, alert to which direction it’s going, when it turns, what might be in its field of vision, what its body language and movements might mean. Sometimes I almost feel as if I’m in training for this crucial activity, the art of survival, and that I enjoy getting better at this exciting game played for my continued existence. Anyone who works at this hectored tempo under the whip without a break, loading more and more onto his back without taking notice of when the driving rage of the SS troops and guards ebbs, will exhaust himself to the point of breakdown. Anyone who rests too long and misses the next upsurge is also finished.146

Josef Katz, working as a roofer at the Salaspils camp, similarly explains: “It is impossible to work on the roof in this cold. I can no longer hold the roofboard; my hands are stiff. After spending five minutes on the roof, I go to the barracks for an hour to thaw out. Anything else is impossible with the kind of food we get. Only one who can avoid hard labour has a chance to get out of here alive. All those who have to do hard labour are lost.”147 As for David Rousset, his words admit no equivocation: “Ici, à tout instant, il faut être sur le qui-vive, à guetter. L’unique préoccupation, obsédante : économiser au maximum ses forces. ... Vous devez toujours avoir l’air de travailler tout en ne faisant rien. Ce n’est pas facile. Il faut apprendre. Vous croyez que ne rien faire, ça vient tout seul. Détrompez-vous. C’est une science.”148

Living in an environment purposefully designed to establish perpetual fear, exhaustion, hatred and, subject to torture and constantly and completely at the mercy of their oppressors’ arbitrariness, experiencing daily the loss of fellow prisoners in great numbers, the inmates were forced to expect their personal death, to conceive and embrace it as an immediate possibility, if not reality. Literally living in death, overwhelmed by it, their acquaintance with death promoted the substitution of the latter with life itself (more exactly the evil and suffering that life can still bring) as the primary object of fear. Fear of death? No more. Death is part of everyday experience; it means liberation from fear, from this life. Nelly Gorce describes a typical roll call at the end of the workday.

En plus de la souffrance physique que nous procuraient les appels, il y avait la terreur de ce qu’on pouvait voir ou entendre. Que de fois nous y avons frôlé la mort et les spectacles n’avaient rien de réjouissant : c’étaient les cadavres transportés pour figurer une dernière fois sur la liste des vivants, ceux qui lentement se refroidissaient pendant ces trois longues heures, sans aucun bruit, un numéro cessait de vivre et glissait dans le calme de la mort. Il y avait aussi les “accidents,” tel celui arrivé à l’une des nôtres, imparfaitement alignée : le SS, une brute achevée, lui envoya un tel coup de pied à la base de ses reins qu’elle en eut la colonne vertébrale fracturée et comme, tombée à terre, il lui était impossible de se relever, l’homme lui écrasa le crâne à coups de botte. Il y avait ces petits enfants aux lèvres bleues par le froid, ces vieilles femmes semblables à des squelettes dont les os ne cessaient de trembler, les malades et les agonisantes dont le visage était déjà marqué des empreintes de la mort. Il y avait les cris, les hurlements, les rires hystériques, il y avait la peur, la peur atroce de l’inconnu, des coups, des souffrances de la minute suivante, la peur de demeurer longtemps encore sous l’âpreté de l’aurore. Celle de la mort certainement pas. Mourir était le havre, le port, la délivrance. ... Si je n’avais pas autant l’habitude de la mort, j’aurais peur. Peur! Est-il vraiment possible d’avoir peur? De quoi aurions-nous peur, sinon de vivre! 149

Jean Améry recalls the inmates’ emotional response to upcoming selections, actions by which a certain number of prisoners from each block were chosen by medical staff (allegedly on the basis of their ailing health or condition) and sent directly to the gas chambers to be killed. These prisoners displayed no fear of death. Death was not even experienced as a problem or question addressed to them, to their lives. Death had simply become an undeniable, obvious fact of life.

Non, nous n’avions pas peur de la mort. Je me souviens très clairement que dans certaines baraques où les hommes attendaient la sélection pour les chambres à gaz, les camarades ne parlaient pas de cet événement imminent, mais manifestaient tous les signes d’inquiétude et d’espoir quant à la consistance de la soupe qui allait être distribuée. C’est donc sans peine aucune que la réalité de la

vie du camp triomphait de la mort et de tout le complexe des questions dites dernières.\textsuperscript{150}

The experience of the universal and unstoppable advance (march) of death which drains, eats up and takes away all life from the inhabitants of the camps characterizes the very atmosphere, the air in and from which the inmates had to draw their own sustenance. This sharing in death, in the atmosphere of death unites all prisoners who are equal in the face of their externally desired and enforced extermination. “Death,” argues Jorge Semprun, “was the substance of our brotherhood, the key to our destiny, the sign of our membership in the community of the living. Together we lived that experience of death, that compassion. This defined our being: to be with one another as death advanced upon us – or rather, ripened in us, spreading through us like a luminous poison, like an intense light that would obliterate us.”\textsuperscript{151} In similar fashion, David Rousset claims that “la solidarité des détenus se fondait sur un sort inexorablement commun. Tous étaient condamnés à mort et tous avaient les mêmes chances de mourir. … Un infranchissable abîme séparait les concentrationnaires des S.S.”\textsuperscript{152} Time, in the camps, was loaded, filled with and measured by death. Charlotte Delbo reflects and remembers:

Pourquoi ne pas oublier plutôt comme le temps durait, durait, puisque tout le monde aujourd’hui se dit vingt-sept mois ce n’est pas si long dans une vie et puisque je ne peux pas leur faire comprendre la différence entre le temps de là-bas et le temps d’ici, entre le temps de là-bas qui était vide, et qui était si lourd de tous ces morts, parce que les cadavres avaient beau être tout légers, quand il y en a des milliers de ces cadavres squelettiques, cela fait lourd et cela vous écrase sous le poids, entre le temps de là-bas qui était vide, et le temps d’ici qui est du temps creux.\textsuperscript{153}

Life in the camps, the daily companionship before and with death, provoked a profound redefinition and restructuring of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the inmates’ personal identities. The members of the Sonderkommando, entrusted with the gruesome task of assisting in the gassing and cremation of the corpses of their fellow prisoners, experienced this transformation firsthand, in the most immediate fashion. Zalmen Lewental writes:

On courait, chassés par les gourdis des gardes SS qui nous surveillaient, au point qu’on ne pensait absolument plus à soi, personne parmi nous ne savait plus ce qu’il faisait, ni quand, ni comment, ni plus généralement ce qui lui arrivait. On se sentait ainsi complètement perdu, vraiment comme des morts, comme des

\textsuperscript{151} Jorge Semprun, \textit{Literature or Life}, 24.
\textsuperscript{152} David Rousset, \textit{Les jours de notre mort}, 390.
automates, nous courions, pourchassés, ne sachant ni où il fallait courir, ni pourquoi courir, ni quoi faire. Personne ne regardait son voisin. Je sais bien qu’alors personne parmi nous ne vivait, ne pensait, ne réfléchissait.  

The frenetic cadence, the abiding presence of death, the constant threat to their own life forced the inmates to fall back upon (within) themselves, to shrink and tone down their affective and spiritual lives to the point of confining the latter to immediate, self-centred concerns and interests. No longer allowed to live, the inmates opted for an economy of sheer survival. As Zalmen Gradowski – another member of the Sonderkommando – explains, “on doit durcir son cœur, étouffer toute sensibilité, émousser tout sentiment douloureux. On doit refouler les atroces souffrances qui déferlent comme un ouragan dans tous les membres. On doit se muer en automate, ne rien voir, ne rien sentir, ne rien savoir.” The inmates could not avoid growing insensitive to human pain, suffering and death. They could not oppose the dulling of their conscience, the blurring of the good-evil distinction. As Filip Müller – also part of the Sonderkommando – clearly states,

The way we lived gave only the present any meaning, the past meant nothing and the future not much either. This appalling, detestable and brutal life had already dulled the emotions of many prisoners to such a degree that they were growing more and more indifferent to the crimes which were committed all around them day after day. The camp made people vicious and selfish. Anybody who did not know how to use his elbows sank like a stone. The sight of people suffering, sick, tortured and murdered had become commonplace and scarcely any longer moved anybody.

This last quotation makes plain the fact that the transformation of the inmates’ inner life was not merely passive, but also – to some extent – embodied the active response of the inmates to the camp.

Conditions in the camps were so extreme, depriving them of all that human beings require to meet their basic needs, that the inmates literally had to set their will on their own survival as on an absolute aim and goal to whose fulfilment they effectively sacrificed everything else, including the ethical (moral) norms and standards they used to comply with before their internment in the camps. In the apt words of Jacques Lusseyran, “you see, just keeping alive what was left to us of life was a task which took all we had ... we had to live in the present; each

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156 Filip Müller, Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers, tr. S. Flatauer (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1999), 64.
moment had to be absorbed for all that was in it, to satisfy the hunger for life.” In the inmate’s heart and mind, the desire to survive – because and despite of the acute awareness of the inevitability of their death – obliterates all other concerns. The unique goal is to survive, to survive at all costs. Again in the sharp words of Filip Müller,

Of course, I had no illusions: I knew with certainty that a dreadful end awaited me. But I was not yet ready to capitulate. The more menacing death grew, the stronger grew my will to survive. My every thought, every fibre of my being, was concentrated on only one thing: to stay alive, one minute, one hour, one day, one week. But not to die. ... I was obsessed and dominated by the determination that I must not die. The heap of dead bodies which I had seen and which I was made to help remove only served to strengthen my determination to do everything possible not to perish in the same way; not to have to lie under a heap of dead bodies; not to be pushed into the oven, prodded with an iron fork and, ultimately, changed into smoke and ashes. Anything but that! I only wanted one thing: to go on living. Sometime, somehow, there might be a chance to get out of here. But if I wanted to survive there was only one thing: I must submit and carry out every single order. It was only by adopting this attitude that a man was able to carry on his ghastly trade in the crematorium of Auschwitz.  

2.1.3. Mere Humanity

It is important to measure the extremely high cost of survival in Auschwitz, paradigmatically emphasized in the testimonies of the Sonderkommando: survival supposes no less than the absolute obedience at all times to the will of the Nazi persecutors (which in itself is no guarantee that survival will effectively ensue for any given inmate). Such subservience, in turn, progressively leads to the complete dehumanization of these prisoners who no longer offer any kind of resistance or alterity to their jailers. Primo Levi states this truth most clearly: “The Russians can come now: they will only find us, the slaves, the worn-out, worthy of the unarmed death which awaits us. To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment.” Rudolf Vrba, who for a time had to work at the ramp of Birkenau, helping the incoming deported to get out of cattle cars and taking care of their luggage on behalf of the Nazis, explains that he did not have any (moral) problem with feeding himself from the deportees’ goods at the very moment they were led to their death in the gas chambers.

159 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in *If This Is a Man, The Truce*, 179.
Nor did the transports themselves make much impression upon me, for I had seen it all before. I had lived, remember, in these little hells on wheels. I had seen people clubbed and killed. I had watched families being ripped apart and had heard their cries; and after my experiences in Auschwitz, I suppose I had become a little numb to suffering. Indeed, for those first few nights on the ramp, my thoughts were selfish. I was concentrating on staying alive. True I saw the great selections and heard the lorries revving up with their cargoes for the crematoria, but my major tasks were dodging the trigger-happy SS men who seemed to be everywhere, unloading the luggage from stinking wagons and stealing food from it before I was spotted. Soon, in fact, I became adept.160

Once the inmates had opted for their survival at all costs, the conditions in the camps necessarily led them to adopt a new ethics. The first principle of this new set of normative behavioural rules is the replacement of all former ethical and moral systems which are by definition inapplicable in Auschwitz. Survival under the law of terror demands the subversion of all values. The ethics of constrained immediacy calls for a highly proactive stance where the individual is ready to act in ways that traditional ethics do not allow. In the words of David Rousset,

Pour vivre, il faut prévenir et tirer les premiers. ... Une telle nécessité, aussi impérieuse, implique un renversement complet des valeurs. Que peuvent signifier aujourd’hui les anciennes tables de la loi : les concepts d’honneur, de probité morale ou intellectuelle, d’équité, de preuves, de culpabilité? De telles notions, avec leur sens traditionnel, transmis si l’on veut jusqu’à nous par les livres, ne peuvent avoir cours que dans la société où elles sont nées. C’est-à-dire dans une société supportant une relative liberté de comportement. ... Mais ici, dans les camps de concentration, le monde de la contrainte la plus totalitaire, où chaque événement porte une réponse définitive, où cinquante grammes de pain, un litre de soupe en plus ou en moins, le déplacement ou le maintien à une fonction précise posent entièrement la question de la vie ou de la mort, dans un tel monde user encore de ces concepts, c’est parler une langue morte qui ne correspond plus au comportement réel des êtres. Agir conformément à eux serait s’éliminer soi-même de l’existence, un suicide. Il n’est que de considérer les hommes autour de nous : un désaccord grandissant entre leur héritage idéologique, leur vocabulaire et leurs agissements, se traduit par un malaise, une confusion de sentiments, un obscurcissement de la faculté de comprendre, qui se solde finalement soit par l’hébétude, l’entrée dans une vie primaire, végétative, soit par une adaptation mécanique et cynique aux nouvelles conditions, pour quelques rares, enfin, par un conflit tragique. ... La violence, la ruse, la délation, l’hypocrisie sont devenues des composantes organiques de notre existence. ... La fourberie s’impose comme une nécessité.161

160 Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, I Cannot Forgive, 148.
Rousset’s claims find complete confirmation in Filip Müller’s eyewitness experience of the assassination of a prisoner speaking out in defence of the rights of his fellow inmates. To openly hold on to and defend humanistic values and conduct in a concentration camp inevitably entailed suffering a sudden and violent death.

Suddenly, relates Müller, the lawyer pushed his way through the ranks and stopped three paces in front of Schlage. Standing smartly to attention, he looked the SS man in the eye and declared with sincere indignation: “Herr Kommandant, as a human being and a lawyer I wish to report that the block clerk” – pointing at Vacek – “has arbitrarily killed several innocent people. Their corpses are laid out over there. I am convinced that the block clerk has killed these prisoners without the knowledge of either his immediate superiors or the authorities. We have been sent here to work and not to be killed. ... I would therefore request you to have this morning’s events investigated and to see that the guilty are duly punished.” When he had finished making his complaint, one could have heard a pin drop. Astounded at his courage and determination, the prisoners caught their breath and stared at Schlage. He, too, was so surprised by the unexpected conduct of this prisoner that for a time he stood rooted to the spot facing the lawyer. The muscles in his face were twitching as he tried to speak. It took a few seconds before he was able to bawl: “Vacek, come here!” “At once, Herr Rottenführer!” replied Vacek and stood to attention before his master. “Did you hear what this fucking Jew has been blathering about?” “I did, Herr Rottenführer!” Vacek replied eagerly. “Then give him what he deserves!” ordered Schlage. Vacek ran to pick up his truncheon from where he had left it and rushed up to the lawyer. He began to batter him with the truncheon and continued until finally the man dropped dead.\textsuperscript{162}

Müller’s assessment of this event is profoundly revelatory; to him, this prisoner simply failed to acknowledge the vacuity of civilised ethical and legal practices and rules in the context of the camps. This failure to understand the “laws” of the camps cost him his life.

Like myself, says Müller, he had come to Auschwitz about a month earlier, but unlike me he was one of those who were too slow in coming to terms with the harsh realities of life in a concentration camp. He had failed to realize that in Auschwitz the values and laws which formed the basis of civilization were obsolete. He was firmly convinced that murders were committed by prisoners put in charge of their fellows without the knowledge of the SS leaders. It simply did not fit in with his concept of the law that prisoners should be allowed to kill fellow prisoners, and to do this for no reason whatever. He still had not grasped the fact that we were now in a place where there were no laws for prisoners.\textsuperscript{163}

Survivors themselves admit that prolonged life in the camps led them to relinquish their own humanity, to enter the realm of the inhuman and even that of the non-human. As we have seen

\textsuperscript{162} Filip Müller, \textit{Eyewitness Auschwitz}, 5.

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Ibid.}, 4.
above, one aspect of this crossing over of the inmates into inhumanity is ethical and moral. As Primo Levi explains,

> We lay in a world of death and phantoms. The last trace of civilization had vanished around and inside us. The work of bestial degradation, begun by the victorious Germans, had been carried to its conclusion by the Germans in defeat. It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pigmy or the most vicious sadist.\(^\text{164}\)

A second result of the rigorous process of dehumanization is the exclusion of the most natural activity of the human mind: thinking. Experienced inmates behaved like irrational animals, absolutely dependent on their natural instincts, and not at all like deliberating analytical beings. As Maurice Cling testifies: “Je me suis concentré depuis des mois sur la survie immédiate: limiter mon horizon aux quelques mètres qui m’entourent, rechercher de la nourriture – comme les bêtes, sans doute – ou quelque chose à “organiser,” ne pas se faire prendre, économiser ses forces au maximum, aux aguets pour éviter les coups, et surtout, ne pas se souvenir, ne pas songer à l’avenir, ne pas s’attendrir, ne pas penser.”\(^\text{165}\) In fact, life under the severe conditions of the camps resembled what Charles Darwin describes in *Origin of Species* as the “struggle for existence,” that is, the incessant competition of individuals – against other members of their own species and the external environmental conditions – for their survival. Systematically overworked and undernourished, the inmates were forced to prioritize their own personal wellbeing over and sometimes in denial of anybody else’s; violent conflicts were bound to arise. As Aimé Bonifas explains,

> The work demanded of us was excessive; we had to make up for lost time. Most of the prisoners were extremely emaciated and weak. Hunger plagued us now more than ever before. We grabbed our bread and devoured it. In all eyes lurked a predatory gleam. ... The relentless struggle for survival aggravated our natural distrust of one another. The most insignificant incident could provoke a quarrel. This jealous self-interest was not the least of our moral weaknesses. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that frightful evidence demonstrated to us that man is a wolf to man, that he is naturally not altruistic but egotistic and that all of us are guilty.\(^\text{166}\)

\(^{164}\) Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in *If This Is a Man, The Truce*, 205-06.
\(^{165}\) Maurice Cling, *Vous qui entrez ici... Un enfant à Auschwitz* (Paris: Graphein, 1999), 142.
In the most extreme situations, such as during the death marches, where the prisoners had to walk for days at a racing pace without being fed or having any rest, the inmates would even forget their most fundamental biological needs, such as thirst and hunger. In the words of Elie Wiesel,

"By now, I moved like a sleepwalker. I sometimes closed my eyes and it was like running while asleep. Now and then, someone kicked me violently from behind and I would wake up. ... The road was endless. To allow oneself to be carried by the mob, to be swept away by blind fate. When the SS were tired, there were replaced. But no one replaced us. Chilled to the bone, our throats parched, famished, out of breath, we pressed on. We were the masters of nature, the masters of the world. We had transcended everything – death, fatigue, our natural needs. We were stronger than cold and hunger, stronger than the guns and the desire to die, doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers, we were the only men on earth."  

Not only were the inmates pushed by the external conditions to which they were subjected to give up on thinking, thus losing their ability to think, they also deliberately attempted to put an end to their inner emotional and intellectual life. This, they did in order to alleviate the suffering induced by the memory of happier days, of loved ones which inevitably confronted them with the irreparable losses they had endured. Hence, not to feel, not to think were necessary (though certainly not sufficient) conditions for the survival of camp inmates. In the clarifying words of Charlotte Delbo,

"Vous direz qu’on peut tout enlever à un être humain sauf sa faculté de penser et d’imaginer. Vous ne savez pas. On peut faire d’un être humain un squelette où gargouille la diarrhée, lui ôter le temps de penser, la force de penser. L’imaginaire est le premier luxe du corps qui reçoit assez de nourriture, jouit d’une frange de temps libre, dispose de rudiments pour façonner ses rêves. À Auschwitz, on ne rêvait pas, on délirait. Cependant, objecterez-vous, chacun n’avait-il pas son bagage de souvenirs? Non. Le passé ne nous était d’aucun secours, d’aucune ressource. Il était devenu irréel, incroyable. Tout ce qui avait été notre existence d’avant s’effilochait. Parler restait la seule évasion, notre délire. De quoi parlions-nous? De choses matérielles et consommables, ou réalisables. Il fallait écarter tout ce qui éveillait la douleur ou le regret. Nous ne parlions pas d’amour."  

The reality of the camps imposed itself so imperatively and so immediately on the prisoners that they were literally left with no room to feel and think. All they could do was to absorb the experience of the camps until they eventually became completely permeated with it. Both the

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human heart and mind were rendered impotent, which led to their death. As Jean Améry explains,

Nulle part ailleurs dans le monde la réalité n’exerçait une action aussi efficace qu’au camp, nulle part ailleurs elle n’était à ce point réalité. En aucun autre endroit la tentative de la dépasser ne s’avérait aussi ridicule et désespérée. … Les énoncés philosophiques avaient perdu leur transcendance, ce n’était plus en partie que des constatations concrètes, en partie du verbiage stérile : là où ils significaient quelque chose, ils nous semblaient banals, et là où ils n’étaient pas banals, ils ne signifiaient plus rien. Pour reconnaître ceci nous n’avions pas besoin d’analyse sémantique ou de syntaxe logique : il nous suffisait de jeter un coup d’œil aux miradors ou de renifler l’odeur de graisse brûlée qui s’échappait des crématoires. Au camp l’esprit dans sa totalité s’avérait donc incompétent. … La parole s’éteint partout où une réalité pose une revendication totale. Pour nous elle s’est éteinte depuis longtemps. Et il ne nous restait même pas la consolation d’avoir à déplorer son trépas.169

Concepts and ideas were proved to be devoid of content and effective power in the camps; life had no use for them. David Rousset observes: “J’apprenais à regarder vivre des hommes qui ne pensent pas. Je découvrais pour eux un intérêt singulier et que le plus sordide offrait souvent des traits surprenants. Je me rendais compte que les idées ne sont point indispensables à l’existence et que le monde se fait sans elles.”170

Through perpetual cohabitation with death, evil and suffering, the human heart, in the camps, also suffered death, a death similar to that of the mind. Regularly pushed beyond the limit of what human affectivity can bear, the inmates had to bypass, to put on hold, and even to deny and forget their ability to feel. Gerda Klein relates the written testimony of an acquaintance of hers, Erika, who discovered (with her father) her recently murdered mother and fiancé in a (still open) mass grave. Her words speak volumes. “We saw a great square grave, half-open yet, a mountain of naked bodies in it. Many we recognized. We found my mother. She was all bloody. We did not find my little brother. I found Henek, the one I loved more than life, who was to be my husband. I kissed his dead face. Not one tear did I shed in that grave. Only my heart died. … There are no hearts. All hearts are dead. How does one bury a heart?”171

2.1.4. One and the Same

Life in the camps can therefore be described as operating a radically uniformizing transformation of the prisoners’ humanity bringing the latter’s expression to its lowest common

169 Jean Améry, Par-delà le crime et le châtiment, 54-55 and 58.
170 David Rousset, Les jours de notre mort, 603.
171 Gerda W. Klein, All but My Life (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 70.
denominator. What is left of humanity is a quasi-instinctual biological urge to stay alive in which none of what the word “human” normally refers to can be observed and found anymore.

La grande masse concentrationnaire, argues David Rousset, est devenue incapable de penser. La peur permanente, la faim, l’abrutissement du travail, les coups, l’impossibilité totale de s’isoler, l’absence de tout repos réel ont détruit dans la foule tous les ressorts, sauf les réflexes élémentaires, l’ont réduite au niveau de l’hébétude et de l’idée fixe (manger, ne pas être battu). Les conditions sociales de la vie dans les camps ont transformé la grande masse des détenus et des déportés (telles qu’elles qu’ont été leur position sociale antérieure et leur formation, du moment qu’ils n’ont pu participer à un degré quelconque aux privilèges concentrationnaires) en une plèbe dégénérée entièrement soumise aux réflexes primitifs de l’instinct animal.¹⁷²

The inmates, insofar as they are the pure victims of the camp system, find themselves completely robbed of their dignity (both in its expression and perception) – having lost their personal identity and integrity – laying naked and empty in the darkness of Auschwitz. In this context, Rousset speaks of “men of no conviction, haggard and savage ... men who bear within them faiths uprooted and dignities undone. An entire race of men naked, inwardly naked, stripped of all culture, all tradition”¹⁷³ and Levi of “a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself ... a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility.”¹⁷⁴ Viktor Frankl similarly observes that

Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to be exterminated (having planned, however, to make full use of him first – to the last ounce of his physical resources) – under this influence the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in a last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value.¹⁷⁵

The inmates progressively became unrecognizable, anonymous instantiations of their former selves. Charlotte Delbo recalls the sight of a group of prisoners coming out of a train in which she herself was also travelling.

Des wagons de queue, descendaient des hommes en rayé, probablement ceux que nous avions vus sur le quai d’Auschwitz. Ils étaient beaucoup, une soixantaine peut-être. Eux aussi changeaient de camp. Ils étaient de la maigreur que nous connaissions, à laquelle nous n’avions jamais pu nous habituer, et se mettaient en

¹⁷³ David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, 28-29.
¹⁷⁴ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in *If This Is a Man, The Truce*, 26.
rang comme des automates. … Nous les dévisagions. Il pouvait y avoir parmi eux quelqu’un de connaissance, qui sait? Mais ils se ressemblaient tellement à cause de leurs yeux creux et fébriles, de leurs lèvres gonflées, qu’ils étaient tous également méconnaissables.  

The most common analogy or metaphor used by survivors to describe the natural effect or end result of prolonged existence in the camps on the inmates is that internment inevitably turned the prisoners into automata or robots, i.e. purely servile artificially, mechanically operated devices. The inmates no longer possess a mind, heart and will – inner principles of action, affection and movement of their own –, they have become objects passively waiting to be handled from without by genuine agents. This condition was made most patent to the inmates during the death marches. Elie Wiesel relates:

> An icy wind was blowing violently. But we marched without faltering. The SS made us increase our pace. “Faster, you tramps, you flea-ridden dogs!” Why not? Moving fast made us a little warmer. The blood flowed more readily in our veins. We had the feeling of being alive. … “Faster, you filthy dogs!” We were no longer marching, we were running. Like automatons. ... I was putting one foot in front of the other, like a machine. I was dragging this emaciated body that was still such a weight. If only I could have shed it! Though I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn’t help thinking that there were two of us: my body and I. And I hated that body.  

In similar fashion, David Rousset describes the appearance and behaviour of the inmates during the death marches.


This condition, characteristic of the *Muselmanner*, is that of human beings who no longer display any expression, feature or sign of their humanity. The testimony of Yakov Gabbay, member of the *Sonderkommando*, is here most illuminating. “Après deux à trois semaines, on s’est habitué. Parfois, la nuit, pendant la pause, je mettais ma main sur un cadavre, et cela ne me faisait plus rien. Nous travaillions comme des robots. Je devais me durcir pour survivre et...”

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raconter tout ce qui s’était passé dans cet enfer. La réalité prouve que l’homme est plus cruel qu’une bête. Oui, nous étions des bêtes, nous n’avions pas de sentiments. Parfois nous doutions que quelque chose d’humain fut demeuré en nous.179 Humanity’s ability to deny itself reaches in the person of the Muselmann a climax, for if it can deny itself the right to any form of actualization, it does not have in its power the capacity to annihilate itself as a (natural) potentiality (in the reality of its possible existence). In the person of the Muselmann, therefore, humanity has been rendered purely virtual (fully implicit and latent). Jean Améry explains that

Il est clair que toute la question de l’activité de l’esprit ne se pose plus là où le sujet sur le point de mourir de faim ou d’épuisement est non seulement privée de son esprit mais cesse même d’être un homme. Celui qu’on appelait le “musulman” dans le jargon du camp, pour désigner le détenu qui cessait de lutter et que les camarades laissaient tomber, n’avait plus d’espace dans sa conscience où le bien et le mal, le noble et le vil, le spirituel et le non-spirituel eussent encore pu s’opposer l’un à l’autre. Ce n’était plus qu’un cadavre ambulant, un assemblage de fonctions physiques dans leurs derniers soubresauts.180

It is very important to observe that, in the context of life in the camps, the characteristic expressions and traits of human nature were rendered latent, forced into a state of implicit potentiality, to be actualised again only if life conditions were to improve. In other words, the inmates’ humanity is not completely eradicated, in the sense of being totally annihilated or obliterated, it simply cannot positively express itself anymore under the prevailing circumstances.

2.1.5. Sparkles of Dignity

In particular situations, it did happen that inmates would momentarily regain their ability to feel and think as human beings. David Rousset relates a situation where, for a few seconds or minutes, through the disruptive intervention of a few inmates, the army of “automata” were shaken out of their torpor.

Depuis près d’une heure, nous stationnons dans l’allée centrale qui monte vers la place d’appel. Nous sommes à l’angle d’un Block. Devant nous, deux autres colonnes immobiles. Dans les rues transversales, des groupes attendent. Le sol est gelé. De gros bourrelets de neige dure sur les flancs de la rue. ... Les hommes, les mains dans les poches, les épaules droites, se serrent, se coagulent et, de temps à autre, se donnent de grandes tapes dans le dos. Trois ou quatre ont quitté les rangs pour se placer contre le mur du Block et ils tapent des pieds très fort comme des automates. ... Dans la rue transversale, une dizaine de jeunes Russes chahutent. ... L’un d’eux fait des boules de neige. Il vise attentivement notre colonne. Il cherche des yeux la tête la plus exsangue et vlan! il lance. La neige s’écrase contre la

180 Jean Améry, Par-delà le crime et le châtiment, 35-36.
tempe et le gosse s’esclaffe bruyamment. Des remous dans les rangs. Des jurons. Les muscles font mal. Bandits! Sales couillons! Ces chiens sauvages qui jouent agrandissent encore la fatigue des autres. Les déchéances physiques, la faim lancinante, l’incommensurable misère qui pèse sur les nuques nourrissent des haines, et la boule de neige bien ajustée avec sa joie perverse a réveillé toutes les impatientes, toutes les rancœurs qui montent à la gorge en vomissures. La colonne est traversée de houles. Et puis tout retombe à plat comme si l’effort avait été trop grand. Tout retombe en grommellements sourds. Les corps redeviennent des mécaniques harassées à demi conscientes. Le troupeau sordide attend, des centaines de regards creux, vides, dans l’hébétude.\textsuperscript{181}

When the prisoners were granted some respite, in the form of improved food rations or longer rest periods, characteristically human faculties or traits such as remembering and feeling automatically began to emerge from their dormant state, becoming painfully active again. Julia Skodova testifies that

As long as a person cannot think of anything but hunger and filth, as long as one is tormented by thirst and pain, as long as one cannot satisfy the most elementary human needs, concepts like “parents,” “home,” “forest and flowers,” are hidden somewhere in the depths of consciousness and very rarely penetrate to the surface. But if you have already eaten your bread and you are lying in a bed without fleas and lice, then all this comes to the surface of consciousness and begins to torment you. I have never cried here. Despite all the misery and terror that I have experienced here, my eyes have remained dry, but when I lie in bed now, I am shaken by sobs.\textsuperscript{182}

The inmates were thus forced to live in the perpetually enforced and renewed denial of their human identity and dignity. The ideological and theoretical concept of their intrinsic, ontological inferiority is impressed upon and borne (suffered) by the prisoners in their bodies, their flesh which was at no time to be considered as human.

The denial of the inmates’ dignity by the persons endowed with authority (be they Nazis or fellow prisoners) did not always take the form of a brutal, violent aggression threatening the physical integrity of the inmate. Sometimes, the mere expression of surprise, disgust or unease could hurt prisoners more profoundly than physical blows. For example, David Rousset relates a situation where a Jewish inmate physician was taught that he could not share a smile with his SS superiors.

La voiture qui les amenait à Helmstedt écrasa une oie à la sortie d’un village. Des plumes volèrent dans le sillage de poussière. Le Lagerkommandant sourit. Albert sourit aussi en le regardant. Il vit la stupéfaction du SS. Il en éprouva une telle gêne que ce petit incident ne put jamais se faire oublier. Mais où donc était son

\textsuperscript{181} David Rousset, \textit{Les jours de notre mort}, 100-01.
\textsuperscript{182} Cited in Hermann Langbein, \textit{People in Auschwitz}, 103.
tort, sinon de se tenir toujours pour un homme? L’autre l’aurait injurié que le mal n’eût pas été grand. Mais ce silence correct, cette surprise naturelle, comme si l’indécence allait de soi! L’insulte devenait furieuse en se montrant dans cet étonnement naïf. Quelle humiliation plus cruelle imaginer? Il se heurtait pour la première fois à l’affirmation de son infériorité, posée comme une réalité du monde, au même titre que l’existence des saisons, que les rapports du chien et de son maître. Impossible de la contester puisque, pour le partenaire, elle ne posait point de problème, qu’elle lui était aussi intuitive que le fait de vivre.183

In this situation, the denial of the prisoner’s humanity is so entrenched, so engrained in the heart of the SS officer that the humble and subtle expression of humour on the part of the prisoner suffices to trigger a reaction intending its complete rejection. Prisoners (especially Jewish) are not allowed to enjoy and share in anything that is properly human.

Any attempt, from an inmate, at pretending to the dignity of a human being is automatically countered with an appropriate emotional (only partly conscious) denial. In a different context, Robert Antelme relates what happened when he, an inmate, had to clean up the office of German civilians. His human dignity is denied in its physical embodiment, as though he did not even exist.

I came back a few moments later. Men were in the office; the girl was steadier now, for she had a solid block of German males behind her. They were civilians from Gandersheim. Again I removed my cap. For them I did not exist. I stooped to pick up a scrap of paper that lay next to the foot of one of them; he automatically drew his foot aside, all the while pursuing the conversation he was in the midst of. Then I went after another piece of paper, next to another shoe. The German moved his foot the way you brush a fly away from your forehead when you’re asleep, without waking up. I was something roaming in their sleep. If I chose to I could make them move their feet; they didn’t see me, but their bodies moved; to the extent that I didn’t exist for them, they were submissive. But the girl was wide awake. She had been following my performance; she knew I was playing a game; she knew I was going after those scraps of paper only in order to crowd those godlike figures and make them move their feet. She couldn’t denounce me for that would have required an explanation since they wouldn’t have understood right away; and so she would have ended up showing that she wasn’t as mighty as they were, since she had noticed me. She would have brought me on stage, rendered me visible, and they would have been obliged to talk to me, to formulate words to me, in order to make me completely invisible again, in order to get rid of me.184

It is important to note that the denial and rejection of the inmates’ human dignity hinges on a semi-intentionally induced process of self-deception whereby the heart and mind of the German civilians and officers refuse to receive the humanity of the prisoners in its otherness. This process

of self-deception presupposes the positive and preserved existence of human dignity in the person of the inmate (if not of this inmate, at least in that of the inmate in general), for otherwise it would be deprived of intrinsic justification, having nothing to deny. As Antelme concisely frames it, “for all their denying of us we are still there.”\textsuperscript{185}

Yet again, therefore, the true purpose served by the behavioural patterns of the camp authorities is that of bringing the humanity of the prisoners into complete latency. That is why, whenever danger looms over the hiddenness of inmate dignity – the latter threatening to emerge from its latency –, critical situations occur, some oppressors being forced to acknowledge its positive existence in order precisely to push it back into concealment. Antelme mentions another encounter with villagers who offered them water to drink from buckets, as they would have done to cattle.

This little village’s entire population is here and there is bewilderment upon every face. They look at us and seem utterly baffled; they will doubtless never again encounter anything so completely mysterious. They are introduced to something beyond their human experience, and from it they seem to be having trouble making their way back. ... When we approach the pails the women get out of the way. One of them stooped to move her pail just as I myself was bending down to drink. “Bitte?” I said and she shook and quickly let go of it. I looked at her – in a natural way, I believe – and then I bent over to take some water. She didn’t move; when I straightened up, I nodded slightly to her, but she still didn’t budge. So I turned away. In front of this woman I had for a moment behaved like a normal man. I couldn’t see myself. But I realize that it was the human in me that made her back away. “Please,” from one of us, must have had a diabolical sound.\textsuperscript{186}

Display of unexpected politeness and good manners, revelatory of the dignity of the individuals expressing them, can only scare those who define their own condition by denying its presence in the persons of the prisoners. In this case, though, the villagers, overcoming their fear, themselves display enough humanity to allow for the inmates’ human identity to be undeniably made manifest to all, at least for a few moments.

Some prisoners, protected by powerful members of the camp hierarchy, enjoyed a relative freedom and the ability to behave in more civilised manner. Of course, such behaviour on the part of inmates, insofar as it asserted their human dignity, flatly opposed Nazi dehumanization, as enforced in the camps. Rousset himself enjoyed such freedom, and could again, at times, pretend to be a university professor specializing in political science. Authorities of the camps, however, did not necessarily wish to acknowledge the dignity that naturally

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 244.
accompanies the status of university professor. Rousset’s interaction with a guard during a typical working day shows the dynamics of negative affirmation of the inmates’ human dignity at work.

Il était visible que l’Idiot [the guard’s nickname] avait envie de nous taper dessus. Il fallait qu’il se contraigne beaucoup pour ne pas le faire. ... Une fois il marchait derrière moi et il s’est mis à me taquiner avec sa baguette. Il criait en riant très fort: “Los! Los!” Au début je ne savais pas très bien ce qu’il voulait. Puis il se mit à frapper un peu plus sérieusement. Alors je ralentis. Plus il tapait, plus je marchais lentement. Je sentais sur ma nuque son souffle court. Arrivé dans le hall, il s’approcha de moi. Il était congestionné. – Professeur, pourquoi n’avez-vous pas obéi? me demanda-t-il. – Je n’obéis pas quand on me frappe. Il devint plus rouge encore, comme si sa face large et bovine allait saigner. – Vous savez que dans un autre Kommando vous auriez été roué de coups. Jeté par terre et roué de coups. Vous auriez obéi, hein? – Possible. Bien sûr que je savais cela, mais je savais aussi qu’il ne pouvait rien faire de tel ici. Dans sa rage, il me vouvoyait. – Pourquoi vous ne voulez pas obéir quand on vous frappe? – Parce que je ne suis pas une bête, je suis un homme. – Vous vous croyez toujours professeur, hein? Il avait une voix rauque, pénible à entendre. – Je crois que je suis toujours un homme. – Vous êtes un prisonnier maintenant. Un prisonnier. – Vous pouvez vous aussi être un prisonnier demain, mais vous resterez un homme que je sache, non? Il eut un ricanement forcé. – Vous avez été professeur. Mais vous ne l’êtes plus. Vous n’êtes plus un grand monsieur. Vous êtes tout petit maintenant. Tout petit. C’est moi qui suis grand. – Certes, dis-je. Et je n’étais plus du tout furieux, mais j’avais terriblement envie de rire.187

In this passage, two distinct notions of human dignity are seen clashing, being defended and opposed to one another in the persons of the guard and of the inmate. The guard upholds an understanding of human dignity based solely on social recognition, that is, the status or standing granted by a community to an individual accomplishing a certain authoritative, privileged function in a society. The guard argues that the inmate – David Rousset himself – no longer enjoys his former dignity of university professor. In the camps he only is a prisoner, that is, nobody: he enjoys no authority and accordingly does not deserve to be shown any respect. In fact, since the guard himself does accomplish some useful duty in the camp and enjoys a relative level of authority, he feels that the former professor should now show respect towards him. But Rousset refuses to do so on the basis of a more fundamental understanding of human dignity. Rousset argues that the guard’s authority is in fact groundless, because it rests on pure self-assertion through brutal and forceful negation of human freedom. The whole camp system rests on sheer violence.

187 David Rousset, Les jours de notre mort, 489-90.
From Rousset’s standpoint, human beings – apart from any prestige or responsibility they might enjoy or have been entrusted with – naturally deserve to be respected, because they are endowed with the ability to act and define who they are by themselves. It is this very notion of dignity, conceived as intrinsic absolute value, which is blatantly and purposefully denied in the camps through the absolute affirmation of the relative dignity of force (defined in relation to another upon which it is being exercised). In the camps, what is merely relative – force – is granted absolute status and worth. The more forcefully the SS attempted to assert their ontological superiority upon the inmates, the more evidently did they affirm their sharing of a common humanity with them. The more violently the SS wished to distinguish themselves from the prisoners, the more acute was their awareness of still being human and only human. If the Nazis allowed the killing of millions of inmates, it is thus not by reason of the latter’s inhumanity, subhumanity or anhumanity, but rather by virtue of the fullness of humanity – the same as their own – which they never stop perceiving embodied in the inmates. Their moral and spiritual inability, their wilful desire not to duly acknowledge this humanity (and act accordingly) led them to eliminate through murder all those embodiments of humanity which opposed this desire. As Robert Antelme explains,

Yet there is no ambiguity: we’re still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men. The distance separating us from another species is still intact. It is not historical. It’s an SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species, and as this mutation is occurring too slowly, they kill. ... It’s because we’re men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It’s because they have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they’ll finally be crushed. ... And if, at that moment, we believe that, here, is certainly that which requires the most considerable effort to believe, that “The SS are only men like ourselves”; if, at the moment when the subjugation of some and the power of others have attained such limits as to seem frozen into some supernatural distinction; if, facing nature, or facing death, we can perceive no substantial difference between the SS and ourselves, then we have to say that there is only one human race. ... The worst of victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner’s power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can’t change him into something else. 188

In all instances and at all times, therefore, in a most profound and radical sense, the basic dignity of the inmates remained intact. The inmates’ radical change of attitude in the wake of the liberation of the camps confirms how dear and immediately present to them, their own absolute personal value still remained.

It’s calm in the entryway, recalls Antelme, where the block leader is sitting at his table, calmly eating. We are out of breath from yelling like angry children to whom nobody is paying attention; yelling that we’re free, free to stay where it’s warm, free to eat indoors. We don’t understand, but they don’t understand either. We cannot stand having anyone lay a hand on us anymore, we feel our persons to be sacred. Free — that means having recovered all our rights, that means being able to say no to everything, or yes to everything, but as it suits us. That means having all at once recovered a power that no one has the right to place curbs upon. But I still have lice and I’m hideous, the other guys too. The picture we present to others makes us appear no different from the day before yesterday. That’s what we’re shouting about: we don’t want to be treated the way we were the day before yesterday; there isn’t any more wreck underneath this wreckage. So ... All right, there are five hundred of us in this block, and there’s got to be a compromise. We have to consent to a minimum of discipline; but the officials now have got to make a greater effort than ever to spare every last one of us any needless suffering — every last one of us, because now the well being of each of us has got to be considered.  

As soon as they recovered their freedom, the prisoners also regained a sense of how they should be treated, each of them, in their singularity. The ways of yesterday, of the camp, will not do, for it is not a treatment suitable to human beings. Deep down, deep inside the inmates crave for the respect they deserve and have not received for so long, for the liberty (relative autonomy) to choose their own course of action.

2.1.6. Meeting the Camp Inmate

Not following the usual pattern which has the relatively “healthy” incoming deportee transformed into a merely biologically surviving individual, some inmates managed to embody what in the eyes of the Nazi administration constituted the “ideal” inmate: a prisoner who not only survives, but thrives when subjected to intense physical hardship; a prisoner who obeys all orders without any trace of opposition, displaying no deliberative freedom of her own and entirely free from commitment to moral principles and rules. To survive Auschwitz, a prisoner must be able to resist both external (physical, bodily) and internal (affective, moral, spiritual) destruction. To overcome the first type of destruction, one must either have been endowed with almost supernatural physical endurance and strength or manage to avoid strenuous activity altogether (through political influence and scheming). To vanquish the second type of destruction, one must either be deprived of inner life or be able to adapt to, neutralise in or keep alive such an inner dimension, despite being subject to the conditions of the camps. Thriving in the context of the camps, the ideal inmate would in principle be unable to live (or even survive)
by herself in the free world. In very instructive fashion, Primo Levi portrays the ideal inmate through the figure of Elias Lindzin, a prisoner extraordinary in many respects.

We can now ask who is this man Elias. If he is a madman, incomprehensible and para-human, who ended in the Lager by chance. If he is an atavism, different from our modern world, and better adapted to the primordial conditions of camp life. Or if he is perhaps a product of the camp itself, what we will all become if we do not die in the camp, and if the camp itself does not end first. There is some truth in all three suppositions. Elias has survived the destruction from outside, because he is physically indestructible; he has resisted the annihilation from within because he is insane. So, in the first place, he is a survivor: he is the most adaptable, the human type most suited to this way of living. If Elias regains his liberty he will be confined to the fringes of human society, in a prison or a lunatic asylum. But here in the Lager there are no criminals nor madmen; no criminals because there is no moral law to contravene, no madmen because we are wholly devoid of free will, as our every action is, in time and place, the only conceivable one. In the Lager, Elias prospers and is triumphant. He is a good worker and a good organizer, and for this double reason, he is safe from selections and respected by both leaders and comrades. For those who have no sound inner resources, for those who do not know how to draw from their own conscience sufficient force to cling to life, the only road to salvation leads to Elias: to insanity and to deceitful bestiality. All the other roads are dead-ends.¹⁹⁰

The ideal detainee is thus defined by brute force. Epitomizing physical strength and deprived of rich inner emotional, moral and spiritual life and conflicts, Elias is neither bound by physical weakness, suffering or sickness or moral and spiritual duties, laws and principles. From his standpoint, the camp is the arena where he can exercise his own peculiar type of freedom, the freedom of an agent free of conscience evolving in a world where moral decision-making (choice) is simplified and reduced to opting for the unique course of action admissible (to an external agency). Elias is therefore an individual whose freedom is univocally determined from without by someone else and who precisely finds his fulfilment in being instrumentalized, that is, dedicated to a clearly delineated purpose he can accomplish without doubt, questions or thinking. For his unswerving obedience and extraordinary performance, Elias is rewarded with more appropriate food intakes and living conditions.

If they wished to survive for a long period of time to the regime of the camps, most inmates – because they are not as physically strong and spiritually deficient as Elias – had no other choice but to find a way to alleviate the outer and inner hardship they endured daily. The easiest way to do so was to join in the camp’s inmate hierarchy. The higher the authority enjoyed by a given inmate, the less subjected to physical duress, weakness and sickness she would be and

¹⁹⁰ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in If This Is a Man, The Truce, 115-16.
the easier it became for the inmate to obtain extra food rations, clean clothes and suitable living and sleeping quarters. At the same time, however, improvement in living conditions at a physical level necessarily entailed greater corruption, depravation and enslavement to the Nazi jailers at the moral and spiritual level. In fact, the members of this camp “elite” were entrusted with some of the duties incumbent on the SS themselves to accomplish. The violence they used in the fulfilment of their duty equalled and even surpassed, in some cases, that employed by the SS officers themselves. Rudolf Vrba depicts the behaviour of those inmates endowed with authority and power to be exercised over their fellow inmates.

I realized that here was a new elite, a prisoners’ establishment, so to speak, recruited to do the elementary dirty work with which the SS men did not wish to soil their hands. It was clear to me, too, that they were fulfilling this task with an efficiency and brutality which equalled and occasionally excelled that of their masters. These were the infamous kapos, an essential part of the structure of every concentration camp and extermination centre in Europe: men who held power of life or death over their fellow prisoners and who did not hesitate to use it.191 To be granted more tolerable living conditions, the inmates who became part of the administration of the camp were therefore led to imitate, borrow and adopt the mores of their own jailers, the SS, and inflict blows, suffering and torture upon their fellow inmates. The more power an inmate enjoyed, the more alike he became to the SS officers. Primo Levi reminds us that the greatest initial shock the incoming deportees first had to experience resulted from their being victimized by other people who were deportees just like them. “The collision with the concentrationary reality and, simultaneously, the unforeseen and uncomprehended aggression on the part of a new and strange enemy, the functionary-prisoner, who instead of taking you by the hand, reassuring you, teaching you the way, throws himself at you, screaming in a language you do not understand, and strikes you in the face. He wants to tame you, extinguish any spark of dignity that he has lost and you perhaps still preserve.”192

These powerful inmates take it upon themselves to accomplish the will of the SS, which is none other than the perpetually enforced negation of the human dignity of all inmates. To accomplish this gruesome duty, the inmate hierarchy must first successfully negate their own personal natural dignity in order then to be able to assert themselves by means of violence. Members of the inmate hierarchy were confronted with an always renewed dual challenge and responsibility: to prove their importance and function to the SS and to demonstrate the

legitimacy of their authority to the inmates subjected to their rule. This they did by managing the level of order (and disorder) existing in the camp. Too well-behaved a camp would signal to the SS that there is no need for an inmate (privileged) hierarchy, too little order would bespeak the inmate hierarchy’s inability to rule efficiently over the mass of detainees. As Robert Antelme explains,

They had to have disorder, provoked if need be, so that kapos be necessary. And when a kapo would re-establish order, he would superimpose himself on that crowd, he would dominate it, and he would be a different man from each of those he bludgeoned. And so it was right that he eat differently, that he be clad differently, that he be differently considered by the SS, and little by little be rehabilitated by them. It wasn’t because discipline was faulty that our kapos struck us. On the contrary, our kapos did everything to compromise a discipline which we were the first to want to impose – and which would have eliminated their reason for existing or, in any case, wouldn’t have allowed them to be the kommando’s demigods. They had to strike us, first of all, in order to live as they wished to, in order to have the position they wanted to occupy. We had to be completely detestable; to them, this was vital. Hence, every organizational proposal had been systematically rejected by the Lagerältester and by them, because our will to organize ourselves collectively had to be strangled, we had to be degraded. This accomplished, disdain and maltreatment could reign.193

Members of the inmate hierarchy thus had to defend themselves from any usurpation fomented against them by other inmates who would attempt to discredit them in the eyes of the SS officers in charge. They were forced to actively prevent such associations of inmates from forming and gaining influence and momentum of their own. As a result, the inmate hierarchy, to maintain itself in power, forcefully opposed the rise of any form of collective structure and unity among the inmates, which could have helped the latter oppose the SS commandment. Inmates are thus found working against their fellow inmates to the exclusive benefit of the SS administration, displaying a lack of compassion, empathy and pity all too typically characteristic of the SS guards themselves. “Jamais nous n’avions vu,” asserts Charlotte Delbo, “à un SS un regard de pitié, un regard humain.”194 Rudolf Vrba’s depiction of Jakob Fries, infamous SS officer who used to stand at the gate of Auschwitz to oversee the daily coming in and out of the working teams, provides concreteness and content to Delbo’s claims.

Standing watching us was an SS Oberscharführer – roughly sergeant major – one of the biggest men I have ever seen, a craggy human mountain, well over six feet tall, resting both hands on a huge club that nearly reached his chin. It was not, however, merely the physical bulk of the man or his broad gangster’s face, his

unblinking eyes or the detached indifference with which he watched us, which set him apart, though all these made an impact. It was the aura around him, an aura of evil, of death, something which told me instinctively that in that massive frame there was not one ounce of pity or decency or good. This time my first impressions were accurate. Here was Jakob Fries, one of the most brutal men ever spawned by Auschwitz, mother of so many murderers. For me, in fact, Fries was Auschwitz and always will be.195

2.1.7. A Humanity Passing the Human

Significantly, there were exceptions to this rule. Some inmates managed to gain authority and respect from the other prisoners and the SS leadership while they were able at the same time to preserve their personal moral and spiritual integrity and to provide their subordinates with better living and working conditions. Such examples are not legion; they rather form the exception, but their existence not only means that the inmates’ human dignity had not been completely eliminated, but also that in some special cases and circumstances, it could be embodied and expressed in more excellent, superior fashion than those observed in normal living conditions. David Rousset describes the extraordinary attitude and behaviour of the leader of his working team (kapo), Emil Künder – a German communist party leader who spent more than 11 years in concentration camps – very skilful at befriending the German civil and military personnel supervising the work of his team of prisoners.

Emil so transcends his situation of concentration camp prisoner that he can relate with civilians as a civilian, taking account of their concerns and problems, introducing himself as one of them. Displaying outstanding technical and organisational competence, Emil could venture, beyond the plane of work duties, into sharing a common humanity with the personnel supervising the work of his crew. Emil preserved his own humanity and its German expression and incarnation to such an extent that he could then share in the humanity of other people not subject to the harsh conditions and life in the camps. This means that in this regard this particular individual

195 Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, I Cannot Forgive, 76.
196 David Rousset, Les jours de notre mort, 441-42.
successfully countered, in his person, the systematic destruction of humankind perpetrated by the Nazis in the camps and embodied humanity with such dignity that he even became a role model for civilians, providing them with advice, helping them to cope with their own challenges.

We must take the full measure of the absolutely exceptional (heroic, saintly) character of such an accomplishment. It is difficult enough to teach and do the good, to set a moral example in normal circumstances; to do it in Auschwitz is simply a supremely demanding task. Rousset goes on to say: “Souvent en le voyant, tenace, rude et froid (alors que je savais toute la passion qui l’habitait), écouter pendant des heures des confidences dérisoires, pour, à la fin, dire juste la phrase qui travaillerait comme un levain la pensée difficile et embarrassée du paysan ou de l’ouvrier qui la recevrait, je me disais : – De tels hommes ont sauvé l’Allemagne. Peut-être se trompent-ils sur beaucoup de choses, mais le fait même de leur existence prévaudra contre les crimes du nazisme.”

Emil Künder succeeded in reversing the civilian skilled workers’ perception of his own inmate crew, leading them to recognize the latter as human beings. He used his preserved personal humanity as a means, a tool to reach out to the civilian workers in their humanity and through them, help his subordinates recover their own. By emphasizing the social roles each member of his crew used to play in society, he asserts both the positivity of their contribution to the broader community and their dignity.

Nous étions les premiers à profiter de cette autorité naturelle d’Emil. Il s’imposait aux Meister, aux militaires, comme Kapo : on le laissait organiser, surveiller et diriger notre travail. Il discutait avec les Meister des tâches de la journée, et systématiquement rognait sur leurs prétentions. Il se faisait pour son équipe un avocat habile et écouté. Le plus grand service qu’il nous rendit, c’était de nous imposer aux autres comme des hommes. Ce souci ne l’abandonnait jamais. Les civils et les militaires nous considéraient comme des déchets de bêtes. Nous n’avions à leurs yeux plus rien d’humain. ... La première tâche d’Emil, lorsque nous avions de nouveaux Posten, d’autres Meister, consistait précisément à ruiner cette opinion que nous n’étions socialement rien. Il savait que nul raisonnement ne prévaudrait, mais que seul le rappel de titres sociaux reconnus, appréciés dans la hiérarchie ordinaire, pourrait être efficace. Ainsi il nous présentait: - Der Professor in Paris. – Arcady, major dans l’armée soviétique. – Nicolaï, Oberleutnant et vétérinaire. – Yury, lieutenant. – Robert, boulanger. ... Contraindre nos gardes à nous recrasser socialement, c’était pour Emil le moyen décisif d’obtenir le climat nécessaire pour un compromis dans le travail.

197 Ibid., 442.
198 Ibid., 442-43.
According to Rousset, Emil Künder’s extraordinary preservation and expression of human dignity both in and for himself and others directly rested on the fact that he had freely and fully accepted his condition of prisoner. Fully assuming his own condition and fate as a concentration camp inmate, Emil could then work at transforming the work he was forced to accomplish and intended by the camp authorities to bring about his own destruction into an ally that would enable him to survive and never lose sight of who he truly was as a human being (his moral, political and spiritual convictions and principles, etc.). He therefore learned a whole series of trades and acquired such proficiency that he naturally came to assume supervisory positions, ultimately culminating in his combining the roles of technical advisor and liaison between the working inmates and the civilian skilled workers.

Even in Auschwitz, and especially there, by responsibly assuming its own extremely constrained and restricted condition, human freedom could survive and have sufficient influence on its surroundings to the point of helping others reclaim, retake possession of their own freedom and responsibility. For freedom can only emerge, be produced and generated by, out of freedom.

Another extraordinary example of involvement in the inmate camp hierarchy which directly led to the improvement of the living conditions of the prisoners and not to more corruption and destruction, is the case of Hermann Langbein, who worked during two years as the clerk (immediate assistant) of SS garrison physician Dr. Eduard Wirths in charge of the medical supervision of the Auschwitz camps (Auschwitz I, Birkenau, and Buna-Monowitz). Actively involved in the underground resistance movement in Auschwitz, Langbein, a German-born political prisoner who successfully concealed his being half-Jewish, gained by means of his assiduous, conscientious and always competent daily work the confidence and trust of Dr. Wirths. Always acutely aware of his status as an inmate, Langbein strove to make good use of the influence he could have on the chief physician in order to ease the life of all prisoners in Auschwitz.

199 Ibid., 461.
Single-mindedly, he argues, I worked toward gaining influence over him, and in this I was aided by the situation created by my employment. If a physician in an SS uniform is not lazy and uninterested, he looks for a secretary who will think along with him; if a clerk wearing an inmate’s garb is not egotistical and heartless, he will use the opportunities that this offers. Any intellectually active prisoner is superior to his guard because he constantly concerns himself with the problems that arise from his situation, whereas those who guard him are distracted by other issues. In the long run neither instructions nor warnings could keep a daily contact at work from deepening and becoming a personal relationship if that is what the inmate was aiming for.200

Noteworthy is the fact that Dr. Wirths was the most humane of all the SS physicians, that is, the most empathetic toward the suffering of the prisoners and most desiring to heal them with the help of all his knowledge and the resources available (accessible to him for use in his activities). These character traits greatly facilitated the fostering of a friendly relationship between the physician and his inmate clerk. Langbein explains:

Several factors combined to produce this: Wirth’s attitude toward the crimes committed in the concentration camps, which I was able to study in Dachau; his diligence, which made him look for a secretary who could also handle confidential messages and who had neither the dull indifference nor the limited intelligence of SS Sergeant Richter, the official clerk in his office; the attacks of other SS leaders to which he as an intellectual was subject ... all this combined to further my aim to create a personal relationship between us and then use it for the benefit of the camp.201

And now, the most remarkable: the display of purely altruistic behaviour on the part of a prisoner who held tremendous power over the organization, maintenance and operation of the medical system of entire camps. Langbein purposefully decided that he would never attempt to draw any personal benefit at all from his relationship with Dr. Wirths, but would instead always try to induce the SS garrison physician to implement changes that would directly help as many (other) inmates as possible. Langbein went as far as to share the true motives behind his own work with Dr. Wirths, and he did so precisely in order to bring Dr. Wirths to fully trust him. By so doing, Langbein also avoided falling prey to corruption, for he desired more than anything to avoid contributing through his own actions to the extermination of inmates. In order to make sure that he would remain faithful to his altruistic ideal of using his political influence to help his fellow inmates for as long as he would enjoy his administrative position in Auschwitz, Langbein elected ethical and practical principles he would always comply with.

By strictly adhering to two principles, I endeavoured to make sure that I remained the active partner. As a matter of principle I never used my chances to secure something for myself; in that way I kept from being corrupted, and this impressed Wirths. I discussed every important step with Ernst Burger and later with the leadership of the resistance movement, and this protected me from becoming a privileged tool in the machinery of extermination. A conversation I had with Wirths in the early weeks bears witness to that. In my Bericht, I wrote: “Wirths goes up to the desk again and sits down. He gives me a quizzical look: – Langbein, can I rely on you? – Herr Doktor, I shall help you to the best of my ability with anything that is useful for the inmates of this camp. You won’t demand anything else of me. I’d like to leave the camp some day, but in such a way that I don’t have to lose respect for myself.”

The sheer courage, moral integrity and steadfastness Hermann Langbein had to display to overcome the threat to his own life and create bonds of friendship with a highly ranked SS officer, to maintain over a long period of time (years, in this case) such good relations, and to make use of his political influence only to help thousands of other inmates while never losing sight of his own personal identity and of the hope that the Nazi regime would ultimately be defeated and freedom recovered, simply are outstanding, unheard of. Voluntarily setting himself purely altruistic goals and doing everything in his power to fulfil them, Hermann Langbein showed through his exceptional behaviour that even in the midst of the darkness of Auschwitz, human dignity – through self-denial and sacrifice for the common good of the inmates – could shine brightly, overpowering destruction and tyranny to the point of erecting itself as moral judge of the behaviour of the jailors themselves. Langbein relates how he was offered by Dr. Wirths the possibility to join the SS. Langbein’s answer to this offer demonstrates that in some cases, inmates were able to impose their moral integrity on their jailors as a criterion compelling the latter to feel ashamed, whereby they acknowledged their moral inferiority.

The next time I come to his room alone, he broaches the same subject. – I told Lolling about you, and he told me that it is possible to take inmates who do especially good work into the SS and continue to work in the camp as SS men. – Herr Doktor, if I have to be in a KZ, then only in the uniform I’m wearing now. I do not know if Wirths would have tolerated this answer just a few months ago. Now he just looks at me, and his facial expression is no longer friendly. – But it would be better for you. – Can I do something like that, Herr Doktor? You know the orders an SS man in Auschwitz must carry out. The inmates here are my comrades, even if I no longer wear their uniform tomorrow. He looks through the window into the camp with its motley swarm of striped garments. It is the

noonday break. – Your views do you honour. His voice sounds a bit disappointed. He senses that my answer is a judgment.\textsuperscript{203}

The actions of prisoners such as Emil Kün
der and Hermann Langbein suppose the dual capacity to extract oneself from Auschwitz to think in terms of human life in general beyond the context of Nazi concentration camps and to limit oneself to the reality of the camp, to prevent oneself from investing one’s hope in a life outside Auschwitz. To exist in the constant tension generated by the necessity to transcend one’s own condition of Auschwitz prisoner in order precisely to be able to act for the greatest good within the latter’s confines is the most demanding moral and spiritual challenge. What this demands is nothing short of “the moral strength to think beyond Auschwitz without any realistic hope of surviving Auschwitz,”\textsuperscript{204} that is, the ability to completely let go of one’s own life, freedom and happiness outside of the camp, in order to dedicate oneself solely to others in the horrendous present.

2.1.8. Embodying Holiness

Human nature and dignity could also be perceived in and through the persons of prisoners who were not at all naturally predisposed to the life and conditions of the camps and did not enjoy a favourable political position. Robert Antelme describes the case of Jacques, a man who knowingly put his life in jeopardy, suffering the whole ordeal of Auschwitz without compromising his moral and spiritual integrity. For Antelme, Jacques’ attitude and behaviour are best characterized as expressions of genuine holiness.

Jacques is what in religion they call a saint. ... Were we to go and find an SS and show Jacques to him, to him we could say: “Have a look, you have turned him into this rotten, yellowish creature. You have succeeded in making him what you think he is by nature: waste, offal. Well, we can tell you this, which by all rights would flatten you for good if ‘error’ could kill: you have enabled him to make of himself the strongest, the most complete of men, the surest of his powers, of the resources of his conscience, of the scope of his actions. ... With Jacques, you never won. You wanted him to steal. He didn’t steal. You wanted him to kiss the kapos’ asses in order to eat. He wouldn’t do it. You wanted him to laugh in order to look good when a Meister was beating some guy up. He didn’t laugh. Most of all you wanted him to doubt whether any cause was worth his rotting away like this. He didn’t doubt. You get your rocks off looking at this wasted wreck that stands before you; but you’re the one who’s been had, fucked all the way up and down. ... For it to be shown that we are in the right we no more count on our bodies’ liberation than on their resurrection. It’s now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs.”\textsuperscript{205}

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 160-61.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{205} Robert Antelme, The Human Race, 88-89.
By enduring, suffering in his body the entire process of dehumanization taking place in the camps without falling prey to inner corruption and destruction, inmates like Jacques express their humanity to the full extent of its dignity and greatness and this, precisely when their body has been broken down, torn apart and ruined.

Human nature and dignity could at times even be made manifest in the worst setting imaginable, that is, during the death marches. In rare cases, years of camp hardship did not succeed at contaminating, staining and grinding away the good-heartedness and holiness of a pure heart. These individuals provided other inmates with solace, a model to emulate as well as with good reasons to keep believing in and hoping for humankind. Elie Wiesel remembers Rabbi Eliahu, a most remarkable religious leader.

The door of the shed opened. An old man appeared. His mustache was covered with ice, his lips were blue. It was Rabbi Eliahu, who had headed a small congregation in Poland. A very kind man, beloved by everyone in the camp, even by the Kapos and the Blockälteste. Despite the ordeals and deprivations, his face continued to radiate his innocence. He was the only rabbi whom nobody ever failed to address as “Rabbi” in Buna. He looked like one of those prophets of old, always in the midst of his people when they needed to be consoled. And, strangely, his words never provoked anyone. They did bring peace.206

Some individuals displayed such integrity, such purity of heart, such wholeness in their devotion to God that goodness emanates from them, overflowing and spilling over, breaking into the hearts of other human beings who, thereby, are forced to acknowledge its existence and pay their respects. Summoned by such holiness, the other inmates were called to offer no less than a religious response: “Rabbi.”

Even in Auschwitz, therefore, humanity could be embodied as mediation of the transcendent into the realm of immanence. In the manifestation of a goodness passing human history lies the justification for Wiesel’s use of the word “prophet,” for prophets – according to traditional Hebraic understanding – are messengers conveying the divine word and will (in)to this world. Divine light and truth can provide comfort to the distressed human heart in times of greatest turmoil, by conferring an absolutely unshakable foundation to human existence, empowering the latter to survive and overcome all challenges and obstacles. But then Elie Wiesel’s remarks seem to entail that God could still be perceived, made present and active even in Auschwitz. We must now turn to the consideration of the modalities under which God could be encountered in the midst of humanly induced absolute darkness.

206 Elie Wiesel, Night, 90.
2.2. Looking for God in the Dark

2.2.1. Solidarity at a Loss

God’s presence in Auschwitz is as peculiar as was the embodiment of humanity in such a place. It is not that the divine finds itself measured by the human predicament, but rather that its manifestation must be proportionate to its beholders and recipients. Since, for the vast majority of inmates, humanity only existed under the modality of negation, to conceive of God as manifesting Godself in Auschwitz under the veil of negativity (as negation of Godself) appears rather appropriate and straightforward. Reality, however, is much more complex than it seems. Precisely because the conditions and life enforced in the camps were intended to deny and reduce to mere latency and virtuality the human dignity of detainees, all grounds for the development and lingering existence of authentic solidarity among prisoners also were taken away. The prisoners no longer shared in a common essence which could act as foundation for the complementary integration of their distinct personal identities. The direct consequence of the dissolution of this communion in a unique human nature is thus embodied in the disappearance of all bonds and ties between individuals in the camps. Life in the camps is therefore marked with profound isolation and solitude.

Charlotte Delbo shows how successful the SS rule was at tearing apart the meaningful relations that could develop among the prisoners, uniting them. “Ils attendent devant la baraque. Silencieux. Dans leurs yeux combattent la résignation et la révolte. Il faut que la résignation l’emporte. Un SS les garde. Il les bouscule. Sans qu’on sache pourquoi, tout à coup il se jette sur eux, crie et frappe. Les hommes restent silencieux, rectifient le rang, mettent les mains au corps. Ils ne prêtent pas attention au SS ni les uns aux autres. Chacun est seul en soi-même.”

Deprived of the resources required to meet even their most basic, vital needs, the prisoners of the camps cannot offer themselves and each other anything at all. The bonds of human society are formed in and through the mutual free offering of oneself and/or other goods. The prisoners having been rid of their own selves and of any external goods they could graciously offer to someone else, there is no way for them to overcome their absolute loneliness and powerlessness and provide assistance to someone else. This effective impossibility of the offering of self and of gifts to others in turn causes that of a commonly shared language. Reality as such having been evacuated, words can no longer convey it: there is nothing left to talk about.

“Ne te fatigue pas, ne parle pas encore,” a dit Carmen tendrement. Nous non plus, nous n’avions rien à dire à Sylviane. Que dire à une jeune fille de vingt ans, qui meurt quand on ne peut même pas lui demander si elle a envie de quelque chose puisqu’on n’aurait rien à lui apporter? Sylviane mourait et ses yeux bleus comme des pierres précieuses s’éteindraient, deviendraient marron comme son visage. Nous étions là devant elle et nous la regardions puisqu’elle n’avait pas la force de rien nous dire et que nous n’avions rien à lui dire. Sylviane immobile nous regardait et nous ne lisions rien dans son regard, rien que la solitude et la détresse. 208

David Rousset’s analysis concurs with Delbo’s: isolation and solitude are essential characteristics of life in the camps.

Hamlet ignorait la solitude. ... On a fait des progrès depuis. ... Être dans un camp, c’est se trouver dans un désert sans contacts possibles ni aujourd’hui ni demain avec des humains. ... Combien ici croient encore à l’importance, même historique, d’une protestation? Ce scepticisme-là c’est le vrai chef-d’œuvre des SS. Leur grande réussite. Ils ont corrompu toutes les solidarités humaines. Ici la nuit est tombée sur l’avenir. Lorsqu’il n’y a plus de témoins, aucun témoignage n’est possible. ... Nous sommes ici des centaines de milliers à vivre sciemment dans l’absolue solitude. 209

Strict isolation and solitude were the result of the undeserved deprivation and persecution endured by the prisoners, which themselves induced profound and lasting (even decades after liberation) feelings of abandonment and forsakenness in the heart of the inmates. Jean Améry observes that “en dernier ressort l’expérience de la persécution était celle d’une extrême solitude. Ce qui m’importe, c’est d’être délivré de cet état d’abandon qui persiste toujours.” 210

Robert Antelme similarly admits that SS rule and terror were successful at preventing the expression of genuine solidarity among prisoners. He is not ready, however, to grant that this fact entailed the actual disappearance of all forms of resistance within the camps. As long as the inmates still enjoyed and could make use of their consciousness and conscience (at least in part), there was still opposition and resistance at the level of the individual’s interiority, for all prisoners desired to live and survive Auschwitz.

The complete oppression, the complete misery threatened to drive each of us back into a quasi-solitude. Class consciousness, the spirit of solidarity are the expressions of a certain healthiness that yet remains to the oppressed. In spite of some reawakenings, the political prisoners’ consciousness here was very likely to turn into a solitary consciousness. Yet, though solitary, this consciousness’

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resistance went on. Deprived of other’s bodies, progressively deprived of his own, each of us still had a life to defend and to cleave to.\(^{211}\)

At bottom, the desire to survive indwelling the heart and soul of all prisoners was not reducible to an instinctual appetite for biological survival, for what all prisoners truly desired was to survive not simply as living entities, but as human beings, as the always unique embodiment of dignity and freedom. Antelme explains that “the motivation underlying our struggle could only have been a furious desire, itself almost always experienced in solitude; a furious desire to remain men, down to the very end.”\(^{212}\) Life in the camps eventually led all prisoners to experience a death more profound and radical than their physical passing: the death of their emotional and spiritual selves. Reduced to the mere anonymity of their biological affiliation to the human species, the prisoners are already dead to both themselves and the human community.

Much worse can be experienced, in Auschwitz, than physical death.

We travelled here in the sealed wagons, argues Primo Levi, we saw our women and our children leave towards nothingness; we, transformed into slaves, have marched a hundred times backwards and forwards to our silent labours, killed in our spirit long before our anonymous death. No one must leave here and so carry to the world, together with the sign impressed on his skin, the evil tidings of what man’s presumption made of man in Auschwitz.\(^{213}\)

2.2.2. A Divine Eclipse

This inner and spiritual death, consecrated and embodied in the isolation and solitude suffered in Auschwitz, was of course characterized by the impossibility to relate positively to/with the transcendent. In Auschwitz, God seemed to have been eclipsed and his word silenced by the hellish living conditions. Worse still, God seemed to express no pity towards his own creatures. Nelly Gorce remembers her transfer to a new block (building containing the sleeping quarters) where many very sick inmates used to live.

C’est la catastrophe, je suis effondrée. Nous voilà arrivées. Nous pénétrons dans un block à peu près désert, les typhiques, qui, hier, l’habitaient encore, ont été emmenées... Je sais trop bien où... Aux fenêtres, plus une vitre, les paillasses sont tellement souillées qu’elles refusent de brûler. Pas de couvertures, ni de sacs. Les femmes, toutes étrangères, ne connaissent pas un mot de ma langue, et moi pas assez de la leur pour pouvoir me faire comprendre. Je me sens affreusement seule parmi cette hostilité, seule... malade, grelottante de fièvre et de froid, sans une couverture, sans un récipient. Partout la saleté la plus hideuse. Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Vous n’aurez donc pas pitié...\(^{214}\)


\(^{212}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{213}\) Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in *If This Is a Man, The Truce*, 62.

As Aimé Bonifas’ testimony makes plain, the disappearance of God coincided with the disappearance of humanity. The more the humanity of the prisoners was successfully buried and denied by SS rule and terror, the more God seemed to disappear and distance Godself from the prisoners, from their suffering and worries.

We were at the end of our strength, and our will was gone. Like my comrades, I was one of the flock, doing whatever the others did, trying to disappear in the crowd – a sheep among the sheep. This day had broken me, and I experienced the despair of Good Friday: “My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Such was my defeat, my physical anguish, my panic before the hideous threat of nothingness. All my confidence dissipated; I was in a whirlpool fifty thousand fathoms deep, and I did not know how to swim!215

God had then truly become silent. “Where is God? Ah! The silence of God at the brink of death! That is perhaps indeed the ultimate test. If the angel stopped the arm of Abraham at the moment when he was going to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering, at Auschwitz millions of Isaacs were sacrificed and the word of the Lord did not sound forth.”216 Filip Müller, member of the Sonderkommando, uses starker terms to convey the same idea: “The little Polish town of Oswieczim, which the Nazis called Auschwitz, had been turned into an inferno, and anyone taken there by an unkind fate might regard himself truly forsaken by God and his fellow men.”217

The overwhelming presence of death, the mindboggling numbers of daily deaths in the camps also veiled the action and presence of God. Surrounded everyday with too much death, with too many deaths, the remaining prisoners are not equal to the task of praying for all the departed. The prisoners where thus rendered unable to communicate with God – via prayer – by the overwhelming omnipresence of death. As Josef Katz explains, “in the beginning, when we did not have so many casualties yet, we had a minyan [a minimum of ten men must be gathered for the celebration of a Jewish liturgical service] for everybody and recited the Kaddish [Jewish prayer for the dead]. While the dead were carried from the barracks we chanted ‘El molei rahamim’ [God full of compassion]. But now that has stopped. There are too many deaths. The hazzan [cantor at a religious service] says he cannot sing so much.”218 Gerda Klein remembers that toward the end of her internment during the death marches, she, a devout practicing Jew, stopped praying. There was nothing left to be grateful for. “I did not cry, but there, in those barns, I stopped praying. Through all the years I had prayed to God ardently and with hope. Now

215 Aimé Bonifas, Prisoner 20-801, 32.
216 Ibid., xiv.
217 Filip Müller, Eyewitness Auschwitz, 2.
218 Josef Katz, One Who Came Back, 47.
I prayed no more. I did not consciously know why, for I was closer to my Maker than ever. One short shot away. ... I wanted to be at peace with God, but I could not pray. ... There had always been something to be grateful for, even after 1939, but during that cold march, when we rested in the icy barns, hungry, afraid, I could pray no more."²¹⁹ It would therefore seem that with the absence of God, the life of prayer had in Auschwitz waned to the point of being relegated to oblivion. Not only was there no one to pray to, but also, in light of the human condition in Auschwitz, no justification to do so. Primo Levi’s words are clear: Auschwitz repudiates any attempt to affirm the existence of divine providence. “The experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my non-belief. It prevented, and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice: Why were the moribund packed in cattle cars? Why were the children sent to the gas?”²²⁰

2.2.3. Prayers and Screams

Interestingly, the agnostic Levi admits that during his internment, he was at least once tempted to pray.

I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in October 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death when, naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the “commission” that with one glance would decide whether I should go immediately into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: one does not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, not when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? And from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise, were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.²²¹

Levi is not saying, in this passage, that prayer is powerless and useless to/for Auschwitz inmates. He does not even argue that prayer conceived as imploration of help from a higher power was in itself illegitimate and therefore to be rejected a priori. He rather claims that atheists or agnostics (i.e. non-believers) could not have recourse to prayer as a possible ad hoc remedy to their anxiety and weakness when they found themselves directly confronted with their imminent death. With these remarks, he actually shows how much he respects prayer, understanding it as a lasting, sustained relationship with the transcendent which supposes genuine belief in the latter’s

²¹⁹ Gerda W. Klein, All but My Life, 185-86.
²²¹ Ibid., 145-46.
existence. In his mind, thus, the life of prayer cannot be improvised, generated and masterfully practised in an instant, but must develop and evolve over time. Prayer must be conceived as a relationship with God as other who cannot be manipulated or made use of according to the expectations, needs or will of the human creature partaking in it.

The existence of such prayer in Auschwitz is asserted even by non-believers who were led by others to pray there, right in the heart of the crematoria. Filip Müller relates how the kapo (work leader) of his Sonderkommando used to pray.

While we were devouring our extra rations, Fischl began muttering a prayer. Looking up at the low ceiling as though he could see heaven there, he rocked back and forth, turning to the right and to the left and invoking God. From the few words I managed to catch I gathered that he was reciting the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. ... When he saw that we were still busy chewing while he was at prayer, he belaboured us with his fists shouting in Yiddish: “You sons of bitches, all you can do is gobble, but you can’t be bothered to pray for the dead whose bread you’re gobbling.” Then, lifting his bloodshot eyes to heaven and overcome by emotion, he finished his prayer. ... Fischl was our foreman, a thick-set, brawny man. When he had finished his prayers he looked more peaceable. There were tears in his eyes. A little later he said quietly: “Man differs from animals in that he believes in God.” That day his last words before he settled down to sleep, spoken in Yiddish, were: “It’s prayer which makes you a human being. Good night to you, fellow Jews!” ... While he was praying he gave us a signal when it was time for us to rise. Every time he nodded his head after a certain passage, we responded by saying “Amen.” To me it seemed sheer madness to pray in Auschwitz, and absurd to believe in God in this place. In any other situation and in any other place I should not have taken Fischl seriously. But here, on the borderline between life and death, we obediently followed his example, possibly because we had nothing else left or because we felt strengthened by his faith.222

According to Müller, Fischl genuinely believed for he had “faith” and his faith was so inspiring and profound as to incite and inspire them to respect it, get somewhat involved in it (even if only reluctantly) and be strengthened by it. Despite his complete inability to understand how to believe in and pray to God could make sense in Auschwitz, Müller nevertheless allows himself to follow Fischl’s lead and gets involved in the latter’s prayer. Müller moreover insists that in any other set of circumstances he would never, even for a minute, have considered praying. According to him, therefore, the extraordinary and extremely peculiar conditions prevailing in Auschwitz legitimize the use of prayer there. In his mind, Auschwitz is a place such that to invoke and enter in prayerful relationship with God there is not intrinsically absurd, but rather in some sense provides meaning to the existence of prisoners. Müller’s testimony has Fischl

222 Filip Müller, Eyewitness Auschwitz, 27-29.
himself provide the reason explaining why prayer remains meaningful especially in Auschwitz (of all places). Fischl argues that the act and reality of prayer is what constitutes and defines the human being as such. The human being is a praying animal. Belief in a transcendent God – the free personal and reverent orientation toward and relationship with the divine – is what sets human beings apart from all other animals. Fischl’s point is that it is precisely when they are forcefully trapped in a place intended to deprive them of their human nature and personal identity that the prisoners must keep on praying, for in the very practice of prayer resides their best means to nourish, preserve and protect their own humanity. In order not to be completely overtaken and drawn into Auschwitz’ perpetually operating dehumanizing machinery, the prisoners must set their hearts and minds on God, for in their relationship to him they find a unique perfectly stable and trustworthy referent and source of life.

2.2.4. Faith in Auschwitz?

It is important to understand that the fact that a great many survivors experienced what they themselves describe as the loss of their explicit faith in God at Auschwitz does not necessarily refute the previous assertions. Let us consider the paradigmatic case of Elie Wiesel to demonstrate this point. Wiesel opens his testimony, *Night*, with a depiction of himself a few years before his deportation to Auschwitz. He portrays himself as a very devout young Jew, student of the Talmud (and later of the Kabbalah), who prays to God as he breathes, naturally, without question and because he needs to pray in order to live. Later on in his narrative, Wiesel recalls the sight of the bodies of infants being thrown in a blazing pit which consumed his faith forever. The words he uses are both crystal clear and strikingly suggestive.

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.

Are we to conclude and understand from this passage that out of an intensely believing Wiesel Auschwitz has made a non-believer? Not at all, for the profound transformation that Elie Wiesel’s faith in God underwent in Auschwitz did not lead to its destruction. From kataphatic modes of experience and expression, Elie Wiesel’s faith moved to apophatic ones. When in

223 See Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 4-5.
Auschwitz the sun had risen over his new life of prisoner, it simultaneously had set over the young Jew’s life of faith. “The night had passed completely. The morning star shone in the sky. I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded – and devoured – by a black flame.”

The depth of the transformation in Elie Wiesel’s life of faith must not be underestimated: for a time he truly believed that his God and faith had died in Auschwitz. This clearly shows from his account of the execution of three prisoners by hanging.

The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks. “Long live liberty!” shouted the two men. But the boy was silent. “Where is merciful God, where is he?” someone behind me was asking. At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. “Caps off!” screamed the Lagerälteste. His voice quivered. As for the rest of us, we were weeping. “Cover you heads!” Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues where hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing. ... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. ... 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 ...”

More than God’s absence or indifference, the injustice of the interminable death of a child signifies the complete isolation of the human heart and soul from the transcendent, the impossibility to relate to something, someone else than the purely immanent reality of this world, of the camp. God is nowhere to be seen. This, however, does not mean that it has become impossible to believe.

Let’s not talk about God. Not here. – Could it be that you no longer believe in Him? – I didn’t say that. – Am I to understand your faith has not deserted you? – I didn’t say that either. I said that I refuse to speak about God, here in this place. To say yes would be to lie. To say no – also. If need be, I would confront Him with an angry shout, a gesture, a murmur. But to make of Him – here – a theological topic, that I won’t do! God – here – is the extra bowl of soup pushed at you or stolen from you, simply because the man ahead of you is either stronger or quicker than you. God – here – cannot be found in humble or grandiloquent phrases, but in a crust of bread. ... – Which you have had or are about to have? – ... which you will never have.

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225 Ibid., 37.
226 Ibid., 64-65.
227 Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, 35.
Faith in God has now taken the form of a silent waiting for something, someone who cannot come. Faith has become belief in God despite the impossibility of God asserted by Auschwitz. Where the active presence of God can no longer be felt, faith is transmuted into the human heart and soul’s indestructible craving, longing and desire for justice, truth and mercy. Faith changes and puts on the garb on an infinite unanswered question, an unsatisfied desire for fulfilment which, in their negativity, include God within themselves, for only God could answer and satisfy them.

For us, contemporary Jews, one and one are six million. Six million times one is God. For just as one cannot conceive of such slaughter with God, it is inconceivable without Him. This is perhaps the final absurdity of the event: all roads lead to it; but all explanations fail. The agony of the believer equals the bewilderment of the non-believer. If God is an answer, it must be the wrong answer. There is no answer. If with the holocaust God has chosen to question man, man is left to answer with a quest having God as object. For faith in and after Auschwitz is defined as the agonizing human heart’s relentless infinite quest for the mysterious, unfathomable God in and beyond the absurdity of the systematic destruction of humankind (proven six millions times) which happened there. If such a quest does not deny God’s existence – for it presupposes it – it certainly does question his identity in regards to what is happening in Auschwitz. Like the biblical figure of Job, the inmates are led by what they see and suffer everyday to ask God to provide an account for who he is and what he does, to explain and justify why his elect people must endure such an ordeal and what all of this has to do with his providence and will for creation.

In Auschwitz, belief in God entails rebellion and resistance by means of the affirmation of the meaning of human existence under the regime of absurdity and terror. The broken and dehumanized creature affirms both herself and her God in a setting which denies the existence of the transcendent. God is summoned to explain Godself to his creatures who, entitled by their suffering, look up to him to receive answers. As if he were on trial, God is accused and must testify of Godself before his creatures. “What are you, my God? I thought angrily. How do you compare to this stricken mass gathered to affirm to you their faith, their anger, their defiance? What does your grandeur mean, Master of the Universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay, and this misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people’s wounded minds, their ailing bodies?” For the believing prisoner, every extra second, minute and hour of life gleaned

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from, wrested from Auschwitz constitutes an act of rebellion and revolt against an implacable and undeserved fate. Prayer in Auschwitz, where God is nowhere to be found, consecrates the elevation of the human creature who can now judge God on the basis of her genuine piety.

And I, the former mystic, was thinking: Yes, man is stronger, greater than God. When Adam and Eve deceived you, you chased them from paradise. When you were displeased by Noah’s generation, you brought down the flood. When Sodom lost your favour, you caused the heavens to rain down fire and damnation. But look at these men whom you have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed, and burned, what do they do? They pray before you! They praise your name! ... 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 stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. ... I no longer accepted God’s silence. As I swallowed my ration of soup, I turned that act into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against him.230

This protest and rebellion against and before God is not to be reduced to sinful behaviour on the part of the human creature who, proudly denying God’s supreme authority, now wishes to act as her own absolute principle of action and source of meaning. It is capital to understand that such revolt and protest were undergirded by a profound reverence for God, which is felt in Auschwitz as not being reciprocated in any way by God. “Despite the barbed wire or because of it, we try to believe that God exists, and that in His book, everything is indeed inscribed, weighed, set right and fulfilled.”231 The lack of response on the part of God is what triggers and justifies the rebellious response on the part of the believing inmate. Rudolf Vrba mentions the paradigmatic case of Moses Sonenschein, whose faith, in Birkenau, was put to the test and radically shaken. At first, when he is confronted with unnameable horrors, Moses, acknowledging how mysterious the ways of the Lord are, keeps reaffirming his trust in God.

As we drove slowly into Birkenau, however, all thoughts of the weather, of Auschwitz, for that matter, vanished. Suddenly, about a hundred yards away, in a wired off section of the camp, I saw at least ten thousand naked women, lined up in neat, silent rows. Around them were dotted the green-uniformed SS men; and beyond them, forty or fifty lorries. ... We were nearer now and could hear the faint whiplash of commands, see a figure stirring here and there. I gripped the arm of Moses Sonenschein beside me and said: “Those poor bloody girls. They’ll freeze to death. They’ll die of exposure in this weather.” Moses, son of a Polish Rabbi and a sincerely religious man, murmured, as he always murmured: “It is the will of God.” I hardly heard him. The full meaning of the horrible vista was slowly becoming clear to my mind which at first had been numbed by the sight. “Do you

230 Ibid., 67-69.
231 Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, 188.
know what it is, Moses?” I said. “It’s a typhus inspection. If they don’t die of exposure, half of them will die in the gas chambers!” “It is the will of God.” ... Stretching all around us were ditches vast enough to hold a row of houses, the ditches that spawned that red glow I could see in the sky from the mother camp. ... I moved to the edge of one and gazed in. The heat struck my face and at the bottom of this great open oven I could see bones; small bones. The bones of children. Moses murmured: “It is the will of God.”

But there comes a point where the level of horror simply becomes unbearable, and the human creature then moves from obedient, simple faith to a challenging, critical questioning addressed in protest to God. Vrba then describes further the fate of the ten thousand naked women as he saw them again, at the end of his team’s working shift. Moses Sonenschein’s reaction speaks for itself.

They were still standing there, naked in the frost; but this time the ranks were much thinner; and now the lorries were packed to capacity. ... The engines of the forty lorries roared simultaneously, shaking the still air, dominating it. ... From the throats of those thousands about to die came a banshee wail that rose shriller and shriller and became louder and louder and went on and on and on. ... The trucks started to move. A woman flung herself over the side. Then another ... and another. The SS moved in with their sticks and their whips to beat back those who were trying to follow. Those who had jumped were being beaten too and were trying to clamber back. They fell beneath the quickening wheels while this funeral for the living dead went faster and faster until we could see it no more. Moses Sonenschein murmured: “There is no God.” ... Then his voice rose to a shout: “There is no God! And, if there is, curse him, curse him, curse him!”

When inmates truly lost their faith in God (understood in terms of reverence), they simply could not survive the camps. Wiesel relates the case of a Rabbi who could no longer believe in the God of Israel.

“It’s over. God is no longer with us. ... I know. No one has the right to say things like that. I know that very well. Man is too insignificant, too limited, to even try to comprehend God’s mysterious ways. But what can someone like myself do? I’m neither a sage nor a just man. I am not a saint. I’m a simple creature of flesh and bone. I suffer hell in my soul and my flesh. I also have eyes and I see what is being done here. Where is God’s mercy? Where’s God? How can I believe, how can anyone believe in this God of Mercy?” Poor Akiba Drumer, if only he could have kept his faith in God, if only he could have considered this suffering a divine test, he would not have been swept away by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost all incentive to fight and opened the door to death.

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233 Ibid., 166.
The foundations of faith could not but have been cracked in and by Auschwitz, which constituted its most absolute testing possible, effected by the experience of radical evil itself.

2.2.5. Immanent Transcendence

In Auschwitz, the struggle for survival is so immediate and intense, that the inmates do not have enough life and time to concern themselves with an afterlife or with the consequences of their actions beyond the immediate here and now. The inmates must therefore put on hold all eschatological, transcendent considerations and set themselves, their immediate survival as the unique and absolute goal to be pursued. In this sense, their relationship to the transcendent God is made subservient to their personal survival until a time where they will again be able to relocate their ultimate end and fulfilment outside their own person, that is, in God. Death, in the camps, is so imminent and ubiquitous, is such a threat to human existence and life that it can no longer be perceived as a gateway to another life in and with God. Death is reduced to the enemy to be relentlessly fought and vanquished here and now. As Robert Antelme explains,

All of us are here to die. That’s the objective the SS have chosen for us. They haven’t shot us, they haven’t hanged us; but, systematically deprived of food, each of us, whether it be sooner or later, must become the dead man they have aimed at. So each of us has as his sole aim to prevent himself from dying. ... Here, the course of the militant is to struggle rationally against death. And most of the Christians here refuse death as fiercely as the others do. Death loses its usual meaning for them. It’s not from this life here with the SS, but from the life back home, that the next world is visible and perhaps reassuring. Here, not enjoyment but life constitutes temptation. And if the Christian behaves here as though to persist in living were a sacred task, that’s because the human creature has never been so close to beholding itself as a sacred value. It may oppose a furious refusal to death, give to the self the highest priority; death has become the absolute evil, has ceased to be a possible opening towards God. That liberation which back home the Christian could think vouchsafed by death, he can here find only in the material deliverance of his imprisoned body. That is, in the return to the sinner’s life, which will enable him to return to his God, enable him to accept death as one of the rules of the game. Thus the Christian here substitutes the creature for God until the moment when, free, with some flesh on his bones, he will be able to recover his subjection again. So it is that, his head clipped smooth, negated as a man by the SS, the man within the Christian will be found to have taken the place of God in importance.\(^{235}\)

When subjected to the conditions and regime of Auschwitz, it appears that in order to preserve their faith in God the prisoners were compelled to inscribe the circle of transcendent reality and signification within themselves, compacting and inserting all it contains within the circumference of their immediate survival. Another way to convey the same truth is to say that faith in

Auschwitz does not ask questions, it consists in the pure trust that God is helping them and will continue to do so until they are freed, either by death or by the allied armies. Just like Job, the believing prisoners remain steadfast and endure their poverty, misery and suffering without repudiating their God. As Philip Mechanicus explains,

The Jews are living here at Westerbork like Job on the dunghill — without possessions. A suit and some underclothes to cover their miserable limbs in the daytime and a blanket at night, a pair of shoes, a cap, a knife, fork and spoon and a mug are their only belongings. Like Job the religious Jews have not lost their trust in God and every Friday evening and Saturday evening bear witness to their devotion to the Almighty. ... The believers do not enquire about the reason for what has befallen them, the reason for their degradation. They accept it and endure it as something that cannot be pushed aside or avoided – in the firm conviction that their God will help them through it all, as He helped their forefathers to undergo trials of a similar nature. An unshakable trust in God underlies their whole attitude.236

Mechanicus then goes on to claim that other Jews, much more inclined toward critical thinking, were naturally led to question such simple trust in God and demanded explanations, reasons accounting for the ordeal they were being subjected to.

The thinking Jew who does not have this trust asks the question: “Why have I been placed in this degrading and dishonouring position?” There must surely be a more fundamental reason for his being so sorely afflicted. The mere fact that he is a Jew cannot be a satisfactory reason for his misery, his dispossession, his isolation, his banishment. This is an oversimplification, not allowing for other factors. It contains no lesson for life, no incentive to examine and take stock of his moral, spiritual or social attributes. He asks himself: “Am I personally guilty or must I atone for the guilt that others have brought upon themselves?” He is prepared to acknowledge his guilt in advance although that guilt has not been revealed to him. He may have puffed himself up with pride or been unjust, quite unwittingly, and according to the karmic of communal guilt he is prepared to join in atoning for the guilt of others. He is prepared to look upon his banishment as a period of purification, humiliation and cleansing. But why purification? Must one leave this to the Mystery, the Godhead, Providence and not ask?237

The critical Jews do not doubt God’s existence; they simply are not content with entrusting the whole task of making sense of their lives to God. They feel it is their responsibility to grasp the reasons explaining why they had to suffer Auschwitz. Their questions do not stem from the desire to elude punishment, retribution or suffering, for these prisoners are willing to acknowledge their guilt even before God asks them to do so. They feel, as free rational creatures, that they have the right to know why they need to be purified and cleansed. They need to know

237 Ibid., 17-18.
what they have done to incur such a treatment. They are ready to acknowledge their guilt precisely because they believe. As Elie Wiesel explains, “we say we are guilty, and perhaps that is what we believe. Perhaps we need to consider ourselves guilty because otherwise it would mean that God does not know what He’s doing, and does not know what He wants.” In these prisoners, therefore, as was the case with Job, faith can coexist with critical thinking; it is precisely in their genuine faith that they find the justification for and legitimization of their questioning. Zalmen Gradowski, member of the Sonderkommando, classified all prisoners into three categories: those who believed and practised their faith even in Auschwitz, those whose faith had been profoundly transformed by Auschwitz and who practised it in silence and those who expressed their faith in God through public protest by refusing to take part in the liturgical offices. Nathan Cohen writes:

Écrivant au sujet de prisonniers pratiquants, Gradowski mentionne qu’ils étaient de ceux qui croyaient encore que tout ce qui se passait avait été voulu par une organisation suprême dont les actes sont hors d’atteinte de l’intelligence humaine. Leur esprit n’avait pas été entamé et ils refusaient de renoncer à leur foi. ... Un autre groupe de prisonniers était composé de ceux qui avaient perdu la foi et ne vivaient désormais plus en paix avec Dieu. Ses Actes les emplissaient d’amertume et ils étaient incapables de comprendre comment le “Père” pouvait livrer ses fils aux mains des meurtriers. Ils ne demandaient pas à Dieu d’expliquer Ses actes et se retenaient de lui demander des comptes. Refusant une attitude hypocrite, ils se tenaient à l’écart pendant les prières, comme s’ils souhaitaient déverser à nouveau leur cœur devant Dieu mais en étaient incapables. Gradowski situe dans le troisième groupe les prisonniers qui s’absentaient simplement pendant la prière. Ils étaient incapables d’exprimer à Dieu leur gratitude, et de le louer, Lui qui avait autorisé les sauvages à se dresser et à assassiner des millions d’innocents pour la seule raison qu’ils étaient nés juifs.

2.2.6. A Need for God

In Auschwitz, belief in God took on multiple figures and was widespread among Jewish prisoners. This is in part due to the fact that Auschwitz, as both experience and reality – through the radical denial, destruction and redefinition of human ideals, norms and practices – called for a similarly radical and redefining positive response. Such a response, one that would heal and fulfill the human identities and lives torn apart in Auschwitz can only originate and come from the supernatural. For the survivors reflecting on their experience in the camp (as they are still

238 Elie Wiesel, One Generation After, 187-88.
there or after their liberation), this response took the form of professed belief. As Lucie Adelsberger, a survivor, explains,

It is not only the world around us that has changed; we ourselves have been reshaped. In fairy tales and legends we read that angels and messengers from heaven who are sent down to earth go astray and cannot find their way. Some of this also applies to those who return to earth from hell. Human ideas and standards dissolved. Everything there was oversized and excessive in its dynamics, and consequently our conceptions were changed and it is hard to get accustomed to normative paths again. After so much meanness and misfortune one expects a plethora of kindness and happiness that is not of this world.

Similarly, Jacques Lusseyran argues that in Auschwitz, because the living conditions are so antagonistic, assistance can only come from within the individual. This inner help, however, does not originate in the prisoner herself, but comes from the ultimate Other residing in the soul of every human being. To find transcendence, the prisoner had to look inside herself and put her trust in the God she would find there, indwelling her heart. If such belief in God were not possible, then, says Lusseyran, everything was lost.

In a spot like this don’t go too far afield for help. Either it is right near you, in your heart, or it is nowhere. It is not a question of character, it is a question of reality. If you try to be strong, you will be weak. If you try to understand, you will go crazy. ... Don’t be afraid to lose your soul there, for God is in it. ... Don’t believe in yourself. Only God exists. ... If God’s pity does not exist, then there is nothing left. ... From the moment when you start looking for this pity, you lay hold of it. ... There is forgiveness for every misery. And as misery grows, forgiveness grows along with it.

In other words, if God does not exist, and if God does not care for and love his creation, then human existence, especially in Auschwitz, is not worth living. The evil of Auschwitz is such that to overcome and heal from it, supernatural assistance is required. The evil of Auschwitz runs so deep in the heart, life and soul of the survivor that its removal would affect and compromise the integrity of her personal identity. Maurice Cling testifies that in this life, the wound left by Auschwitz never heals.

Je vivrai cinquante ans de vie d’homme, portant une plaie ouverte au plus profond de moi-même, malgré la revanche personnelle de la naissance de quatre fils. Peut-être cette plaie ne s’est-elle pas refermée parce que faire son deuil était impossible, et peut-être aussi parce que j’avais conscience qu’elle était devenue partie intégrante de moi-même ... elle en était devenue en quelque sorte partie

prenante, non comme deux faces d’une médaille, mais comme un amalgame. Une maladie, en somme, dont je ne pouvais ni ne voulais guérir.\textsuperscript{242}

Jean Améry strongly concurs with Cling when he explains that

Celui qui a été torturé reste un torturé. La torture est marquée dans sa chair au fer rouge, même lorsqu’aucune trace cliniquement objective n’y est plus repérable. ... L’homme torturé ne cessera plus de s’étonner à la pensée que ce qui s’appelle âme ou esprit ou conscience ou identité, selon le cas, puisse être anéanti d’un coup. ... Celui qui a été soumis à la torture est désormais incapable de se sentir chez soi dans le monde. L’outrage de l’anéantissement est indélibile. La confiance dans le monde qu’ébranle déjà le premier coup reçu et que la torture finit d’éteindre complètement est irrécupérable. Avoir vu son prochain se retourner contre soi engendre un sentiment d’horreur à tout jamais incrusté dans l’homme torturé : personne ne sort de ce sentiment pour découvrir l’horizon d’un monde où règne le \textit{Principe Espérance}. Celui qui a été martyrisé est livré sans défense à l’angoisse.\textsuperscript{243}

The psychological and spiritual wounds caused and left by Auschwitz in the prisoner are the most difficult to cure and heal. Torture breaks apart the bonds of trust tying the prisoner to this world. Homeless, lost and exiled in a reality she cannot trust anymore, knowing that the world and its inhabitants can subject her to a force she cannot oppose, the liberated survivor wanders in the world alone, her heart bereft of hope and permeated with angst. In Auschwitz, the inmates learn that there can be no limit to the evil perpetrated by human beings upon other human beings. Améry expresses his “étonnement de constater l’existence de l’autre qui s’affirme dans la torture sans plus tenir compte d’aucune limite.”\textsuperscript{244}

The evil perpetrated in Auschwitz presupposes and entails more than specific wrongdoing (particular misdeeds), for it involves a malicious intention that brings about and sustains an atmosphere of palpable death, an atmosphere draining away all the life force found in those breathing it in. The inmates believe in eternal damnation or “hell,” not on the basis of faith, but by reason of their direct experience of it as a fact. As David Rousset explains, in Auschwitz “on parle de la liberté comme de Dieu, avec la même ferveur mystique et sans la foi. C’est à l’enfer que les détenus croient, à leur enfer éternel. Ils ont depuis trop longtemps épuisé les désillusions, la fatalité du camp les a trop puissamment écrasés.”\textsuperscript{245} Auschwitz rests on a universal desire for the complete destruction of the humanity of its prisoners; it is the abode and paradigmatic locus of manifestation of absolute, radical evil. Jorge Semprun spells this out best:

\textsuperscript{242} Maurice Cling, \textit{Vous qui entrez ici...}, 197.
\textsuperscript{243} Jean Améry, \textit{Par-delà le crime et le châtiment}, 83-84 and 95.
\textsuperscript{244} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
\textsuperscript{245} David Rousset, \textit{Les jours de notre mort}, 877-78.
What’s essential is the experience of Evil. Of course, you can experience that anywhere. ... You don’t need concentration camps to know Evil. But here, this experience will turn out to have been crucial, and massive, invading everywhere, devouring everything. ... It’s the experience of radical Evil. ... Evil is not what is inhuman, of course. ... Or else it’s what is inhuman in man. ... The inhumanity of man, considered as vital possibility, as personal intention. ... As freedom. ... So it’s ridiculous to oppose Evil, to distance oneself from it, through a simple reference to what is human, to mankind. ... Evil is one of the possible designs of the freedom essential to the humanity of man – the freedom from which spring both the humanity and inhumanity of man. ... Besides, the essential thing about this experience of Evil is that it will turn out to have been lived as the experience of death. ... And I do mean “experience.” ... Because death is not something that we brushed up against, came close to, only just escaped, as though it were an accident we survived unscathed. We lived it. ... We are not survivors, but ghosts, revenants.246

In Auschwitz, everything was permeated with, tainted and corrupted by evil, an evil stemming from within the heart and soul of human beings themselves. The prisoners felt evil as intrinsic, constitutive of their human freedom and will, present and active even before any wrongdoing had been done, as a fundamental possibility. The determination of their human freedom and will as/by actual evil always remained an immediate possibility. Human powers could not eradicate evil, for they were the font from which all the evil flowed. The evil experienced and made manifest in Auschwitz was such that nobody was immune from it, nobody could escape being deleteriously affected by it and nobody can pretend to have fully recovered from it. At least, this was and is how actual survivors of the camps felt it.

2.2.7. A Guilt to Expiate

The purpose of Auschwitz transcended (in the minds of its designers) the physical extermination of the inmates, for the camp was structured in such a way as to maximize the humiliation suffered by the prisoners. The detainees had first to expiate the guilt they had earned for being (pretending to be) human like the Aryan Nazis. And for this, death alone did not suffice; through extreme starvation and suffering, the prisoners were to gain acute awareness of their blameworthiness and accept their slow continuous unstoppable dehumanizing destruction as the just retribution, the appropriate payment for their fault for being (pretending to be) human. In the sharp words of David Rousset:

Death therefore is not enough. Only expiation can assuage and sooth the Master Race. The concentration camps are an amazing and complex mechanism of expiation. Those who are to die go to their deaths slowly, at a rate so calculated that their physical and moral disintegration, realized by degrees, shall make them

246 Jorge Semprun, Literature or Life, 88-89.
finally aware that they are creatures accursed, incarnations of Evil, not men. ... This philosophy alone explains the inspired niceties of the tortures, the intricate refinements that prolong them, their systematization, and all the other elements that go to make the camps what they are. The presence of the criminals; the brutal lumping of all nationalities while abolishing any possibility of understanding between them; the deliberate mixture of all strata of society and of all age groups; hunger, beatings, fear permanently drilled into every brain – all these are but so many factors whose logical result, without any need for further intervention, can only be that total dissolution of the individual which is the ultimate expression of expiation.  

Etty Hillesum provides us with a clear example of how the Nazis rigorously applied their philosophy of universal chastisement upon the prisoners of the camps: a great many are to pay for the guilt personally incurred by a single inmate. A young prisoner, in Westerbork, on the day of his deportation, tries to elude being sent to Auschwitz.

A young Jew has had the effrontery to run away. One can’t really call it a serious attempt to escape – he absconded from the hospital in a moment of panic, a thin jacket over his blue pajamas, and in a clumsy, childish way took refuge in a tent, where he was picked up quickly enough after a search of the camp. But if you are a Jew you may not run away, may not allow yourself to be stricken with panic. The commandant is remorseless. As a reprisal, and without warning, scores of others are being sent on the transport with the boy, including quite a few who had thought they were firmly at anchor here. This system happens to believe in collective punishment.

The Nazis impose upon the prisoners a form of universally applicable collective retributive justice which they can never elude, for throughout their lives they remain guilty of being what they are: human (in the Jewish, Gypsy, Polish, French, etc. declensions of humanity). As a consequence of the Nazis’ slow and systematic universal process of destructive dehumanization operated upon them and which moreover forces them, if they wish to survive, to become its accomplices, the camp inmates come to internalize a form of “universal” guilt, a guilt from which they will never be able to exonerate themselves.

The survivors of the camps know that to some extent they owe their survival to the fact that thousands of other prisoners lost their lives, the purpose of the camp system being the extermination of all prisoners. The longer a given prisoner survived, the greater the number of prisoners who had to lose their lives to ensure her survival. The longer a given prisoner survived, the better the living conditions she needed to enjoy, the more she had to become an accomplice,

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part of the dehumanizing system. The more guilt, then, did this inmate incur. There was no way for the prisoners to avoid earning such guilt. Ella Lingens states this most clearly:

And doesn’t every one of us repatriates walk around with a guilt feeling that our henchmen so seldom have and that derives from doubt? Am I alive because the others have died in my stead? Because I had my own bed with two blankets even though I knew that four women were lying in another bed with only one blanket and could never really sleep? Because I was able to eat a double ration of bread since the patient for whom the block had still received a ration was unconscious and at death’s door and therefore unable to eat it? Because a grateful patient had “organized” warm felt boots for me from the property depot, while the vast majority of the women were rubbing their frozen feet raw in their heavy wooden shoes? Because I had a job that was part of the machinery created by the SS to keep the camp from sinking into a chaos from which no productivity of any kind could be extracted anymore? Because in all our wretchedness we were indispensable to the powers that be and our survival was important to them, because we constituted a little cog in this enormous machinery of destruction?249

Simon Laks and René Coudy also acknowledge that survival in the camps inevitably entailed a certain level of adaptation to the living conditions and system reigning there, forcing them to absorb, make theirs part of the guilt earned by the systematic extermination of the inmates (through the fact that they became, in their struggle for survival, more or less actively and intentionally its accomplices). “We are well aware that, given the extent to which we adapted both instinctively and knowingly, we all became more or less inhuman and therefore objectionable to the society to which we were fortunate enough to return. A deep abyss separates us from that society, forever. ... We make no effort to fill up this abyss because we know that this would be impossible.”250

The evil that spread in and from Auschwitz was such that it indelibly marked every human person in her soul, spreading in accordance with the laws governing pandemics, with the unceasing generation of new muted forms able to cause more damage. To oppose the power of such evil is not a human prerogative. That is the reason why, according to Primo Levi, liberation by the allied forces did not mean, for the prisoners, enjoyment of genuine freedom, because the camps had so profoundly enslaved their souls and spirits to invincible evil, fault and guilt that it was impossible for them to disrupt these spiritual ties through physical liberation. Primo Levi explains:

So for us even the hour of liberty rang out grave and muffled, and filled our souls with joy and yet with a painful sense of prudency, so that we should have liked to

249 Cited in Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 484.
250 Cited in *ibid.*, 485.
wash our consciences and our memories clean from the foulness that lay upon them; and also with anguish, because we felt that this should never happen, that now nothing could ever happen good and pure enough to rub out our past, and that the scars of the outrage would remain within us forever, and in the memories of those who saw it, and in the places where it occurred and in the stories that we should tell of it. Because, and this is the awful privilege of our generation and of my people, no one better than us has ever been able to grasp the incurable nature of the offence, that spreads like a contagion. It is foolish to think that human justice can eradicate it. It is an inexhaustible fount of evil; it breaks the body and the spirit of the submerged, it stifles them and renders them abject; it returns as ignominy upon the oppressors, it perpetuates itself as hatred among the survivors, and swarms around in a thousand ways, against the very will of all, as a thirst for revenge, as a moral capitulation, as denial, as weariness, as renunciation.\footnote{251}{Primo Levi, \textit{The Truce}, in \textit{If This Is a Man, The Truce}, 218-19.}

Shame is the feeling characterizing the natural emotional reaction of testifying survivors to the evil they encountered, experienced and suffered in Auschwitz and which has become part of who they are. Life in the camps and the conditions prevailing there were such that they irresistibly brought almost all inmates to forego their ethical and moral principles in favour of sheer biological survival. Elie Wiesel relates how he himself, like the son of a rabbi he knew, failed the test to take care and remain faithful to his father (a sacred, divinely ordained task for Jewish people). During the death marches, Rabbi Eliahu lost track of his son with whom he had shared all aspects of the camp experience throughout their three-year long internment. When the night rest came, he began looking for his son and met with Wiesel.

“It happened on the road. We lost sight of one another during the journey. I fell behind a little, at the rear of the column. I didn’t have the strength to run anymore. And my son didn’t notice. That’s all I know. Where has he disappeared? Where can I find him? Perhaps you’ve seen him somewhere?” “No, Rabbi Eliahu, I haven’t seen him.” And so he left, as he had come: a shadow swept away by the wind. He had already gone through the door when I remembered that I had noticed his son running beside me. I had forgotten and had not mentioned it to Rabbi Eliahu! But then I remembered something else: his son had seen him losing ground, sliding back to the rear of the column. He had seen him. And he had continued to run in front, letting the distance between them become greater. A terrible thought crossed my mind: What if he had wanted to be rid of his father? He had felt his father growing weaker and, believing that the end was near, had thought by this separation to free himself of a burden that could diminish his own chance for survival.\footnote{252}{Elie Wiesel, \textit{Night}, 91.}

Wiesel then finds himself praying to God, asking to be provided the strength never to abandon his father in like manner. “And in spite of myself, a prayer formed inside me, a prayer to this God in whom I no longer believed. ‘O God, Master of the Universe, give me the strength never
to do what Rabbi Eliahu’s son has done’.”253 But when his turn came, Wiesel honestly admits that he failed to fulfill his filial responsibilities. And, then, in this moment, when he measures the extent of his failure as a human being, as a son, his heart is filled with shame.

When I woke up, it was daylight. That is when I remembered that I had a father. During the alert, I had followed the mob, not taking care of him. I knew he was running out of strength, close to death, and yet I had abandoned him. I went to look for him. Yet at the same time a thought crept into my mind: If only I didn’t find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength to fight for my own survival, to take care only of myself. ... Instantly, I felt ashamed, ashamed of myself forever.254

2.2.8. Standing under Divine Judgment

This overwhelming feeling of shame in itself is nothing to be ashamed of, for in it resides the embodiment and expression of what is left of Wiesel’s humanity and of its relationship to an absolutely binding normative principle higher than itself: the transcendent God. If the witnessing survivors feel guilty for or ashamed of anything in regards to their experience of Auschwitz, it is always before the tribunal of God and his law that they do so. They feel the weight of the divine judgment upon themselves and their actions and they measure the responsibility of being human even and especially in Auschwitz. Their all too human failure to preserve their humanity in these inhuman conditions (for all human beings would have done as they did at one point or another) does not take away the responsibility all human beings have to account for who they are, have become and what they do before the transcendent. Even when humanity is denied all rights to exist and express itself, this relationship to a transcendent norm and principle remains applicable and valid, defining and sustaining the existence of humankind even if only in the form of latency.

The inmates know how they should be behaving, they are aware of their failure to act as they ought; they know that in these inhuman, subhuman conditions, what is requested of them is to accomplish superhuman acts, to be superhumanly human. Richard Glazar remembers how Hans, a fellow inmate in Treblinka, evaluates the behaviour of the Czechoslovakian prisoners, among whom both he and Glazar are numbered.

We kept waiting, kept discussing. ... We arrived as if we had come from America or someplace like that. We knew, we understood, and we could’ve made heads roll. We’re all of us man enough. But we’ve just pissed away all this time theorizing, bullshitting too long, getting everything ready, and in the meantime we’ve forgotten how to be human. We stood there like sheep today, not worth shit. They’ve already beat it all out of us. ... My God, we’re no longer human. I

253 Ibid., 91.
254 Ibid., 106.
can’t even believe in myself anymore, and all I can see is my old lady and my son over there on the other side – my little curly-headed son. ... It wasn’t until a few more days had passed that, in the morning, my chest and my throat started to burn terribly, and my brain, as if some kind of acid had overflowed and spilled. And then suddenly in a craze, all I wanted was to tear down everything, like that long-haired man they told us about in religion class, who pulled down the pillars. You’re crazy, I told myself. First you’ll have to pull yourself together, collect your strength, clear your head. And that’s what we all told ourselves – always too much thinking, not only here in Treblinka, but long before that, when it was all getting started with us. They wouldn’t shut us up in ghettos like they used to in the old days, they wouldn’t tear our heads off, and if they did, it might be one person, or two, but not all of us. They shut us all in. They will tear everyone’s head off, in the end, even the Ukrainians who are their helpers. What good is reason here? What we need is one of those mad long-haired men who tore down the pillars and brought everything crashing to the ground.  

The use of the biblical figure of Samson is here highly instructive. Samson is one of the Judges chosen and assisted by God to deliver Israel from the hold of oppressors (in this case, the Philistines) whom God had allowed to subdue his people for a certain time in just punishment and retribution for the evil they had committed against Him. Hans is here clearly saying that the time for human-based discernment and reflection is over, what the prisoners of Treblinka need is a leader guided by a higher, supernatural principle (i.e., the spirit of God) enabling him to know, as from a superior instinct, what to do to free them from Nazi oppression. The leader serves this higher principle of action for the good of the whole community. Hans therefore acknowledges that in conditions and circumstances such as those prevailing in Treblinka, acting in accordance with a certain “divine madness” is not only possible and commendable, but in fact necessary if the humanity of those subjected to those conditions and circumstances is to be defended and preserved. Extraordinary situations call for extraordinary modes of response.

That the situation in the camps is exceptional and unique is obvious to both the inmates and the jailers. Another biblical image is used to mark the singularity and uniqueness of what is happening there, that of the last judgment. Elie Wiesel recalls the final moments before a

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256 See Judges 13:3-5, where an angel of God is talking to Samson’s mother: “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. ... The boy shall be a nazirite [one consecrated] to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (NRSV).
257 Samson’s actions are directed and prompted by the spirit of God compelling him to act in a certain way. In Judges 13:25, it is said that “the spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.” In Judges 14:6, 14:19 and 15:14, Samson is led to a particular action as a direct consequence of the fact that “the spirit of the Lord rushed on him.”
258 See Judges 15:18, where Samson, praying, identifies himself as a servant of the Lord and 16:28-31 where Samson sacrifices himself by bringing down the palace of the Philistines, whereby he takes down the rule of the Philistines over Israel, by killing their rulers and most powerful citizens.
selection, where the instantaneous judgment of SS physicians spelled life or death for thousands of prisoners.

Our Blockälteste had not been outside a concentration camp since 1933. He had already been through all the slaughterhouses, all the factories of death. Around nine o’clock, he came to stand in our midst: “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you. ... In a few moments, selection will take place. You will have to undress completely. Then you will go, one by one, before the SS doctors. I hope you will all pass. But you must try to increase your chances. Before you go into the next room, try to move your limbs, give yourself some colour. Don’t walk slowly, run! Run as if you had the devil at your heels! Don’t look at the SS. Run, straight in front of you!” ... I undressed, leaving my clothes on my cot. Tonight, there was no danger that they could be stolen. Tibi and Yossi, who had changed Kommandos at the same time I did, came to urge me: “Let’s stay together. It will make us stronger.” Yossi was mumbling something. He probably was praying. I had never suspected that Yossi was religious. In fact, I had always believed the opposite. Tibi was silent and very pale. All the block inmates stood naked between the rows of bunks. This must be how one stands for the Last Judgment.259

The image of thousands of prisoners waiting, naked, for a life and death judgment to be pronounced over them in a matter of a few seconds, when everything you are is at stake (for the inmates had nothing else than what remained of who they were) and lays bare before the eyes of your judges and you are left entirely at their mercy (for the inmates could not hide or change their physical appearance and condition), in Wiesel’s mind, constitutes a good depiction of what will happen on Judgment Day, when God evaluates once and for all (thereby entailing eternal consequences and significance) humankind according to what it has become and done. While they are being scrutinized by their judges, while they are under their gaze, the prisoners are unable to look at them. The judges do not have to reveal themselves to the judged who stand naked (both literally and figuratively) before them. In those extreme circumstances and situations, human beings reveal their most profound beliefs and identity. Wiesel discovers his friend Yossi’s sincere belief in God; Yossi is then not ashamed or afraid anymore of praying in public. True friendship also is displayed and expressed in those critical situations: the three friends bind their respective lives and fates to one another to enhance their chances of survival.

Some Nazis also knew they were liable to absolute, transcendent (divine) judgment. They knew they would have to face a punishment proportionate to what they had done and forced thousands upon thousands of other human beings to suffer and inflict on others. David Rousset relates the case of a French guard, under the orders of the SS, burdened with a heavy conscience.

259 Elie Wiesel, Night, 70-71.
Je fis un signe à l’Alsacien qui était debout de l’autre côté du champ. Il sourit et haussa les épaules. Il était venu avec nous de Neuengamme, dans le même wagon. Dès qu’il avait su que j’étais français, on aurait dit que c’était forcé chez lui qu’il s’explique. Tout de suite, il parlait contre les Allemands. ... Seulement, il était quand même avec eux, à nous garder. Pas mauvais bougre, mais il était avec eux. Et il avait peur. Une mauvaise conscience pleine de peur. ... Un matin que nous arrivions dans le champ, nous n’avions même pas commencé à décharger le wagon. Tout le monde s’était mis à regarder le ciel. ... Du côté du village et des collines, le soleil, mais en face le ciel était devenu vert et puis brouillé comme du vin vomi et de plus en plus sombre. Le vent soufflait très fort au-dessus de nos têtes. On aurait dit que le soleil reculait. La tache grandissait vite sur le flanc des collines à notre droite. En face, sur la hauteur des scories, le sel, qui semblait de la neige sous le soleil, devenait d’un gris sale. Il faisait de plus en plus noir comme si nous retournions à la nuit. ... Je regardai l’Alsacien. Il scrutait le ciel et son visage était livide comme l’écume que drossait le vent. – Professeur, me dit-il, c’est le jugement dernier. Je sentais qu’il avait envie de dire une prière, mais sa mémoire était partie. Il répétait : – Ce pays va être puni. Dieu va le punir et nous avec.260

The Alsatian guard anticipates and perceives in the rise of a particularly powerful natural storm the coming of his reckoning, where summoned before God, he will have to provide an account for his actions. He fully grasps that the punishment deserved by those who set and managed the camps on behalf of the Nazi regime cannot simply be individually based, but must also be collective: Germany as a whole and all who served it deserve to suffer retribution. The French guard knows that he cannot provide adequate accounts for his collaboration with the Nazis, his fearful conscience betrays him, revealing that something of his humanity has been preserved over and beyond his compliance with the orders of the Nazi regime. The fact that both prisoners and guards feel compelled to use the metaphor of the last judgment presupposes and entails that to them, what happened in Auschwitz, the guilt and responsibility all those involved must bear and assume utterly transcend what falls under the legislation of positive human justice and law. What happened in Auschwitz reclaims an absolute and definitive form of judgment pronounced by an ultimate (superhuman) authority.

2.2.9. Life after Death or Death before Life?

The members of the Sonderkommando, by reason of their isolation from the rest of the camp and the nature of the tasks they were forced to accomplish, were acutely aware of the fact that they had crossed the border between life and death and entered into the realm of the afterlife. David Rousset relates a discussion between two members of the Sonderkommando in Birkenau.

260 David Rousset, Les jours de notre mort, 477-78.

These forlorn prisoners live under a sentence of death which has already been decreed and enforced upon them. Forsaken by the free civilized society and forgotten by the other prisoners of the camp, they live with and accomplish the very work of death itself, enjoy the material riches of those who, having fallen into their hands, lose everything, including their lives.

Richard Glazar describes an encounter between a group of prisoners from Treblinka (extermination camp) riding in a truck to a working site with inhabitants of a neighbouring village. Once again, the biblical metaphor he makes use of conveys in striking fashion the surreal atmosphere in which the encounter occurs and its supernatural import. Glazar likens the group of inmates from Treblinka to the four riders of the Apocalypse.

Now we’re driving past some of the thatched huts. Out in front there are children, teenagers, and women, all of them barefoot and dressed in rags, all of them standing there with their mouths wide open, some trying to cover their mouths with their hands. They all gape at the trucks racing past, following the progress of this terrifying apparition – the uniformed riders of the Antichrist from the realm of the dead, of gold and legendary riches, beyond the forest. For a little bottle of vodka, or a little bottle of cream, you can get boots made of leather so soft that you wear them like gloves. For a larger packet of food you may even be able to get a gold ring – from those murderous Ukrainian thugs in black uniforms, the ones who have already struck down so many good Poles.

To re-enter the civilized world is for camp inmates akin to coming back to life from the realm of the dead. They are looked at and feel like ghosts, remnants of their previous selves who belong to a plane of reality which should not be manifesting itself explicitly (positively) in the (normal or ordinary) world of the living. They are made of the stuff of legends and fairytales, mysterious creatures not often, if ever, directly encountered and are only allowed to disturb the events and dwellers of the living world on rare, exceptional occasions.

Like the riders of the Apocalypse, their manifestation and presence in this world foreshadows the upcoming onslaught of catastrophic happenings. The omen of death, their

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261 Ibid., 582.
262 Richard Glazar, Trap with a Green Fence, 106-07.
apparition suggests that the grim Reaper is about to strike again. Jean Améry directly correlates this work of death, operated in and through the prisoners, with the Christian motif of the incarnation of the divine word. We will now try to unfold and unveil the multiple layers of meaning involved in his use of this extremely central Christian teaching (remember that Améry is an agnostic Jew). “Nous autres, nous sommes habitués à ce genre de choses. On a pu voir comment le verbe s’est fait chair et comment le verbe devenu chair a finalement formé une montagne de cadavres.” Améry is here referring to the fact that with the Nazis what had before remained verbal threats or had been limited to local, circumscribed coercive operations turned into a quasi-systematic process of extermination of millions of innocent human beings conducted over the whole of continental Europe. Améry’s powerful statement implies that the very embodiment of the word, the fleshing out in action of what is said, constitutes that which causes death, the death of both the word itself and of that which is denoted by it.

2.2.10. Christian Motives

At this point, the Christian undertones of Améry’s reference to the incarnation become much more apparent. First of all, the millions of victims of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps were, like Jesus, innocent and like him appreciating the full value of a human life and of its sacrifice, they prayerfully asked God to be spared from the ordeal that is a most shameful and violent death. Nelly Gorce recalls the arrest of seven prisoners who, aware that they have been selected for execution in the gas chambers, flee in an attempt to save their lives.

Et les sept pauvres filles furent reprises et entraînées tandis qu’elles hurlaient : – Mais je travaillerai, voyez, je suis forte. Oh, ma petite fille, je veux la revoir... Ma petite... Non, non, laissez-moi... Ayez pitié, madame! Ayez pitié! – Ils vont nous tuer, affirme anxieusement une autre. Et la Polonaise ricane : – Vous direz cela au SS. Dehors, le vent sifflait sa rage, le soleil incertain éclairait par instants ce tableau déchirant. Il y a mille neuf cent quarante-quinze ans, le Christ au jardin des Oliviers, gravissant un calvaire analogue, avait supplié : – Mon père, si c’est possible, faites que ce calice s’éloigne de moi. Elles ne sont que de pauvres femmes désirant seulement vivre encore un peu. Elles ne peuvent accepter de mourir ainsi dans l’injure et la haine, de se savoir cadavre, grossissant le tas de corps encore tièdes attendant l’heure du brasier. Non, non, elles ne peuvent accepter d’être ainsi jetées dans les flammes, non elles ne tomberont pas avec les autres asphyxiées par le gaz, non, elles ne veulent pas mourir...\(^\text{264}\)

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\(^{263}\) Jean Améry, *Par-delà le crime et le châtiment*, 18.

Like Jesus, these prisoners believed their life and person were inscribed within an intimate relationship with God, but they could not perceive any positive meaning in the death of millions of inmates and even less in their joining the masses of corpses produced by the Nazi death factories. Why suffer such calumny and hatred, why lay their life when there is no purpose to be served by means of the suffering of such humiliation and death? Why should these prisoners suffer death by extermination when so much good could still emanate from their hearts and mouths, and be accomplished by their hands?

In like manner to Jesus who, nailed to the cross, profoundly feels abandoned and forsaken by God, the prisoners of the camp, all condemned to death know in their hearts that God has left them, they are completely alone in the darkest of times, when their need of his assistance is direst. Unable to alter their personal fate, the prisoners understand that their own blood will be shed and that only God can help them. God’s existence and power are made most manifest in and through their very absence, in the plain revelation of the creature’s absolute need for them. Richard Glazar remembers the singing of a very moving song by a fellow Treblinka prisoner, operatic singer, in response to the Nazis’ burning of corpses in huge bonfires.

– *Eli, Eli* – they have thrown us into the fire, tortured us with flames. No one denied your holy writ. Salwe grieves and laments. The melody and the text from a dark past, the outside fires intruding upon the present, tear open our innermost being. We are torn apart, those of us who are hearing the song for the first time, just as those who had heard it before, in their hours of terror and pogroms, had been. – Save us, oh save us. You alone can deliver us. ... At the end the chords disperse, and the voice breaks somewhere high over the flames : - *Shema Israel* ... *adonai echod!* ... Now, here, with wide-open eyes I am listening, and the scene comes to me in which the man on the Cross screams at the ninth hour : – *Eli, Eli – lama sabachthani?* You, the Only One, why have you abandoned me? Yes, it must have been something like that : “and the curtain in the temple tore open ... the earth shook ... the peaks crumbled” – there, behind Salwe’s back, behind the bars. ... Salwe lives in the barracks across the way, because he’s one of the “Court Jews.” Today the heavens torn open in blood seem to have brought him to us.

The figure of the agonizing Christ on the cross speaks to witnessing survivors in an expressly Jewish way. Jorge Semprun was led by a deeply moving encounter with an agonizing prisoner to correlate this experience with the final moments of Christ’s life on the cross. More exactly, he perceives in the face of this particular inmate the face of the crucified Christ. After the liberation of Buchenwald, some inmates are requested by the management of the camp to

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look for remaining survivors in the deserted blocks. On their final round, Semprun and a friend of his meet with “death praying.”

To avoid risking an epidemic, the American military authorities had decided to collect and identify the corpses and then bury them in common graves. Which was why Albert and I were making one final sweep through the Little Camp that day, hoping to find some last survivors too enfeebled to have rejoined, on their own, the communal life of Buchenwald since its liberation. Albert’s face went livid. He strained to hear, and suddenly became frantic, squeezing my arm painfully. “Yiddish!” he shouted. “It’s speaking Yiddish!” So, death spoke Yiddish. Albert was more able than I was to glean this information from the guttural (and to me, meaningless) sounds of that ghostly singing. ... We take a few steps down the center aisle, and stop. We listen hard, trying to determine where the voice is coming from. Albert is panting. “It’s the prayer for the dead,” he whispers. ... Albert rushes over to the bunk where the voice is rattling faintly. Two minutes later, we have extracted from a heap of corpses the dying man through whose mouth death is singing to us. Reciting its prayer to us, actually. We carry the man out in front of the hut, into the April sunshine. We lay him down on a pile of rags that Albert has collected. The man doesn’t open his eyes, but he hasn’t stopped singing, in a rough, barely audible voice. I have never seen a human face that more closely resembled that of the crucified Christ. Not the stern but serene countenance of a Roman Jesus, but the tormented face of a Spanish Gothic Jesus. Of course, Christ on the Cross does not usually intone the Jewish prayer for the dead, but this is a minor detail. There is nothing from a theological point of view, I presume, to prevent Christ from chanting the Kaddish.  

A prisoner, physically too weak to free himself from the pile of corpses in which he finds himself entrapped, the unique person alive in the block, relentlessly sings the prayer for the dead upon himself in Yiddish. His voice coming out of death itself, for he is agonizing among the dead, and being addressed to death in his own dying person, in and through him, death is observed talking to itself. Death is not only or simply seen talking, but more importantly praying. By means of the highly unusual practice of reciting the prayer for the dead upon himself (this prayer is traditionally recited by the living for the dead, never by the dying upon themselves), this particular prisoner reveals the radicality of both the sacrifice of his personal life (for his unceasing prayer declares his will to live before God and all others) and of his faith in God (for praying, in such gruesome conditions, supposes a very profound assent of the whole person to God and his will). Like Christ on the cross, this prisoner never lets go of God, never gives up on God even when he knows God has handed him over to death. In his torment, in his absolute relinquishment of himself in and to God, in his unfailing resolve to remain faithful to God and

266 Jorge Semprun, Literature or Life, 29-31.
accomplish his will, this prisoner resembles the dying crucified Christ. This unavering faith in God which, even in the harshest conditions imaginable, always succeeds at gathering the strength necessary to express itself outwardly, to speak itself out, is the reason why this prisoner ultimately is, in his own way, resurrected from the dead. Help has reached out to him from without as both a result and a response to his faith. The God who empowered him to remain faithful in the midst of meaningless suffering is the God who rescued him from the dead. “We’re sitting in the sun, Albert and I, in the little wood surrounding the infirmary compound, where we have brought to safety the Jew from Budapest. His harsh and somber voice sang the Kaddish from beyond the grave, a grave from which he has been resurrected.”267

2.2.11. Remembering the Passion of Christ in Auschwitz

But as Robert Antelme reminds us, the analogy between the Passion of Jesus Christ and the ordeal undergone by the prisoners of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps is subject to important defects and limitations. The first of these being that from the standpoint of camp inmates, Christ’s ordeal does not seem to have involved much hatred, humiliation and suffering. In the face of Auschwitz, it would seem that Christ’s sufferings pale and are threatened of falling into insignificance. Robert Antelme relates his personal reaction to the reading of the Gospel on Good Friday in the Gandersheim camp.

Good Friday. About seven o’clock, back from the factory, a few guys have got together and sat down on the edges of two adjacent beds. Some are believers; some are not. But it’s Good Friday. A man had accepted torture and death. A brother. They talked about him. One guy had managed to get hold of an old bible at Buchenwald. He reads a passage from the Gospel. The story of a man, just a man, the cross for a man, the story of one single man. He is able to speak, and the women who love him are there. He isn’t wearing some costume, he’s handsome, in any case he has healthy flesh on his bones, he doesn’t have lice, he is able to say new things; and, while he’s mocked, at least it’s because people are inclined to look upon him as if he were somebody. A story. A passion. Away in the distance, a cross. A faint cross, very far away. A beautiful story. He was allowed to have a story. He spoke of love, and he was loved. The hair that wiped his feet. The nard. The disciple he loved. The wiped face. ... Here the dead aren’t given to their mothers, the mothers are killed along with them, their bread is eaten, and gold is yanked from their mouths to get more bread. They make soap

267 Ibid., 55-56.
from their bodies; or they make their skin into lampshades for the SS bitches. No nail-marks on these lampshades; just artistic tattoos. “Father, why hast thou ...?” Screams of suffocating children. Silence of ashes spread across a plain. The scale and depth of the evil experienced in Auschwitz is such as to render the Gospel accounts unintelligible to the prisoners. The problem is not that the person and story of Jesus are discredited by the advent and event of Auschwitz, but rather that of defining the true significance of Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice after Auschwitz, with due account being taken of Auschwitz as a paradigmatic instantiation of radical evil. Jesus was a free man, who could behave, preach and teach as he willed. Jesus lived in a world where his message could at least potentially be heard, where the traditions and mores enabled human beings not merely to survive, but to live well and thrive in accordance with the will of God. Jesus lived in a world where traditions even allowed for the advent of historical novelty and adaptation. It is in such a world that Jesus Christ was subjected to his passion.

Such a world has nothing to do with Auschwitz. If Jesus Christ needed to be more than human to accomplish his mission, to be able to endure the sufferings he was subjected to, then why were six millions of so-called “normal” human beings subjected to sufferings so out of scale, so disproportionate with what Jesus Christ himself had to endure without enjoying any of the special divine assistance granted to him? Why is it that these six million deaths have not been endowed with any redeeming value at all? Why did God allow for Auschwitz to happen if the world has already been saved in and through the Passion of Jesus Christ? Why did God abandon six million people bearing their own crosses, delivering them to the Nazis to be crucified in the gas chambers and buried in the crematoria? Who can Jesus Christ be to these people? How could he change their lives, providing meaning to human existence in the midst of utter darkness and horror?

2.2.12. Empowering and Empowered Christ

That Jesus Christ did in fact help some prisoners to face the ordeal of Auschwitz clearly is attested by witnessing survivors themselves. This divine assistance and support became apparent once the inmates had overcome their expectation of a certain type of action and intervention from God. God would not put an end to the rule of the Nazis by means of an extraordinary intervention from without. God would not provide any explanation for, any positive meaning to Auschwitz the inmates could fathom and embrace as a cause worthy to sacrifice their lives for. God would rather essentially help the inmates accept their situation – as

terrible as it was – and provide them with the power to help him become present in the midst of darkness itself, in and through their persons and actions. The testimony of Etty Hillesum magnificently attests of this evolution of faith which from and instead of looking for God outside of humanity, outside of Auschwitz, searches him within the human heart and within the abysmal darkness of Auschwitz. In the context of Auschwitz, human beings are made by God channels, custodians and stewards of his action and presence. Without them, Auschwitz, to the eyes of all human beings, would simply be bereft of God. Some prisoners are therefore called to become living abodes, temples for God in Auschwitz.

Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. ... I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us, that we must help you to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last. ... No one is in their clutches [the Nazis’] who is in your arms. ... You are sure to go through lean times with me now and then, when my faith weakens a little, but believe me, I shall always labour for you and remain faithful to you, and I shall never drive you from my presence.269

The Christological aspect or element of this redefined, deepened and more mature faith in God shows in the actions the believing prisoners are then led to take in order to keep alive the presence of God within themselves and others. In a manner analogous to Jesus Christ giving his whole self and life for the good and sake of humankind on the cross, breaking his body so that all could share in it for their spiritual nourishment (as is daily remembered and re-enacted in the Eucharistic liturgy), the prisoners are led to forget themselves and break their bodies, freely offering themselves to others, helping them in love. These prisoners are therefore induced by their faith to share in Christ’s Eucharistic sacrifice and offer themselves to others, helping them to cope with Auschwitz and become in their turn beacons of divine light and love there. These deeply believing prisoners act as sacraments of God (Jesus Christ) in the midst of utter absurdity and darkness. Etty Hillesum beautifully writes: “When I suffer for the vulnerable, is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer? I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among

men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long. ... We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”

Jacques Lusseyran, who despite being blind survived Buchenwald, fully agrees with Etty Hillesum and also explains whence he obtained the moral and spiritual power he needed to survive and to heal others without losing sight of himself and of God. In a clear reference to Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, Lusseyran claims that he drew all his strength from God who guided him at every step of the way. “The inscription over the gate read, Konzentrationslager Buchenwald. I passed through this gateway going in the opposite direction fifteen months later, on April 18, 1945. But here I come to a halt. I can’t say how, but it is no longer I who am conducting my life. It is God, and I haven’t always understood how he went about it.”

Lusseyran argues that the fact that during his internment he had to go through and survive a critical period – where he suffered from multiple serious diseases, set foot on death’s doorstep several times and had to spend months in the camp’s infirmary – enabled him to reconnect with his interiority, to recover a lost sense of peace and serenity. Freed from despair and fear, he could then live a much more “human” existence in Buchenwald. “Sickness had rescued me from fear, it had even rescued me from death. Let me say to you simply that without it I never would have survived. From the first moments of sickness I had gone off into another world, quite consciously. I was not delirious. ... I still had the look of tranquility, more so than ever. That was the miracle.”

Lusseyran ascribes to God the renewal of his life and strength, for as he was enjoying them again, he was fully aware of his own personal helplessness, weakness and inability. The awareness of being assisted by a power much more trustworthy than himself granted him the profound hope and trust necessary not only to survive, but also to be happy in Buchenwald. His personal responsibility was to make sure that he always remained open to God’s empowering assistance.

The Lord took pity on the poor mortal who was so helpless before him. It is true I was quite unable to help myself. All of us are incapable of helping ourselves. Now I knew it, and knew that it was true of the SS among the first. ... There was one thing left which I could do: not refuse God’s help, the breath he was blowing upon me. That was the one battle I had to fight, hard and wonderful all at once: not to let anybody be taken by the fear. For fear kills, and joy maintains life. ... On
May 8, I left the hospital on my two feet. I was nothing but skin and bones, but I had recovered. The fact was I was so happy that now Buchenwald seemed to me a place which if not welcome was at least possible. If they didn’t give me any bread to eat, I would feed on hope.274

From this moment on, the quality of life Lusseyran enjoyed in the camp radically improved: he had been made free by God to serve others by helping them to cope with the ordeal of their imprisonment in a concentration camp. His survival and wellbeing entirely depended on his ability to let go of any interest in and thought he might have felt and conceived in regards to his own personal preservation. He became a highly respected spiritual director whose soothing advice and presence were requested at any time of day and night.

I was carried by a hand. I was covered by a wing. ... I hardly needed to look out for myself, and such concern would have seemed to me ridiculous. I knew it was dangerous and it was forbidden. I was free now to help the others; not always, not much, but in my own way I could help. I could try to show other people how to go about holding on to life. I could turn toward them the flow of light and joy which had grown so abundant in me. From that time on they stopped stealing my bread or my soup. It never happened again. Often my comrades would wake me up in the night and take me to comfort someone, sometimes a long way off in another block. Almost everyone forgot I was a student. I became “the blind Frenchman.” For many, I was just “the man who didn’t die.” Hundreds of people confided in me. The men were determined to talk to me. They spoke to me in French, in Russian, in German, in Polish. I did the best I could to understand them all. That is how I lived, how I survived. The rest I cannot describe.275

In the person of prisoners such as Etty Hillesum and Jacques Lusseyran, God could therefore be perceived at work in Auschwitz, tending to human beings, indwelling their hearts and souls and through them shining forth to others. These exceptional cases further demonstrate that human survival and good life intrinsically depend on the relationship the individual entertains with the absolute and the transcendent; with God. The constantly enforced and renewed denial and repression of the human face and identity demonstrate that the latter can never be completely eradicated or obliterated, always existing at least in the form of a latent potentiality tending toward its actualisation and actualising itself as soon as the external context allows. Hence, the human identity, especially in Auschwitz, is shown to be defined at all times and in all circumstances by the implicitly or explicitly assumed assent or rejection of God. In the face of such evil, it is impossible for the absolute and transcendent God not to be invoked at one point or another at least in the form of a question, protest or denial. The exceptional cases of

274 Ibid., 281-82.
275 Ibid., 282-83.
explicit faith in God, of holiness expressed toward God and others observed in the camps prove that an intimate relationship with God remained – even in Auschwitz – a possibility and for a few inmates, an immediate and actualised one.

2.3. Part I: Insight into the Dark of Auschwitz

Summing up the developments of the first two chapters, we can conclude that Auschwitz, as the imposed and sustained experience of radical evil and suffering, confronts the prisoners with the infinite task of redefining themselves as human persons inscribed within a relationship to the transcendent, that is, to God. Their fundamental dignity being radically denied, the survivors must integrate within their life narratives the event and reality of Auschwitz. Auschwitz has turned their human existence into an unfathomable mystery; the survivors have become a fundamental problem or question to themselves. Remembering Auschwitz for them identifies with the deliberate attempt to provide meaning to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, the prisoners experienced such denial of their humanity that the latter actually disappeared, becoming purely latent and potential, mute no longer being able to oppose and express the unspeakable. To really share in their experience, we postmoderns must respond to the testimonies of the survivors in complete openness, being ready to be radically transformed and shocked in the existential-spiritual aspects of our being and existence and have the courage to redefine our own life narratives in light of the survivors’ experience.

Auschwitz is about absolute or radical evil infecting, corrupting and tainting human freedom in its very nature, principles and actual existence. Auschwitz is about evil and suffering debilitating the human nature and existence to the point that the human person’s relationship to the transcendent inevitably and undoubtedly is questioned and shaken in its foundations. History and the flow of time come to a standstill, the actions of human beings trapped in Nazi labour and extermination camps possess and serve no purpose. Isolated and reduced to themselves, constantly subjected to a regime of pure terror, deprived of food, rest and suitable sanitary conditions, and forced to work twelve hours a day six days a week, the life of the camp inmates is reduced to a direct and perpetual struggle for sheer biological survival. In Auschwitz, moral laws and principles are abrogated. Surrounded with death, seeing fellow inmates dying per hundreds every day, the detainees must assume the end of their own life as so immediate a possibility that within the enclosed, self-sufficient and estranged context of the camps, death no longer is felt as still to come, but as having already become reality. Like Odysseus, the prisoners enter the realm of death while they are still alive. The economy of survival imposes the reduction
of conscious and inner life to concern for the strictly imminent present and immediate surroundings only. The prisoners almost inevitably suffer the loss of all ability to think and hope. Naked in the dark, unable to trust anyone, they find themselves completely alone and falling prey to absolute fear. Fighting in order not to lose what is left of their humanity, the inmates try to spare as much energy and strength as they can, waiting for the opportunity to express their humanity in its emotional, existential and spiritual dimensions again.

The prisoners attempt the impossible (this is their only option): to survive in, through and even by means of the very denial of their humanity which is purposefully designed and planned by the Nazis to cause their death. With the exception of inmates who were endowed with both extreme physical resistance and poor spiritual development and life, survival could in these circumstances only be ensured by means of corruption. Biological survival demanded the depravation of the soul: inmates had to join the camp hierarchy and adopt the ways of the SS. The special cases of extraordinary prisoners (such as Emil Künder and Hermann Langbein) prove beyond doubt that the only way to survive without losing oneself was to leave one’s former life behind, to sacrifice one’s freedom and happiness (outside the camp, before and to come after) and to dedicate one’s life to helping other, fellow inmates. The only way to successfully oppose and actually vanquish the Nazi dehumanizing and destructive machinery resided in the free decision to assume one’s situation as a camp inmate and to create for oneself and others, in this continual nightmare, opportunities for the expression of genuine humanity.

Expressions of holiness were observed even in the night of Auschwitz. Certain prisoners remained faithful to God despite the fact that he had become silent, that they could no longer hear him. As their faith was undergoing a profound transformation – passing into the crucible of Auschwitz – most believers did not stop believing in God. Unable to understand his actions (or inaction), the prisoners ask God to explain Godself, protesting against the ordeal they are undeservedly being subjected to. Like Job, the prisoners who strongly and persistently object to their state of misery, poverty, subservience and suffering nevertheless patiently bear with it in faithfulness to their God. God’s existence is never denied or repudiated, it is the meaningfulness of his action toward and presence alongside his chosen people which now lay out of sight, are questioned and contested. The surviving prisoners know for a fact that hell exists, for that is where they are forced to live every day. They feel and believe that the evil they are subjected to transcends anything human agency can successfully resist and overcome. For Auschwitz is not only intended to exterminate a significant portion of humanity, but also at the same time to force
the latter to expiate its own humanity, the very fact that it is human. Guilt and shame pervade their heart and souls. Having witnessed the extermination of thousands of human beings, the idea that their survival depends on the death of so many others who did not deserve to die, the idea that they contributed to these deaths, even if involuntarily, by simply struggling for their own personal survival, and the idea that having rejected all moral values and imperatives, they had become insensitive to suffering and death in order to survive have all become unbearable to them. Despite being aware that what they should have been and done was beyond human powers to accomplish, the prisoners nevertheless feel and believe that they stand in need of absolute forgiveness (mercy), that is, that they stand under the judgment of God. Assistance must come from God, for the prisoners first to be able to overcome their expectations of manifestations of divine power to come from without, and empower them to become – through self-denial (death to self) – abodes for the divine in the midst of utter darkness, bearers and channels of divine grace in Auschwitz.

It is the task of the remaining chapters of the present dissertation to articulate with the help of theological categories the form and nature of this relationship of the human person to God as it could be and sometimes has been experienced in Auschwitz in a way that is instructive and formative for us today. Let us begin with a genetic presentation of the traditional understanding of God’s relationship to human beings; a relationship where God heals and elevates human beings to the supernatural, enabling them to obtain their fulfilment directly from and in him. The next part of this dissertation thus considers major stages in the formulation and development of the Christian doctrine of grace.
Part II: Grace in the Christian West
Prologue

In the span of the next three chapters, we offer a presentation of the doctrine of grace as it was developed and evolved in the context of Western Christianity. The purpose of the following exposition is not to provide a definitive interpretation and formulation of the Christian doctrine of grace as it is understood and professed in the churches of the west, but rather to gain a sense of the spirit animating and undergirding its genesis and the elaboration of the subsequent figures and forms it successively took throughout the history of western Christianity. We propose to accomplish this task by means of the careful consideration of teachings which have become inevitable landmarks in the landscape of the theology of grace, namely, those of Aurelius Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Fathers of Trent, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions are here represented through some of their most authoritative spokespersons, and this, in order to more fully respect and convey the substance of the traditional theology of grace related to human freedom as characteristic of the western world in its entirety.

Augustine, the doctor of grace, undeniably provided the western tradition with the context, foundation and essential concepts for the elaboration of its doctrine of grace. Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine undergirds Trent’s teaching on this topic (as exposed in the Decree on Justification) and still constitutes today, for Roman Catholic theologians, the necessary point of departure for any systematic treatment of the question of grace. Martin Luther’s, John Calvin’s and Trent’s theological teachings and pronouncements on grace – embodying the Reformation and the correlated Roman Catholic response – profoundly influenced the definition of both the Christian identity and theology in its modern figures, especially in regards to the doctrine of grace and its relations to human freedom and redemption. Karl Barth arguably is one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century to come from the Protestant tradition. The doctrine of grace plays a central role within his theology, systematically developed and exposed in the Church Dogmatics. The latter’s importance and influence on contemporary articulations of the
doctrine of grace simply cannot be ignored or denied. Lastly, Karl Rahner’s transposition of Aquinas’ teaching on grace in terms of the supernatural existential exercised considerable influence on the Roman Catholic theology of grace from the time of the second Vatican council onwards. Hence neither can his account be left aside. Let us now consider in turn and in chronological sequence, these key moments in the evolution and history of the western doctrine of grace in the hope that this study will provide us with positive insight into its unique underlying essence and spirit progressively unfolding itself in and through a multiplicity (series) of more and more developed and involved intrinsically interdependent expressions and forms.
Chapter Three

Augustine and Aquinas:
Foundation and Systematic Articulation

3.1. Aurelius Augustine: Developing a Christian Theology of Grace

3.1.1. Human Nature in Need of Healing

According to the bishop of Hippo, before the fall the first human beings enjoyed genuine freedom, the exercise of their own autonomous free wills, the ability to elect either good or evil as they wished and responsibility for the choices they made before God. Their “free choice was at that point so free that [they were] able to will both good and evil.”\(^{276}\) They could have chosen to remain under God’s direct guidance and this choice would have been credited to them as genuine merit, “for this freedom [that of not being able to sin] would also have been for Adam the reward of his merit, as it has become that of the holy angels.”\(^{277}\)

The problem is that Adam and Eve chose to turn away from God and, for this, they were severely (and justly) punished. “Adam abandoned God through free choice, he experienced the just judgment of God to the point that he was condemned along with all his offspring which in its entirety had sinned along with him when it was still located in him.”\(^{278}\) God had even provided Adam (and Eve) with special assistance, a “grace in which, if he willed to remain, he would never have been evil and without which he could not have been good even with free choice,”\(^{279}\) which is to say, in John Rist’s terms, that “Adam received an \textit{adiutorium sine quo non}, a degree of assistance which enabled him to choose the good if he wished.”\(^{280}\) Rist’s claim is confirmed by Augustine’s own words: “The former immortality man lost through the exercise of his free will. ... Even in that case, however, there could have been no merit without grace; because,

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\(^{277}\) Augustine, \textit{Rebuke and Grace}, 11, 32 (131-32).

\(^{278}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 10, 28 (128).

\(^{279}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 11, 31 (130).


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although the mere exercise of man’s free will was sufficient to bring in sin, his free will would not have sufficed for his maintenance in righteousness, unless God had assisted it by imparting a portion of his unchangeable goodness.”

By turning away from God in complete awareness and knowledge, Adam condemned himself and all his offspring (humanity as a whole) then “still located in him.” Though he seems never to have successfully accounted for the actual presence of Adam’s offspring within the person of Adam himself, Augustine was convinced that all humanity shared in his guilt: “We [human beings] share in his [Adam’s] sin; we share in his guilt and in the weakness which he has to endure in his fallen state. In a sense we are Adam.” Augustine’s teaching is clear: “God did nothing else than by a just sentence to condemn the man who wilfully sins, together with his stock; as a matter of course, whatsoever was even not yet born is justly condemned in its sinful root.”

The root of Adam and Eve’s crime, for Augustine, resides in their disruption of the created order and in what this action entailed: going away from God, they established themselves as sole and ultimate source of their being, thereby introducing in humanity “the major problem of self-reliance or pride, the fundamental way in which humans imitate the demons.” For pride consists in the wilful rejection of guidance from an external, superior authority and principle. The human creature’s radical (absolute) self-affirmation and determination severs the unity of creation by disrupting the latter’s intrinsic order, based on and defined by intrinsic dependence (subjectively experienced as love for) the Creator. In Augustine’s own words, “sin in man is perversity and lack of order, that is, a turning away from the Creator who is more excellent, and

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282 See John M. Rist, “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” 430: “When Adam sinned, he sinned with full knowledge.” This “full knowledge” is not the equivalent of the divine absolute knowledge or omniscience, for Augustine explicitly states that Adam was still “ignorant of his future fall,” which God evidently foreknew.


286 Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, chap. XLIII. Translation from *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 650 (hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).


288 See *ibid.*, 335: “The original sin of humanity, like that of the angels, was a disordered love of one’s own individual goodness and of dominion over the material world. The creature rejected the guidance of divine wisdom and proudly exercised autonomous choice.”
a turning to the creatures which are inferior to him.” Sin, for Augustine, involves a profound personal transformation perverting both the nature and object of human love.

The life which we live in this world has its attractiveness because of a certain measure in its beauty and its harmony with all these inferior objects that are beautiful. Human friendship is also a nest of love and gentleness because of the unity it brings about between many souls. Yet sin is committed for the sake of all these things and others of this kind when, in consequence of an immoderate urge towards those things which are at the bottom end of the scale of good, we abandon the higher and supreme goods, that is you, Lord God, and your truth and your law.

Humankind set itself – a created good, instead of the Creator God – as ultimate good and by so doing wilfully disrupted the created order. Such intentionally pursed inordinate desire for the ontologically inferior constitutes sin.

The will, therefore, which cleaves to the unchangeable good that is common to all, obtains man’s first and best good things though it is itself only an intermediate good. But the will which turns from the unchangeable and common good and turns to its own private good or to anything exterior or inferior, sins. It turns to its own private good, when it wills to be governed by its own authority; to what is exterior, when it is eager to know what belongs to others and not to itself; to inferior things, when it loves bodily pleasure.

Since, says Augustine, “God [had] made human beings upright from the beginning,” and knowing that “there is no injustice with God,” human opposition to the divine will rightly deserve retribution and punishment to be exercised by divine justice upon the disobedient.

The ultimate consequence of Adam and Eve’s choice to put their trust in themselves alone was that humanity as a whole was to become entirely helpless and enslaved to evil (sin), no longer being able to accomplish the good. Augustine’s words betray no equivocation: “No one is by himself sufficient for either beginning or carrying out any good work.” “If your merits come from yourself, they are evil merits which God does not crown.”


Augustine, *Rebuke and Grace*, 6, 9 (113). Augustine had already expressed in 396 CE the same idea even more clearly: “Now all men are a mass of sin, since, as the apostle says, ‘In Adam all die’ (1 Cor 15:22), and to Adam the entire human race traces the origin of its sin against God. Sinful humanity must pay a debt of punishment to the supreme divine justice” (*To Simplician – On Various Questions*, I, q. 2, 16 [398]).

Augustine, *The Predestination of the Saints*, 1, 2 (150).

will without any sin, and he made it a slave to sin.””\textsuperscript{295} Augustine claims that through Adam’s fault, human free will has been lost, human beings now being enslaved to sin. “As a man who kills himself must, of course, be alive when he kills himself, but after he has killed himself ceases to live, and cannot restore himself to life; so, when man by his own free will sinned, then sin being victorious over him, the freedom of his will was lost.”\textsuperscript{296} Since God – the source and principle of all things – is completely devoid of evil and injustice, Augustine cannot but conclude that “the origin of evil stems from the free choice of the will,”\textsuperscript{297} because creation, as the fruit of divine creative action, cannot be evil. Properly speaking, then, fallen human beings are at once the sufficient principle of the evil they commit and entirely incapable of generating good.

Evil and sin reside in and stem from the human free will, progressively taking hold, slowly conquering the whole will by fostering division and establishing itself as a stable disposition (a second nature). As Augustine states, “the law of sin is the violence of habit by which even the unwilling mind is dragged down and held, as it deserves to be, since by its own choice it slipped into the habit.”\textsuperscript{298} Sin benefits from the passivity of the will which, unaware, allows for more and more of its dominion to be incrementally taken away. “The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. ... In large part I was passive and unwilling rather than active and willing. But I was responsible for the fact that habit had become so embattled against me; for it was with my consent that I came to the place in which I did not wish to be.”\textsuperscript{299} The invasion of the will by sin results in the coexistence of multiple conflicting wills simultaneously pretending to rule the individual. This internal conflict weakens the will’s ability to induce the individual to act, paralysing and eventually subjecting her to an alien principle (by means of vices). “The willing is not wholehearted, so the command is not wholehearted. ... The will that commands is incomplete, and therefore what it commands does not happen. ... I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself.”\textsuperscript{300}

\textsuperscript{295} Augustine, \textit{Rebuke and Grace}, 12, 35 (133).
\textsuperscript{296} Augustine, \textit{The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love}, chap. XXX (675).
\textsuperscript{297} Augustine, \textit{The Gift of Perseverance}, 11, 27 (207).
\textsuperscript{298} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, VIII, v (12) [141].
\textsuperscript{299} \textit{Ibid.}, VIII, v (10-11) [140].
\textsuperscript{300} \textit{Ibid.}, VIII, ix (21) – x (22) [148].
3.1.2. A Mediator and His Gifts

If fallen humans are to act righteously again, this will happen only through the immediate intercession of God: “We must understand the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. It alone sets human beings free from evil, and without it they do nothing good whether in thinking, in willing and loving, or in acting. Grace not merely teaches them so that they know what they should do, but also grants that they do with love what they know.”\textsuperscript{301} Without the mediation of Jesus Christ and his grace, human beings are strictly incapable of the good and cannot obtain salvation.

Whoever maintains that human nature at any period required not the second Adam for its physician, because it was not corrupted in the first Adam, is convicted as an enemy to the grace of God. ... From the moment, when “by the one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, in whom all sinned,” the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt, and fell into the possession of its destroyer. And from him no one – no, not one – has been delivered, or is being delivered, or ever will be delivered, except by the grace of the Redeemer.\textsuperscript{302}

Jesus Christ, both human and divine in the unity of his person, pure expression of the divine mercy, effects a perfect mediation between humankind and God. Being and coming from God, he assumes the human identity and nature. In a definitive and perfect self-offering (perfectly holy, untainted by sin), he acts as both priest and offering, thereby reconciling and elevating humankind to God. In and through him, human beings are made to partake in the supernatural existence and life of the Triune God.

The true Mediator you showed to humanity in your secret mercy. ... He appeared among mortal sinners as the immortal righteous one, mortal like humanity, righteous like God. ... Being united with God by his righteousness, he made void the death of justified sinners, a death which it was his will to share in common with them. ... It is as man that he is mediator. He is not midway as Word; for the Word is equal to God and “God with God,” and at the same time there is but one God. ... For us he was victorious before you and victor because he was victim. For us before you he is priest and sacrifice, and priest because he is sacrifice. Before you he makes us sons instead of servants by being born of you and being servant to us. With good reason my firm hope is in him. For you will cure all my diseases through him who sits at your right hand and intercedes with you for us.\textsuperscript{303}

\textsuperscript{301} Augustine, \textit{Rebuke and Grace}, 2, 3 (110).
\textsuperscript{302} Augustine, \textit{On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin}, chap. XXXIV (643-44). See also Augustine, \textit{On Nature and Grace}, II: “If Christ did not die in vain, then human nature cannot by any means be justified and redeemed from God’s most righteous wrath – in a word, from punishment – except by faith and the sacrament of the blood of Christ.” Translation from \textit{Basic Writings of Saint Augustine}, 523 (hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
\textsuperscript{303} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, X, xliii (68-69) [219-20].
Jesus’ pure self-sacrifice on behalf of humankind is unsurpassable, for in and through it, all things are united and fulfilled. “Four things are to be considered in every sacrifice: by whom it is offered, to whom it is offered, what is offered, and for whom it is offered. Therefore, the same one and true Mediator himself reconciled us with God by the sacrifice of peace, in order that we might remain one with him to whom it was offered, in order to make those for whom it was offered one in himself, and in order that he himself might be both the one who offered, and the one who was offered.”

By and in Jesus Christ grace is bestowed upon sinful humankind, freeing the latter from slavery to sin, empowering and assisting her in the accomplishment of the good. Human beings are called to collaborate to the redeeming work accomplished by Christ in and through them.

We ourselves bring it to pass; that is to say, we ourselves justify our own selves. In this matter, no doubt, we do ourselves, too, work; but we are fellow-workers with him who does the work, because his mercy anticipates us. He anticipates us, however, that we may be healed; but then he will also follow us, that being healed we may grow healthy and strong. He anticipates us that we may be called; he will follow us that we may be glorified. He anticipates us that we may lead godly lives; he will follow us that we may always live with him, because without him we can do nothing.

Grace, thus, when understood as God’s saving gift, identifies with the Holy Spirit. Sent by Christ upon humankind to indwell the latter’s heart, the Holy Spirit enables it to express genuine (supernatural) love for God. “The human will is so divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness, that [the human being] receives the Holy Spirit, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God” in such a way that “our very will, without which we cannot do any good thing, is assisted and elevated by the importation of the Spirit of grace.” For human beings, perfect righteousness consists in the expression of perfect love for God itself “poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

306 Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, V. Translation from *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 463 (hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
307 Ibid., XX (476).
308 See Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, XLIX (553), where the bishop of Hippo speaks of “persons who have had, are having, or are to have the love of God so perfectly as to admit of no addition to it (for nothing short of this amounts to a most true, full, and perfect righteousness).”
Such pure gifts coming from the divine out of sheer love, apart from any human merits, embody the true expression of divine grace, since “it is, of course, not grace if any merits come before it, for what is given, not as grace, but as something due, is a repayment for merits rather than a gift.”

Hence, in the fallen state, human merits themselves are to be conceived as gracious gifts of God to humankind: “The grace of God is not given according to our merits because all the merits of the righteous are also the gifts of God and conferred by the grace of God.”

Emphasizing that “good works do not produce but are produced by grace,” Augustine then shows that works are required as the natural (or rather supernatural) fruits of grace. “When the apostle [Paul] says that he considers we are made just through faith without the works of the law, he does not mean that works of justice should be disdained once faith is accepted and professed but that everyone should know that he can be made just through faith even if he did not perform the works of the law before. They do not come beforehand, before the person is made just, but they follow afterwards, when the person has been made just.”

A faith that does not lead to the production of good deeds is a dead faith which cannot redeem. As Augustine explains, “faith achieves nothing, unless it is faith as the apostle defines it, namely, the faith that works through love ... without works it cannot bring salvation.”

As ordained minister and representative of Christ, Augustine wishes to help his congregation adopt a way of life that cuts at the root the evil that has prevented humanity from enjoying a perfect and happy existence under God’s guidance. The preaching Augustine incites his parishioners to eliminate from their lives all possible sources of boasting or pride. Since the primary source of pride is none other than merit obtained from the perpetration of good deeds, Augustine opts for a radical stance on the issue of grace and works: all merits are to be ascribed to God alone. The only attitude human beings can ever adopt toward God is that of absolute obedience and humility. “Let our confession,” writes Augustine, “be humble and submissive and let everything be ascribed to God.”

The real significance of this claim lies deeper than might seem at first glance. If, in the Lord’s Prayer, human beings ask God to be given perseverance in virtues they lack, these perseverance and virtues can only be gracious gifts received from God. As Augustine notes, “this prayer of the Lord would alone be enough for us for the cause of grace

310 Augustine, The Predestination of the Saints, 3, 7 (153).
312 Augustine, To Simplician – On Various Questions, I, q. 2, 3 (388).
313 Augustine, Faith and Works, 14 (21) [241].
314 Ibid., 16 (27) [245].
which we are defending, for it leaves nothing to us in which we might boast as if in something of our own.”

These virtues include “even the beginning of faith … just as self-control, patience, justice, piety,” alongside prayer, and perseverance. Human beings, in order not to fall back into sin, also need the constant and continuous presence (or offer) of the divine assistance which constitutes the only stable basis on which they can morally stand and lean, for “if grace is withdrawn, a human being falls, no longer standing upright, but cast headlong by free choice.”

3.1.3. Human Freedom?

But can any action or element of an action be ascribed primarily to human agency? The answer seems to be an outright “no,” for as Augustine bluntly states, “our good life is nothing but the grace of God.” In fact, even their will does not lie within the reach of human beings, for God, while bestowing grace on them, not only awakens desire, but the very willing itself. Augustine observes 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.” When God offers grace to human beings, he induces the willing in accordance to his own will, and there is nothing human beings can do to prevent their will from being thus altered: “Human wills cannot resist his [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.” This is no negligible claim, for the word *voluntas*, usually translated as “will,” “does not denote for Augustine a part of the human psyche; rather it is the human psyche in its role as a moral agent … Thus *voluntas* is not a decision-making faculty of the individual, as subsequent philosophy might lead us to suppose, but the individual himself … It is the basic core of the human person.”

To control the will implies controlling the individual as a whole, and not simply a part of the human person. This state of fact leads Rist to admit the existence, in the case of fallen human beings, of a “basic

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316 I*bid.*, 7, 13 (198).
317 Augustine, *The Predestination of the Saints*, 21, 43 (185). See also *The Gift of Perseverance* 3, 6 (194) where Augustine explains that conversion and the beginning of faith are prayed for by faithful Christians for other people, thus implying that they are to be considered gifts from God: “The beginning of faith is a gift of God since the holy Church prays not only for believers that their faith may be increased or persevere, but also for nonbelievers that they may begin to have that faith which they did not have at all and to which their hearts are opposed.”
318 See Augustine, *The Gift of Perseverance*, 23, 64 (235): “It also belongs to the divine gift that we pray, that is, that we ask, seek, and knock. For we have received the Spirit of adoption as children in whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ Blessed Ambrose also saw this, for he says, ‘And to pray to God pertains to spiritual grace, as scripture said, No one can say, ’Jesus is Lord,’ except in the Holy Spirit’” (1 Cor 12:6).”
319 See ibid., 24, 66 (235): “Both to begin to believe and to persevere in the Lord up to the end are gifts of God.”
320 Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice*, 6, 13 (79).
321 I*bid.*, 8, 20 (84).
323 Augustine, *Rebuke and Grace*, 14, 45 (139-40).
Augustinian alternative: man is slave either of God or of evil, either of *caritas* or of *cupiditas*. And those who are the slaves of *caritas* are made so by God.”

Augustine himself unequivocally describes the condition of the human will in terms of enslavement. The human will “is either free from righteousness when it is enslaved to sin, and then it is evil, or it is free from sin when it is enslaved to righteousness, and then it is good.”

The condition of human beings, after Adam and Eve’s fall, is thus that of “slaves” either to sin or to God. Human willing identifies with human doing which is wholly ascribed to the master obeyed (sin or God).

The complete sufficiency of grace entails, for the human will and mind, the impossibility to resist the action of divine grace. For the action of divine grace to be effective, no positive contribution from the individual is required. Grace is the sufficient principle of human action deserving and leading to salvation.

More than only being irresistible and sufficient, grace – for Augustine – is also necessary for each and every good and righteous deed effectuated by a human being.

All merits earned through the accomplishment of righteous deeds and actions are furthermore to be ascribed strictly and only to God. Glory is the prerogative of God alone.

Humankind, in the fallen state, is so incapable of earning merits that all it can ever accomplish and concretely realise without God’s assistance is to sin. This powerlessness of fallen humanity logically follows, for Augustine, from the fact that human agency and freedom have already been overtaken by sin and are now being ruled by it. From a purely human perspective, there are and can be no future and hope for humankind, for human agency and freedom have

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327 See Rist, “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” 422: “For Augustine, if a man does something, he ‘wills’ it.”
328 See James Wetzel, “Pelagius Anticipated: Grace and Election in Augustine’s *Ad Simplicianum*,” in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. J. McWilliam (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 126: “The irresistibility of grace, properly understood, is equivalent to the doctrine of the sufficiency of grace – the idea that God’s redemptive work can succeed on any human will, whatever the severity of its pathology. Human beings do not have to begin to cure themselves in order for God to get involved.”
329 See Theodore T. Shimmyo, “Free Will in Saint Augustine’s Doctrine of Predestination,” *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987): 139: “Augustine affirms the absolute sovereignty of grace over the will … [T]he divine decrees are never impeded by man’s will … [E]very act without exception is the fruit of a grace from God.” See also John M. Rist, “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” 435: “They [the elect] not only cannot act without God’s help, or will without God’s help, but even the acceptance or rejection of help is dictated to them. No vestige of Adam’s free choice thus remains.”
330 See Rebecca H. Weaver, “Augustine’s Use of Scriptural Admonitions Against Boasting in His Final Arguments on Grace,” in *Studia Patristica, Vol. XXVII: Cappadocian Fathers, Greek Authors after Nicaea, Augustine, Donatism, and Pelagianism*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 425: “[G]lory belongs only to God since the spiritual goods that a person possesses are not self-derived but are divine gifts. They are received from the one to whom all glory is to be given.”
331 See Carol Harrison, “Delectatio Victrix: Grace and Freedom in Saint Augustine,” in *Studia Patristica, Vol. XXVII*, 298: “All that remains to his [Adam’s] descendants is a will which is free only in the sense that it is free to sin: it is unable to do the good … He [man] can do nothing of himself, but sin.”
been bound and reduced to inefficiency. Under the current rule of sin, the human person does not possess herself, is not her own, but entirely belongs to sin.\textsuperscript{332}

Since God – by predestination – sets apart the few elect upon whom he will bestow his grace, the remainder of humanity being intentionally left to their own means, God alone has the power to change the condition of the fallen. Considering that only the intercession of God’s grace enables human beings to accomplish the good, the ultimate spiritual fate of each human person hangs on God’s bestowal or withholding of his grace.\textsuperscript{333} Repudiation of free choice between good and evil is much easier to justify in a context of pervasive moral corruption and sinfulness, for this kind of freedom seems to imply that good and evil are equivalent and originate from the same principle. If an agent is free to do either good or evil, she must in some way transcend and contain both within her individuality, which in turn suggests that good and evil in fact have sprung out of only one fundamental source. Such an argument seems to have carried weight in Augustine’s mind, for as O’Daly remarks, “the ground of Augustine’s objection to liberty of indifference is that ‘it has established one and the same root of good and evil,’ that is to say, that it posits the same cause of opposite effects.”\textsuperscript{334} Freedom of choice, so vitiated by sin, is certainly not the kind of freedom Augustine, so desperately hoping to see and meet God, craved for and envisioned as worthy of beholding absolute goodness and love. Far from conceiving freedom of indifference as an ideal to be pursued by human beings or as the ground of their dignity, he rather perceived in it something to be done away with.

3.1.4. A Holy Bondage

The previous remarks do not prevent Augustine from acknowledging and advocating the existence of human free will in some other sense. Augustine certainly admits the existence of human freedom understood as absence of or exemption from external constraints and impediments. What comes first in Augustine’s mind is spontaneity of action, the unimpeded

\textsuperscript{332} See William S. Babcock, “Augustine’s Interpretation of Romans: (A.D. 394-396),” \textit{Augustinian Studies} 10 (1979): 61: “Augustine has pictured a human state in which a person must struggle against a self which is not merely resistant to the will, but is actually beyond his own control, which conquers him rather than being conquered by him.”

\textsuperscript{333} See Gerard O’Daly, “Predestination and Freedom in Augustine’s Ethics,” in \textit{The Philosophy in Christianity}, ed. G. Vesey (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9: “Predestination to damnation is simply the withholding by God of grace from those he does not will to save. That is to say, whereas predestination to salvation is actively caused by God, God merely permits the damned to suffer the consequences of Adam’s sin … We might say that the predestination of the damned is the negative condition of their damnation. Condemned through the solidarity of all humans with Adam, they are predestined because God foreknows that he will not give them the grace to be saved.”

\textsuperscript{334} \textit{Ibid.}, 93.
exercise of created free agency, not autonomy and self-control. Rist aptly describes Augustine’s view: “Man is … free in the sense only of being arranged to act in a way which is not subject to external pressures. All men are thus ‘free’; the elect are free from serious sins, the damned are free from virtue.” The saved cannot but act in accordance with the irresistible, sufficient, and necessary grace of God. The condemned cannot do anything else than sinning, because they cannot overcome the power of their concupiscence. The condemned can therefore be said “free of virtue,” for they will never experience it, and the saved “free of sin,” since they will only commit non-damageable ones. The condemned and the saved are also free in the sense that nothing will ever prevent the former from sinning and the latter from doing good, because God’s will cannot be impeded.

Augustine interprets Scripture as presupposing human beings’ enjoyment of genuine free will. This he sees verified especially in the divine commands. “Where, of course, it [Scripture] says, ‘Do not do this,’ and ‘Do not do that,’ and where in God’s counsels the act of the will is required for doing or for not doing something, the existence of free choice is sufficiently proven.” Augustine even claims that responsibility ought not be taken away from the individual, but wholly imputed to her. “Let no one, then, accuse God in his heart, but let each person blame himself when he sins. And when he does something as God wants, let him not take this away from his own will. For, when he does it willingly, he should call it a good act, and he should hope for the reward of a good act from him of whom it is said, He will repay each according to his works (Matt 16:27; Rom 2:6; Rev 22:12).” As soon as there is human willing, there is human responsibility. Genuine and actual willing translates into action, which in turn builds up and constitutes the identity of the moral agent. From a moral and spiritual standpoint, human persons are what they do, and they do what they will, even if they do not or ever possess absolute control over their own agency.

In Augustine’s mind, human beings can only exercise positive agency and freedom within the context of divine grace, that is, in and by cooperating with the primary agency of

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335 See ibid., 96: “Augustine’s view of free will amounts to liberty of spontaneity. It is not so much the ability to do otherwise, as the ability to act free of compulsion or constraint.”
337 Augustine, Grace and Free Choice, 2, 4 (73-74).
338 Ibid., 2, 4 (74).
339 See Gerard O’Daly, “Predestination and Freedom in Augustine’s Ethics,” 91: “For Augustine, the notion of ‘compulsion of the will’ is nonsensical. Augustine takes this view because he is convinced of the self-evident nature of the fact that we will … He believes that this fact about us … is corroborated by the authority of Scripture, where divine commands, promises, and threats, and the whole apparatus of divine rewards and punishments, entail the concept of human freedom and responsibility.”
divine grace as the latter accomplishes supernatural actions in and for them. Patout Burns rightfully assuming that for Augustine “the initial grace of conversion, faith, and forgiveness is both gratuitous and efficacious,” also justifiably defends that for the Bishop of Hippo “the subsequent grace of charity, however, does require a free human cooperation, which it facilitates but does not produce” and this, because “this cooperation with grace in good willing and working is necessary for eternal salvation.” It is also true, as Harrison contends, that “in some contexts … Augustine does seem to allow some room for man’s cooperation with God: he often speaks of the will being prepared by God … He also described God as a helper (adjutor) and comments that ‘the very name of Helper tells you that you yourself are active’ (Serm. 156.11).” Consider, for instance, the following passage from Grace and Free Choice: “He works, therefore, without us so that we will, but when we will and will so that we do the action, he works along with us; nonetheless, without his either working so that we will or his working along with us when we will, we can do nothing in terms of works of piety.” Similarly, in On the Spirit and the Letter, Augustine argues that grace does not oppose or annihilate human freedom but instead sets it on solid foundations: “As the law is not made void, but is established through faith, since faith procures grace whereby the law is fulfilled; so free will is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved.” God, therefore, by anticipating, assisting and following human freedom, heals and empowers the latter to accomplish meritorious actions, “for he begins by working in us that we will and works along with our wills in making them perfect.”

No doubt, Augustine contends that the will cannot be coerced into willing, in determinate fashion, from without. While always subject to incitements induced by external objects and powers, for any action to ensue the will must always give its inalienable consent. Augustine’s Confessions – as his own reinterpretation of his life (not God’s) –, offers sufficient evidence of the human will’s actual and undeniable involvement in each and every action perpetrated by the individual. Neither the hold exercised by sin or by divine grace over the human will is powerful enough to completely deny and obliterate the will’s effective participation in human action.

341 Carol Harrison, “Delectatio Victrix,” 299.
342 Augustine, Grace and Free Choice, 17, 33 (94).
344 Augustine, Grace and Free Choice, 17, 33 (94).
345 See James Wetzel, “Pelagius Anticipated,” 130: “Augustine insists that the one inalienable contribution that human beings make to their own redemption is the consent that they give to the divine influence at work within them.”
Wetzel explains, “Augustine was too good a psychologist to be seduced by conversions which took the humanity out of the conversion and too good a theologian to rest very comfortably with appeals to divine omnipotence.”\textsuperscript{346} Augustine believed that “even in the most radical self-overcomings, there is a trace of the old self remaining.”\textsuperscript{347} His conversion reached its completion only when the entire process had been later reinterpreted and appropriated by Augustine himself. Converts must contribute to their conversion by at least giving inalienable consent to their own transformation. Otherwise, this conversion would not be theirs and they would not be free, for they would simply no longer exist, having been, as free creatures, annihilated.

Augustine defended, preached and practised an ascetic mode of life. He felt strongly about the need for and necessity of spiritual exercising. As Aaron Stalnaker explains, “Augustine regards the Christian life – in lay, clerical, and monastic forms – as consisting essentially of the practice of spiritual exercises.”\textsuperscript{348} If God’s grace is at all times to be considered the primary agent of human spiritual progress, this in itself does not deny the necessity for secondary agency, it rather emphasises it, for otherwise recommending the practice of spiritual exercising to other persons would be nonsensical. For such recommendations presuppose that their recipients do influence the very progression of their faith and righteousness. So, when “at various times, to various audiences, Augustine recommends practices such as sexual restraint or renunciation, voluntary poverty, almsgiving, communal ownership of property, fasting, self-examination, private and public confession, various kinds of prayer, bible study and other sorts of learning (including the traditional liberal arts), philosophical dialogue, brotherly rebuke, and various forms of penance,”\textsuperscript{349} all these activities and practices require the active participation of human agency in her own development and formation.

3.1.5. Love Is Freedom

The central issue for Augustine was the participation of the human person in the very essence of God, of her dwelling in and being embraced by the light of love and goodness. J. Patout Burns explains that “instead of focusing on autonomy, Augustine explained created freedom as a participation in God’s unfailing love of goodness and thus of each creature according to its degree of sharing in that goodness and being. He identified the freedom that deliberates and chooses between good and evil, the power to sin or not to sin, as a deficient form

\textsuperscript{346} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid., 138.
of true liberty.” Augustine’s comparison of Adam’s free choice before the fall with the impossibility of sinning shows the truth of Patout Burns’ claims: “What will be more free than free choice when it will no longer be able to be a slave to sin?” Clearly, Augustine attributes more value to the impossibility of sinning than to the capacity to choose between good and evil. The idea is that humans must at all costs make sure they never turn away from God, because they are in their very essence a dire lack of and desire for God’s own love and essence. If, in order to be fulfilled, they must allow grace to overturn and override their defective free choice, why would human beings not agree to such a sacrifice? “In order to love God as the highest good and to love creatures in their relation to God,” further explains Patout Burns, “the created person must participate in God’s own love for God and for the world as God governs it. This love is not an activity of the creature alone; it is the effect of the grace of charity and the fruit of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

Because “charity is not a part of the natural constitution of any creature,” due to the fact that “only God is indefectibly good,” for any creature to participate in God, God must enable the creature to do so. God must actively transform human beings to enable them to share in his nature, because only God is capable and worthy of God. In this context, freedom is not of choice, but rather is grace, for the indwelling action of the Holy Spirit within human beings’ very souls is the only means by which they can ever become capable of the love that is God.

Any willing which is independent of the Holy Spirit’s influence and belongs to the creature alone is disordered and sinful. Thus, for Augustine, true freedom is the fruit of grace rather than the property or achievement of nature. ... Augustine’s notion of freedom, therefore, does not value autonomous choice. The divine will is by nature identical with unfailing love of goodness. Although God enjoys the supreme freedom, the divine will cannot even deliberate on a choice between good and evil.

Wetzel reaches a similar conclusion when he says:

What is anything human to God? Nothing unless God has claimed it first. Augustine allows himself the audacious thought that his desire for God is first of all God’s desire for God, because no other alternative conforms to the truth of his existence. He is here because God created him to seek and become part of God,

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351 Augustine, Rebu...e and Grace, 11, 32 (131).
353 Ibid., 337.
354 Ibid., 337-38.
and this despite the fact that a being sufficient unto itself has no motive to create or relate to anything outside itself.\textsuperscript{355}

For Augustine, the elect cannot miss the mark and elude being saved, because by the action grace exercises upon them they already are in God, have become part of God, and are progressively led to more complete participation in God. Assuming he was among the elect, for he actually experienced God’s gracious work within himself, Augustine saw no reason to refuse what was happening to and within himself, at once in spite of himself and in accordance with his own will, for his will was ordained and subservient to God’s. Hence, it is not without good reasons that M. Cleary claims that for Augustine, “true freedom of action is to be found in being supremely attracted to someone in such a way that love becomes so gradually unimpeded that nothing holds us back; no alternatives, no matter how superficially attractive, can take the place of delighting in the presence of someone to whom we are naturally drawn, for we were created for him.”\textsuperscript{356}

That Augustine shares such a vision of love is embodied in the fact that for him genuine love – the love of God – culminates in a vision, the vision of God as God is in Godself. “The longing of truly devout souls,” argues Augustine, “by which they desire to see God and burn with eager love for him, is not enkindled, I think, by desire to see that aspect under which he appears as he wills, but which is not himself; they long for the substance by which he is what he is.”\textsuperscript{357} The vision of the invisible God in Godself is granted to some in and through Jesus Christ who, as Word, is the perfect (simple) revelation of the Godhead. “The only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father without sound of words declares the nature and substance of the Godhead, and therefore to eyes that are worthy and fit for such appearance he shows it invisibly. ... For the Lord is spirit; ... consequently, he who can see God invisibly can be joined to God incorporeally.”\textsuperscript{358} The spiritual vision of God supposes bypassing the normal process of cognition which abstracts intelligible natures from images provided by the senses. The spiritual vision of God entails the determination of the intellect (or of the human soul as a whole) with the divine being through direct, immediate impression. Augustine believes that such a vision is precisely what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus.

Another point that can trouble us is how it was possible for the very substance of God to be seen by some while in this life, in view of what was said to Moses: “No

\textsuperscript{355} James Wetzel, “Snares of Truth,” 134-35.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., chap. 37 (205).
man can see my face and live,” unless it is possible for the human mind to be divinely rapt from this life to the angelic life, before it is freed from the flesh by our common death. He who heard “secret words which it is not granted to man to utter” was so rapt that a certain turning away of his consciousness from the senses of this life took place. ... The mind must necessarily be withdrawn from this life when it is caught up to the ineffable reality of that vision.\(^{359}\)

The previous developments show that Augustine’s theology of the current human condition is concerned first and foremost with the healing of the human soul, with the restoration of human freedom and of the created order which had been deleteriously and definitively damaged through the first human beings’ misuse of their own agency. This healing and restoration involve the reorientation of creation and more particularly of the human heart and will toward their true ultimate goal and fulfilment, namely, the triune God. Enslaved to sin to the point of not being aware of it, help must come to human beings from without in the person of the unique and universal mediator, Jesus Christ. Uniting perfect humanity and divinity in his person, Jesus’ spotless and free loving self-offer on behalf of all human beings reveals the radically merciful nature of the triune God who takes upon Godself to provide lost humankind with a purely gratuitous access to eternal happiness. As a consequence, human beings are to receive everything they are and do – their renewed nature and the capacity to actualise it – from God. In and through Jesus Christ, grace, that is, the Holy Spirit – the reality and gift of divine love per se – is poured into their hearts. From this divinely infused love flows the creature’s ability to cling to God absolutely and spontaneously, fulfilling the human heart and life. Sin – the disordered love for creatures – is progressively relegated into the realm of mere possibility and ultimately, in the afterlife, into complete inexistence, the whole individual being then spiritually united to God in love.

3.2. Thomas Aquinas: Canvassing a Systematic Treatment of Grace

3.2.1. A More Integrative Perspective

Fully endorsing Augustine’s teaching on grace in its essentials, the original theological work of Thomas Aquinas inserts it within a theoretical context and framework which both clarified and integrated the multiple aspects and functions accomplished by divine grace in relation to human freedom and salvation. With Aquinas, some fundamental distinctions are for the first time provided with coherent systematic articulation. According to Jean-Marc Laporte,

We find in his writings a number of integrating insights which have become the backbone of the classical tradition on grace, those which relate grace (the

\(^{359}\) *Ibid.*, chap. 31 (199).
supernatural) and nature (the connatural), healing and elevating grace, habitual and actual grace. In some of these integrations Aquinas is attempting to reconcile the different emphases of Eastern and Western theologies of grace, emphases which we find juxtaposed in the thought of Augustine, rather than integrated in a fuller theoretical perspective. Aquinas’ willingness to deal with the East as well as with the West is a sign that he was instinctively aware of the need for balance.  

Aquinas understands the dynamics of the divine grace – human freedom interaction within the context of a comprehensive theological anthropology. The human being and condition are understood as inserted within a highly structured universe intrinsically oriented toward God, the principle, source and goal of its existence. In this section, we follow Aquinas as he leads us from divine predestination to human salvation in the beatific vision (of God) through God’s exercise of providence, from creation to renewal and redemption in Jesus Christ, from the fall to grace. All things begin in and with God, all things end and are fulfilled in God. With Aquinas, all things possess cosmological proportions and implications, for the love, power and will of God are intrinsically one and universal. Their created effects can only exist within their unity and universality; these effects must be globally integrated. The incarnation clearly shows that in the divine design, human beings are meant to play a central role. Their fate and destiny impacts and coincides with those of the entire creation. Hence, in this section, we follow Aquinas through his final masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae*.

Aquinas fully unveils the cosmological import and meaning of Augustine’s insight that human beings are called by God to share in the divine being and existence.

We are bound to profess that divine providence rules all things, not only in their general natures, but also as individuals. Since every efficient cause acts for an end, the purposed ordering of effects extends as far as the causality of the first cause engaged. ... Now the causality of God, who is the first efficient cause, covers all existing things, immortal and mortal alike, and not only their specific principles but also the source of their singularity. Hence everything that is real in any way whatsoever is bound to be directed by God to an end. Since his providence is naught else than the idea whereby all things are planned to an end, we conclude quite strictly that all things insofar as they are real come under divine providence. 

Divine providence also embraces the actions of free creatures such as human beings and angels (created spirits), even when the latter misbehave and act in ways that oppose the divine will.

Because the very act of free will goes back to God as its cause, we strictly infer that whatever men freely do on their own falls under God’s providence. Indeed

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their providing for themselves is contained under God’s providing as a particular under a universal cause. God makes higher provision for the just than for the unjust, inasmuch as he does not let anything happen that would finally prevent their salvation. We speak of him as abandoning sinners, because he does not hold them back from moral evil; but it is not that he casts them out from his care altogether; they would fall into nothingness unless his providence kept them in being.\(^{362}\)

For Aquinas, creatures are nothing in and of themselves. All they are and do, they ultimately derive and obtain from another, upon whom they absolutely depend for their existence and fulfilment. “Just as every created thing only has being from another, and considered in itself is nothing, so it needs to be conserved in the good appropriate to its nature by another. But it can fall short of the good itself, just as it can fall away into non-being by itself, if it were not conserved in being by God.”\(^{363}\)

The divine action and mode of causality are adapted to the being and nature of the creatures upon which they exercise primary causation. In the case of free creatures (such as the human being), divine causation does not deny but sets into existence and enables the exercise of genuine second-order (created) freedom.

Free decision spells self-determination because man by his free decision moves himself into action. Freedom does not require that a thing is its own first cause, just as in order to be the cause of something else a thing does not have to be its first cause. God is the first cause on which both natural and free agents depend. And just as his initiative does not prevent natural causes from being natural, so it does not prevent voluntary action from being voluntary but rather makes it precisely this. For God works in each according to its nature.\(^{364}\)

The exercise of human free will presupposes the existence of a definite orientation to all human actions. Human freedom is not the ultimate ground of its self-determination, for it operates always within the horizon defined by a pre-given ultimate end for its own activity.

The movement of the will is a sort of bent towards something. Just as something is called natural because it accords with a natural bent, so a thing is called voluntary when it accords with the bent of the will. ... Necessity given some end in view is compatible with willing, in the case where some end can be attained only by one method; for instance if we will to cross the sea we must of necessity will a ship. Likewise, natural necessity is not incompatible with willing. Indeed it

\(^{362}\) Ibid., Ia, q. 22, a. 2, ad. 4 (97).

\(^{363}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 109, a. 2, ad. 2, vol. 30: The Gospel of Grace, tr. C. Ernst (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1972), 77 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).

\(^{364}\) Ibid., Ia, q. 83, a. 1, ad. 3, vol. 11: Man, tr. T. Suttor (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1970), 239 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
is most necessary that the will of necessity cleave to its final fulfilment, happiness.\textsuperscript{365}

In other words, the human freedom and will do not determine the ultimate end whose actualization they pursue. Assuming it as a given,\textsuperscript{366} they rather derive the nature and sequence of means by which the fulfilment of this end will be brought about. “We are masters of our acts in that we choose this or that. But we choose, not the end, but things for the sake of the end. Hence our desire for ultimate fulfilment is not one of the things we are master of.”\textsuperscript{367}

\textbf{3.2.2. Created for the Supernatural}

The definition and possibility of human freedom hangs on the existence of a threefold indeterminacy in the will in regards to its object. Human beings are free to opt for the set of means they deem most appropriate for the actualization of their ultimate end. They are also free to put these means into action when and under the circumstances they judge most appropriate. Human freedom therefore depends on the knowledge human beings acquire of their own end and of the means suitable to fulfill it.

There is found to be indeterminacy of the will in regard to three things: its object, its act, and its ordination to its end. ... The will necessarily desires the last end in such a way that it is unable not to desire it, but it does not necessarily desire any of the means. In their regard, then, it is within the power of the will to desire this or that. In the second place the will is undetermined in regard to its act, because even concerning a determined object it can perform its act or not perform it when it wishes. It can pass or not pass into the act of willing with regard to anything at all. ... A third indetermination of the will is found in regard to its ordination to its end inasmuch as the will can desire what is in truth directed to its appointed end or what is so only in appearance.\textsuperscript{368}

The will’s indeterminacy is itself rooted in the spiritual dimension of the human being. The human soul (first act or form of the human composite) is spiritual in nature and, in this regard, is not subject to univocal determinisms characteristic of material entities. The soul’s proper good (actualization and end) embraces a great many particular goods and can take a multiplicity of forms. “Since the will, like the mind, is a certain non-material force, there corresponds to it one common reality, namely being good, as there corresponds to mind one common reality, namely

\textsuperscript{365} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia, q. 82, a. 1 (219).
\textsuperscript{366} See \textit{ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 9, a. 6, ad. 3, vol. 17: Psychology of Human Acts, tr. T. Gilby (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 2006), 81: “God moves man’s will as universal mover to the universal object of will, which is the Good. A man cannot will anything without this universal motion” (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
\textsuperscript{367} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia, q. 82, a. 1, ad. 3 (219).
\textsuperscript{368} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{De Veritate}, q. 24, a. 6, tr. R. W. Schmidt (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 57-58 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
being true and being real and so forth. This universal good embraces many particular goods, towards none of which is there a determinism within the will."369

According to Aquinas, the human condition is further complicated by the fact that God chose to ordain human existence and freedom to an ultimate end and fulfilment absolutely beyond what natural powers can accomplish. God has willed for human beings to have a share in his own eternal life. God has therefore willed that he would provide human beings with the supernatural assistance they need to share in his own existence.

How right it is that God should predestine human beings. We have seen that everything falls under his providence, also that the function of providence is to arrange things to an end. Now the destiny to which creatures are ordained by God is twofold. One exceeds the proportion and ability of created nature, and this is eternal life, which ... consists in the vision of God and surpasses the nature of any creature. ... When a thing cannot reach an end by its own natural power, then it has to be lifted up and sent there by another. ... So a creature of intelligence, capable of eternal life, is brought there, properly speaking, as sent by God. The idea of this sending pre-exists in God, as does the idea of ordering the whole of things to their end, which we have called providence.370

Within the framework of Aquinas’ theology, then, human happiness and beatitude – because they are supernatural – are received as gifts from above. Happiness and beatitude are not the natural effects of the exercise of human freedom and reason. Human beings are not in charge, in control of their own fulfilment. God is. As Jean-Marc Laporte explains, “human nature is in the paradoxical position of being naturally oriented towards a fulfilment, intimacy with God, which only divine initiative can bring about. Indeed the genuineness and the perfection of any personal fulfilment is in proportion to our lack of control over it. Such fulfilment is relational. It either comes from the inmost freedom of the other or it is sham. It cannot but be super-natural, absolutely so in terms of God, relatively so in terms of human others.”371

All creatures being by definition incapable of the divine, God endowed the first human beings, when he created them, with a free supernatural gift – the grace of original righteousness. Original righteousness provided them with the supernatural ability to freely and fully love God in a personal fashion, before anything else. This supernatural ability to love God, when actualized, itself granted the first human beings with perfect integrity and unity of being and existence. At that time, they could not fall prey to inner corruption (whether physical, emotional or spiritual).

369 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia Ilae, q. 10, a. 1, ad. 3 (87).
371 Jean-Marc Laporte, *Patience and Power*, 221.
There are so many authorities of the holy fathers attesting that man had grace in the state of innocence. That he was actually set up in grace seems to be required by the very rightness in which God made man for his first state. For this rightness was a matter of the reason being submissive to God, the lower powers to the reason, the body to the soul. Now the first submissiveness was the cause of the second and third, since as long as the reason remained submissive to God it was itself given the submission of the lower elements. Now it is plain that submission of body to soul and lower powers to reason was not by nature; otherwise it would have persisted after sin. From this it is plain that that primary submissiveness in which the reason put itself under God was not something merely natural either, but was a gift of supernatural grace. For an effect cannot be more potent than its cause.  

By means of original righteousness the first human beings enjoyed *de facto* immortality. “Immortality and exemption from suffering in man’s original state did not result from the condition of matter, but from original justice.” The immortality of the first human beings endured as long as their wills clung to God. “The whole order of justice lay in man’s will being subjected to God. This subjection first of all and chiefly was through the will, to which belongs the moving of all the other powers towards the final end.”

Reminding us of Augustine’s Adam, Aquinas argues that it was in the power of the first human to choose whether he would remain in the state of original righteousness and bequeath this graced condition to the whole of humankind (present in him as descending from him) or not. “Original justice was a definite gift of grace divinely bestowed upon all human nature in the first parent. Hence even as that original justice would have been transmitted along with human nature to the descendants of the first parents, so the opposite disorder is in fact transmitted.” Original sin thus consists for Aquinas in the free movement of the first human being’s will away from God. This wandering astray causes the loss of the gracious state (supernatural stable disposition or habit) of original righteousness and the subsequent disordering of all human powers. Subject to profound intrinsic disorder, the human individuality and personality can no longer exercise effective rule over their multiple intrinsic desires and tendencies.

From the will’s turning away from God, then, the disorder in all the other powers of the soul followed. So then the lack of original justice subjecting the will to God is what is formal in original sin. Every other disorder in the various powers of the soul is like what is material in original sin. The disorder of the other powers of the

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374 *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q. 82, a. 3 (39).
375 *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q. 81, a. 2 (15).
soul is chiefly noticeable in an unruled turning to goods that pass away, which disorder can be designated by the term “concupiscence.” So then original sin materially is concupiscence, yet formally it is the lack of original justice.\(^{376}\)

Each of the main powers of the human soul is affected by a specific detrimental alteration or wound resulting from the fact that they no longer are immediately oriented toward their virtuous actualization.

Insofar as reason is deprived of its direction towards truth, we have the “wound of ignorance”; insofar as the will is deprived of its order towards good, we have the “wound of malice”; insofar as the irascible appetite is deprived of its ability to face the difficult, we have the “wound of weakness”; insofar as the concupiscible appetite is deprived of its ability to temper the pleasurable, we have the wound of “concupiscence.” ... Because of sin the reason, especially with regard to moral decision, is blunted; the will becomes hardened against the true good; sustained virtuous activity becomes increasingly difficult; concupiscence grows in ardour.\(^{377}\)

All this disorder within the soul leads to the generation of further disorder in the body which then becomes, as a consequence, corruptible. Physical death is thus a direct penal effect of the disorientation of the will, that is, of sin. “Once, therefore, original justice was lost through the sin of the first parents, just as human nature was injured in soul by the disordering of the powers so also it became corruptible by reason of the disturbance of the body’s order. ... Death, then, and all the evil consequences for the body, are particular penalties for original sin.”\(^{378}\)

3.2.3. A Human Condition Bequeathed by Adam

Original sin is transmitted to all generations by virtue of the latter’s corporate existence in Adam’s human nature, their humanity being generated from and in his. “All who are born of Adam can be considered as one man by reason of sharing the one nature inherited from the first parent, even as in political matters all belonging to one community are reckoned to be like one body, and the whole community like one person.”\(^{379}\) Original sin is contracted by subsequent generations of human beings not through their own will, but Adam’s impacting their existence through disorderly generative powers. “The disorder which is in an individual man, a descendant of Adam, is not voluntary by reason of his personal will, but by reason of the will of the first parent, who through a generative impulse, exerts influence upon all who descend from him by way of origin, even as the will of the soul moves bodily members to their various activities.”\(^{380}\)

\(^{376}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 82, a. 3 (39).
\(^{377}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 85, a. 3 (91).
\(^{378}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 85, a. 5 (97).
\(^{379}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 81, a. 1 (9).
\(^{380}\) Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 81, a. 1. (11).
In Augustinian fashion, Aquinas argues that because the distribution and spread of original sin are coextensive with those of humankind itself, all human beings contract original sin from their parents and stand in need of the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ. “That all men descended from Adam, Christ alone excepted, contract original sin from him must be firmly held according to Catholic faith. The denial of this truth implies the error that not all would be in need of redemption through Christ.”\(^{381}\)

To be personally freed from the hold of original sin, human beings must therefore be cleansed and renewed in the grace of Christ obtained through baptism. The grace of baptism will however not prevent them from bequeathing the primeval fault to their own offspring. For in the appetitive powers of their souls (responsible for biological generation) disorder remains. “Original sin is taken away by baptism as to its guilt, since the soul recovers grace for the life of the spirit. Original sin remains, nevertheless, as to the ‘tinder of sin,’ which is the disorder of the lower powers of the soul and of the body. This is the part of man, not the spiritual, which functions in generation.”\(^{382}\) Original sin is thus conceived by Aquinas as a disorder which, in contradistinction with actual sinning, is transmitted and received through the body, reaching out to the soul and detrimentally affecting it. Characterizing the human condition – being experienced by all human beings apart from the very first –, the intrinsic disorder and corruptibility that is original sin can be conceived as an inherited stable disposition.\(^{383}\) Original sin naturally incites individuals to wilfully commit wrongful deeds (as stemming from the very core of their spiritual being and person and being expressed outwards). “The sin passing in this way from the first parent to his descendants is called ‘original,’ as a sin passing from the soul to the body’s members is called ‘actual.’”\(^{384}\)

We can now more accurately measure the effects and scope of sin on human action and freedom. Human beings were created by God as oriented toward a supernatural end – that is, to find happiness in the sharing of the divine life itself. The wilful turning away from God that is sin automatically entails the loss of original righteousness, a grace freely bestowed upon them by God to elevate their nature to supernatural life and love. Deprived of this supernatural gift as a result of its own free action, human nature is left in a permanent state of brokenness, disorder and lack of fulfilment which subsequent actions can only worsen. “Thus if the principle by which

\(^{381}\) \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 81, a. 3, (17).
\(^{382}\) \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 81, a. 3, ad. 2 (19).
\(^{383}\) See \textit{ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 82, a. 2, ad. 3 (33): “Original sin is a congenital habit arising from a vitiated origin.”
\(^{384}\) \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 81, a. 1, (11).
a person’s will is maintained in its relationship to God is destroyed by sin, then even though the
disorder is rectifiable by God’s power, for its own part it is irreparable,”\textsuperscript{385} this being especially
attested by the fact that “since the withholding of grace is a punishment by God, the sin that
ensues is called a punishment in virtue of its implication ... left without the help of divine grace,
men became slaves to their passions.”\textsuperscript{386}

Sinners cannot evade taking responsibility for their actions, because no evil power can
coerce the human will into acting against its own good, it can only incite the human will to go
astray.

In line of direct causality nothing can move a man to sin unless it can move his
will. ... The will can in turn be moved only by its object, i.e. in the manner in
which the perceived good moves one to desire, or by a force which can impart an
inner inclination to the will. This latter can only be the will itself or God. ... God
cannot be the cause of sin. The only alternative force is the human will itself, and
therefore from this point of view man’s will directly causes his sins. ... Sensible
reality thrusting itself upon the human will from outside causes one to sin; either
the devil or another man can incite one to sin by offering an object or by
persuading one’s reason. But in none of these ways do other realities directly
cause one to sin because the will cannot be moved by necessity by any object,
except the ultimate goal.\textsuperscript{387}

And the just penalty deserved by human freedom’s wilful wandering away from its ultimate end,
which is none other than God, is eternal punishment. “Those sins that ... turn a person away from
God bring about a debt of eternal punishment”\textsuperscript{388} and this, because “a sin creates an obligation to
eternal punishment inasmuch as it stands in irreversible opposition to the order of divine justice,
namely by being contrary to the principle of this order, the ultimate end.”\textsuperscript{389} Suffering from
original sin and subjected to intrinsic affective, physical and spiritual disorder, all human beings
are helpless. They cannot free themselves from the stronghold of evil and sin. They must receive
external assistance. In his infinite mercy, God provided human beings with such assistance in
and through the promulgation of divine law.

3.2.4. The Divine Graciously Offers Assistance

Since human beings stand guilty of having wandered and of staying away from the source
of their happiness, they must be offered help in the form of extraneous principles capable of

\textsuperscript{385} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 87, a. 3, vol. 27: Effects of Sin, Stain and Guilt, tr. T. C. O’Brien (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars,
1974), 21 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
\textsuperscript{386} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 87, a. 2 (17).
\textsuperscript{387} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 80, a. 1, vol. 25: Sin, tr. J. Fearon (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1969), 221.
\textsuperscript{388} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 87, a. 3 (21).
\textsuperscript{389} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia IIae, q. 87, a. 6 (29).
inducing them to freely return to God. They must subject themselves to him in and out of love, and through them the whole of creation (whose reordering is thereby accomplished as well). Divine law, in both its Old and New forms, constitutes such a principle. “The New Law does not differ from the Old Law, because both have the same end, which is that men should be subject to God ... there is only one God of both New and Old covenants.” While the divine law provided to Israel through Moses taught the people of God about their sinful condition, it could not bring about their conversion and grant them salvation. The latter, only the gospel of Christ, working from within the human heart and spirit, can do. “Something may be inward to man as though added on to nature by the gift of grace. It is in this sense that the New Law is inward to man; it not only points out to him what he should do, but assists him actually to do it.”

While the Old law essentially consisted in precepts (commandments), the New law is embodied in supernatural grace. Granted by the Holy Spirit and obtained through Jesus Christ in his humanity, grace empowers its recipients to fulfill the divine commandments (i.e. to faithfully obey God’s will). “What is primary in the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit, shown in faith working through love. Now men obtain this grace through the Son of God made man; grace filled his humanity, and thence was brought to us.”

The New law is thus essentially defined by the infusion of divine grace within the human heart and soul in the form of a supernatural habit (stable disposition and principle of action) which incites its recipient to accomplish what is necessary for salvation. By empowering and encouraging human beings to obey the divine commandments, divine grace induces them to act according to (and not against) their nature, thereby preserving their freedom.

What a man does through a disposition which accords with his nature, he does of himself, for dispositions incline one in a natural way. ... Since the grace of the Holy Spirit is a kind of interior disposition infused into us which inclines us to act rightly, it makes us do freely whatever is in accordance with grace, and avoid whatever is contrary to it. The New Law, then, is called the law of freedom in two senses. Firstly, because it does not constrain us to do or to avoid anything apart from what of itself is necessary or contrary to salvation, falling under the precept or the prohibition of the law. Secondly, because even such precepts or prohibitions it makes us fulfill freely, inasmuch as we fulfill them by an inner stirring of grace.

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390 Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 107, a. 1, vol. 30: The Gospel of Grace, tr. C. Ernst (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1972), 23 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
391 Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 106, a. 1, ad. 2 (7).
392 Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 108, a. 1 (43).
393 Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 108, a. 1, ad. 2 (45).
Hence, following Aquinas, after Adam’s fall, divine grace must accomplish two distinct, but intrinsically related functions. Grace must first heal wounded human nature so as to enable it to actualize its natural potentialities. Second, grace must elevate human nature to the supernatural so as to endow it with the capacity to accomplish deeds worthy of partaking in the eternal life and love of God.\textsuperscript{394}

In the state of spoiled nature man falls short even of what he is capable of according to his nature, such that he cannot fulfill the whole of this kind of good by his natural endowments. ... Thus in the state of intact nature man needs a gratuitous capacity supplementing the capacity of his nature in one respect, namely, to perform and will the supernatural good. But in the state of spoiled nature he needs it in two respects, namely, in order to be healed, and further that he may perform the good proper to supernatural capacity, which is meritorious.\textsuperscript{395}

These healing and elevation of human nature are accomplished by means of the unique infusion, within the human soul, of a supernatural habit altering the human soul in its very essence. Thus provided with supernatural identity and powers, supernaturally meritorious actions flow from the human soul as from a proper immediate principle. “Since grace is higher than human nature, it is impossible that it should be a substance or a substantial form; but it is an accidental form of the soul itself. ... Grace is a kind of habitual state which is presupposed by the infused virtues, as their origin and root. ... Grace is the originating principle of meritorious action by the intermediary of the virtues, just as the essence of the soul is the originating principle of vital activity by the intermediary of the powers.”\textsuperscript{396} By means of an instantaneous transformation (justification), sinful human beings – through the action of divine grace infused within their hearts and souls – are freed from their guilt and, rejecting all evil and sin, made to love God. “The four elements which are required for the justification of the unrighteous are indeed simultaneous in time, since the justification of the unrighteous is not successive, but in their natural order one comes before another. The infusion of grace comes first; next the movement of free choice directed to God; third the movement of free choice directed at sin, fourth the forgiveness of sin.”\textsuperscript{397}

\textbf{3.2.5. Embarking on a Transformative Journey}

For the newly converted, this primary transformation is not the end, but the beginning of a new life grounded in and oriented towards the supernatural Good, that is, God. The full

\textsuperscript{394} See \textit{ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 114, a. 4 (211): “Eternal life consists in the possession and enjoyment of God.”
\textsuperscript{395} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 109, a. 3 (75-77).
\textsuperscript{396} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 110, a. 2, ad. 2 (115), a. 3, ad. 3 (121) and a. 4, ad. 2 (123).
\textsuperscript{397} \textit{Ibid.}, Ia Ilae, q. 113, a. 8 (191).
personal appropriation and outward expression of the transformation effected by divine grace both happen over, take time. Their ties to sin having been broken by God, human beings are called by their saviour to enter on a spiritual journey of formation. Empowered and guided by Jesus Christ and his grace, they progressively learn to live and act supernaturally, perceiving and enacting the will of God as it has been made to indwell and determine their very being. Sensing the presence and stirrings of God within their own hearts and souls, human beings renewed in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are fashioned by divine grace. Ultimately, they respond spontaneously – out of supernatural habit and without deliberation – and in a personal manner to the divine summons. The newly justified must now enact what they have just been made to be and become. This quickly reveals to be not so easy a task to accomplish. In the apt words of Jean-Marc Laporte:

Once justified, I begin a journey towards God by concrete spatio-temporal acts. In other words, I enter the Christian struggle, the process of sanctification. At the root of my journey is a hope which allows me to move towards the good even though there are obstacles in the way. As the obstacles take on their full dimension when I move towards commitment to a particular path of action, I might be invited to daring. And in the midst of the struggle, there sometimes is room for anger, for a disciplined, aggressive, and effective use of energy against evil. More than anything else, however, patience, a less intense but ultimately more effective and significant mode of conation, is needed.\textsuperscript{398}

Divine grace accompanies the justified at every step of their journey, always anticipating (preparing and easing) and following (opening opportunities to receive further assistance and perfection) their action. This adapted and sustained assistance enables the justified not simply to freely consent to the action of divine grace within them but also to take active part and positively contribute to their own salvation.

There are five effects of grace in us: firstly, the healing of the soul; secondly, willing the good, thirdly, the efficacious performance of the good willed; fourthly, perseverance in the good; fifthly, the attainment of glory. And so, in that it causes the first effect in us, grace is called prevenient with respect to the second effect; and in that it causes the second effect in us, it is called subsequent to the first. And as a single effect is posterior to one effect and prior to another, so grace can be called both prevenient and subsequent in regard to the same effect, under different respects.\textsuperscript{399}

\textsuperscript{398} Jean-Marc Laporte, \textit{Patience and Power}, 227.
\textsuperscript{399} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, Ia IIae, q. 111, a. 3 (133-35).
God works both from within and without human freedom in order to bring about its actualization and this, not in opposition to the individual’s will, but in complete respect to the latter’s condition and development.

God knows, argues Laporte, when and how to invite and persuade from without, and through his Providence orchestrates the set of circumstances that are congruent for each unique human “yes” to grace. In addition God can also work within my freedom, giving that freedom a new power, a new willingness. Thus, while remaining utterly respectful of my human freedom, God can attain what he will, but by being infinitely patient, by working with the flow rather than against the flow of my being.  

Aquinas’ teaching remains perfectly in line with Augustine’s insofar as for him also all meritorious actions in regard to human salvation follow from grace as the latter’s effect. Only grace can deserve, earn or merit (further) grace. “Every good work performed by man proceeds from the first grace as principle and source.” Human participation in salvation itself is an effect of grace, resulting from the justification of the sinner operated through the infusion of habitual grace in the soul of the justified. Insofar as divine grace is the unique efficient cause (principle of the movement) of the human will from sinfulness to righteousness or from potency to act in the context either of a particular action or an habitual condition or state, Aquinas deems grace “operative.” Insofar as divine grace assists the human will to accomplish the good towards which it has already been induced to tend, it is for Aquinas to be deemed “cooperative.”

There is first the interior act of the will; and as regards this act, the will behaves as moved and God as mover, especially when a will which before had willed evil begins to will the good. And so, when God moves the human mind to this act, grace is called operative. The other act is external; and since it is ordained by the will, it follows that the operation involved in this act is attributed to the will. And since for this act too God helps us, both by confirming the will within so that it might achieve its act and by providing the means of action without, grace is called cooperative in respect of this act. ... If grace is understood as habitual gift, the effect of grace is twofold, as in the case of any other form; the first effect is being, the second is activity. Thus habitual grace, inasmuch as it heals or justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operative; but inasmuch as it is the principle of meritorious action, which proceeds from free choice as well, it is called cooperative.  

3.2.6. Guided by the Holy Spirit

In human action, therefore, divine initiative and grace always come first. The human will is by grace enabled to freely consent to the divine acting upon itself (to incline it toward the

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401 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 114, a. 5, ad. 3 (215).
402 *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q. 111, a. 2 (131).
supernatural good) and then to contribute to its own further transformation and perfection. The infused supernatural habit determining the human soul in its essence is the created effect of the presence within the soul of the Holy Spirit. “For the love of God is in us through the indwelling spirit. But it is the Holy Spirit who directs us in the right path.”

The Holy Spirit – God, uncreated grace – resides in the heart of the justified and acts as the main principle of their actions, illuminating their intellect and stirring their will to desire the good and take action. “The spiritual man is not only instructed by the Holy Spirit regarding what he ought to do, but his heart is also moved by the Holy Spirit. ... The spiritual man is inclined to do something not as though by a movement of his own will chiefly, but by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. ... The Holy Spirit causes the very movement of the will and of free choice in them.” This instinct is purely spiritual and because it is rooted in God, it is a much superior, more suitable principle and guide for human action than human reason and will. After quoting J. H. Walgrave, Servais Pinckaers comments,

“Under the New Law, the instinct of the Holy Spirit becomes in us our own instinct. The instinct of the Holy Spirit builds up the very movement of the free will.” Now, the word “instinct” is perfect, according to St. Thomas, to describe such an action moved by inspiration: it refers to an interior impulse, whose origin is nevertheless exterior, or rather superior, such as the action of the Creator in animals. In order to be applied to the action of the Holy Spirit, however, the word instinct has to undergo a major transformation: it is a spiritual instinct, a Spirit that inclines us in a very personal way toward the truth and the divine goods that are revealed to us.

Union with God in the person of the Holy Spirit is – from the standpoint of the human person – made possible through infusion of the supernatural (theological) virtues of faith, hope and love. “Man’s primary union with God comes about through faith, hope and charity.” Of these three, charity is the most perfect and ultimate, because it constitutes a participation in and union with the divine being.

Among theological virtues themselves that which more fully attains to God is the more important. Now always a being through itself is fuller than a being through

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404 Ibid., no. 635, 214-15.
another. But faith and hope attain to God according as from him comes knowledge of truth or possession of good, but charity attains God himself so as to rest in him without looking for any gain. This is why charity is higher than faith and hope, and consequently than all the virtues. ... Charity implies union. 407

Hence, the supernatural virtue (habit) of charity lies at the foundation of the participation of the human being in the eternal life of God. “For man the ultimate and principal good is the enjoyment of God ... and to this end he is directed by charity.” 408 Infused by the Holy Spirit, charity embodies the triune God’s gift to humanity of a share in the mutual love (charity) of Father and Son. In and through charity, renewed human beings are made to enter in a relationship of friendship (intimate communal life) with God. “Charity is our friendship for God arising from our sharing in eternal happiness, which is not a matter of natural goods but of gifts of grace. ... Hence we have it neither by nature, nor as acquired, but as infused by the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son; our participation in this love, is creaturely charity itself.” 409

Thus, as and through charity, the Holy Spirit indwells the human heart and soul and moves them toward God, leading the individual to act in a manner that both fulfills her supernatural vocation and pleases God. “It is by charity that the Holy Spirit dwells in us. ... As the Holy Spirit moves the soul to love God ... charity and impeccability go together because of the Holy Spirit, who infallibly brings about whatever he wills.” 410 In fact, all human virtues and their effects – meritorious actions – stem from and bear fruit in charity. Flowing from and being expressed under the guidance of God, charity ordains everything to the ultimate end of human existence and action, namely, God. “Charity comes into the definition of all the virtues ... because somehow they all depend on charity. ... Charity is called the end of the other virtues because it directs them all to its own end. And since a mother is one who conceives in herself from another, charity is called the mother of the other virtues, because from desire of the ultimate end it conceives their acts by charging them with life.” 411

The outward expression into concrete external action of the justified’s renewed friendship with God, the newly healed and elevated human nature’s channelling of divine love (charity) into the world must be ensured, eased and strengthened. For this purpose, the Holy Spirit instils

407 Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 6, resp. and ad. 3, vol. 34: Charity, tr. R. J. Batten (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1975), 25 and 27 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
408 Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 7, (27 and 29).
409 Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 2 (39). See also ibid., IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 7 (57): “If we take it according to its own specific form there is no limiting charity’s growth, for it is a sharing in that infinite charity which is the Holy Spirit.”
410 Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 11 (69 and 71).
411 Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 4, ad. 1 and a. 8, ad. 3 (19 and 33).
further graces which enable the recipient to obey smoothly, without difficulty, his stirrings – the gifts. These gifts also are integrated by and in charity as both the source from and medium through which they find expression and the goal they are intended to fulfill. “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit dispose all the faculties of the soul to submit to God’s movement. ... The Holy Spirit dwells in us by charity ... so the Gifts of the Holy Spirit are connected with one another in charity, in such wise that one who has charity has all the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, while none of the Gifts can be had without charity.”412

3.2.7. Jesus Christ, Unique Saviour

Following in Augustine’s footsteps, Aquinas argues that the grace received by the justified, along with divine charity itself – the Holy Spirit – is obtained from and through Jesus Christ. Grace and charity belong to the unique mediator who, on account of the merits of his passion, took away all sins and gained access for all humankind to eternal life and glory.

Christ was given grace not only as an individual but insofar as he is head of the Church, so that grace might pour out from him upon his members. Thus there is the same relation between Christ’s deeds for himself and his members, as there is between what another man does in the state of grace and himself. Now it is clear that if anyone in the state of grace suffers for justice’s sake, he by that very fact merits salvation for himself. Therefore Christ by his passion merited salvation not only for himself, but for all who are his members, as well.413

Jesus Christ, by voluntarily entering and suffering his passion, delivered humankind from all sin – original and actual – and has made his grace accessible to all those who believe in him, love him, and partake in the sacraments which he himself instituted. “Through Christ’s passion we are delivered not only from the sin of the entire human race both as regards the sin and the debt of punishment (for Christ paid the price of our ransom), but also from our own sins, provided we share in his passion by faith, love, and the sacraments of faith.”414

In complete agreement with Augustine, Aquinas believes that the innocent Jesus Christ genuinely sacrificed himself for the salvation of sinful humankind and this, purely out of love for God and humankind. “Sacrifice, properly speaking, designates what men offer to God in token of the special honour due to him, and in order to appease him. ... Christ offered himself for us in the passion. This gesture, this voluntary enduring of the passion, motivated as it was by the greatest

412 Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 68, a. 5 and a. 8, (27 and 39).
413 Ibid., IIIa, q. 48, a. 1, vol. 54: The Passion of Christ, tr. R. T. A. Murphy (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1965), 77 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
414 Ibid., IIIa, q. 49, a. 5 (109).
of love, pleased God. It is clear then that Christ’s passion was a true sacrifice.”

In offering his pure human life to God, Jesus Christ made a perfect, unsurpassable oblation. His offering itself was at once most appropriate in regards to those on behalf of whom it was made and most pleasing to God. “That flesh [Christ’s] is the most perfect sacrifice for the following reasons: first, since it is flesh of human nature, it is fittingly offered for men and received by them in the Sacrament of the Eucharist; secondly, being passible and mortal, it was suitable for immolation; thirdly being sinless, it was efficacious for the cleansing of sins; fourthly, being the flesh of the offerer himself, it was acceptable to God because of the love of him who offered his own flesh.”

Christ’s wilful sacrifice of his embodied humanity is perfect because in his unique person, human nature is made fully subservient to the divine one who wills and works through his humanity the salvation of humankind. In the person of Jesus Christ, human nature becomes a perfect instrument to be used by the divine. Jesus accomplished in his person, by means of his passion, what he empowers – through his overcoming of sin and its consequences – all other human beings to become in him: the freedom of acting only from and in pure love for God, spontaneously and in complete integrity.

God is the principal efficient cause of man’s salvation. But since Christ’s humanity is the instrument of his divinity, all Christ’s acts and sufferings work instrumentally in virtue of his divinity in bringing about man’s salvation. Thus Christ’s passion causes the salvation of men as an efficient cause. ... When Christ’s passion is viewed in relation to his divinity, it can be seen to act in an efficient way; in relation to the will which is rooted in Christ’s soul, by way of merit; in relation to the very flesh of Christ, by way of satisfaction, since we are freed by it from the guilt of punishment; by way of redemption, inasmuch as we are thereby freed from the slavery of sin; and finally, by way of sacrifice, thanks to which we are reconciled to God.

The human nature is used by and acts in the person of Christ as the conjoined instrument of his divine nature. “In Christ, accordingly, his human nature has its own form and possibility of action; and the same is true of his divine nature. Consequently the human nature has its native activity, distinct from the divine activity, and vice versa. Yet at the same time the divine nature employs the activity of the human nature as the activity of an instrument. Similarly, the human nature participates in the activity of the divine nature as an instrument participates in the activity

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415 Ibid., IIIa, q. 48, a. 3 (81).
416 Ibid., IIIa, q. 48, a. 3, ad. 1 (83).
417 Ibid., IIIa, q. 48, a. 6, ad. 3 (91-93).
Fully respecting the integrity and intrinsic capacities of his own human nature, Christ makes use of it as any other human being would do. The radical difference lies in the fact that his proper operation and purpose – as a person – is not limited to natural human abilities but also embrace the divine ones. Christ’s divine nature, being no creature, having eternally been begotten by the Father, admitting no beginning nor end and no limitations in power, provides his human nature with individuality, concrete instantiation and subjective existence. His human nature remains complete and undivided but is at the same time perfected, graced with beatific vision. Deprived of sin, his body is perfectly subjected to his rational soul, his desires completely ordinate and God the central and sole object of all his attention, focus and striving. “Neither Christ’s divine will nor his deliberative will was impeded or held back by his instinctive will or by his sensuous impulses. Likewise, in the inverse sense, neither Christ’s divine will nor his deliberative will rejected or impeded the movement of his instinctive human will or of his sensuous impulses. For it pleased the divine will and the deliberative will of Christ that his instinctive will and his sensuous impulses should act in conformity with their own natures.”

3.2.8. Finding Freedom in and from Christ

Perfect order reigns within the person of Christ between the constituents of his human nature and between his human and divine natures. Christ fully is his own master and is able to sacrifice what is less excellent for the sake of what is more: his body to his rational soul, his human nature to his divine, his whole person to the Father.

By special provision the Son of God allowed his flesh before the passion to do and to suffer all that is characteristic of its nature. Similarly he allowed all the powers of his soul to function according to their nature. Now it is apparent that it is natural for the sensuous will to shrink from physical pain and bodily injury. Likewise the will acting by natural instinct rejects whatever is contrary to human nature and intrinsically evil, such as death and what is connected with it. Nevertheless, as modified by judgment, the will may sometimes choose to undergo such evils in order to attain its goal. ... It was God’s will that Christ should undergo pain and suffering and death. Not that these things attracted the divine will for what they are in themselves; they were willed only as a means for bringing about man’s salvation. It is clear that Christ could will something other than what God willed. ... This conclusion is borne out by Christ’s own words, “Not my will, but thine, be done.” His will modified by judgment desired that God’s will should be fulfilled, even though he admits that he desires something else.”

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418 Ibid., IIIa, q. 19, a. 1, vol. 50: The One Mediator, tr. C. E. O’Neill (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1965), 91 (translation hereafter referred to by page number between brackets).
419 Ibid., IIIa, q. 18, a. 6 (83-85).
420 Ibid., IIIa, q. 18, a. 5 (79).
All the constituents of his person being perfectly ordered and integrated, Christ can only humanly will in accordance with his unchanging divine will (which is identical with the Father’s). Consequently, his human nature serves, at all times and under all circumstances, his divine one and does so as a perfected, but still no more than a human nature. When for instance, Christ is performing wonders, such as healing a leper, Christ’s human nature performs its natural operation, touching, while his divine one accomplishes what transcends human capacity, that is, the actual elimination of the disease in the person.\(^{421}\) This, in itself, already supposes for Christ’s human nature to have been perfected by grace, for normal human nature never is capable, when left to itself, to be so ordered and united as to always accomplish God’s will and purpose. Christ’s divine nature and will, in turn, make use of his human nature and will to express themselves, without negating their identity. Christ’s human nature, therefore, by being only but perfectly human, by entirely submitting itself to his divine nature, accomplishes itself and manifests the latter more clearly and distinctly than any other created reality could ever do. Every action of Christ, while being completely and recognizably human, is at the same time pervaded by his divinity which expresses itself through these human operations and what transcends and prolongs them.

Christ’s human nature and will always find their fulfilment in the accomplishment of the purpose of the divine nature and will. Because human nature precisely consists in a certain desire (will) of the divine (or intimacy with), it is always voluntarily that Christ’s human nature obeys his divine nature.

To the possessor of any nature may be attributed the characteristics of that nature. Now human nature, because of its very condition, is subject to God in three ways. First of all, there is the subjection arising from its place in the hierarchy of goodness. The divine nature is subsisting goodness; a created nature, on the contrary, participates in some measure in this divine goodness. ... Secondly, human nature is subject to God because of divine power; for human nature, like any created thing, is subject to the direction of divine providence. Thirdly, human nature is specially subject to God by reason of its characteristic activity; for it willingly obeys his commands. Christ himself acknowledges that he is subject to the Father in these three ways.\(^{422}\)

That divine grace, in the form of the Holy Spirit indwelling and inspiring his human nature, perfects the latter so as to enable it to accomplish his own divine nature’s will in all circumstances does not oppose his will being a desire for the divine. As long as this desire is

\(^{421}\) See *ibid.*, IIIa, q. 19, a. 1, ad. 5 (95).

\(^{422}\) *Ibid.*, IIIa, q. 20, a. 1 (111).
brought to fruition, Christ’s human will is actualized, and Christ is acting, as a human being, voluntarily. For Aquinas – as was also the case with Augustine – being free, at its most radical level, is not being free to choose between good and evil (for that constitutes a defective form or mode of freedom). It is not defined either by the choice between distinct courses of action or options (for such choice and derivation of means to a given end is a subsidiary form of freedom), but by desire and action according to one’s nature and ultimate end.

Human nature being essentially defined as obedient, self-denying desire of God, to actually desire God in complete submission and obedience identifies, for human beings, with willing properly so-called and fulfills their being and identity. The human creature, as Christ’s example shows so brightly, has never been meant by God to exist independently, autonomously, determining itself on its own, quite apart from the divine command, summons and assistance (motion). It rather was created always to stand under the immediate, interior influence of God through the action of Christ’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit perfectly unites, orders and submits the human person to God’s will and action turning her into its instrument and manifestation. Let us conclude this section with Jean-Marc Laporte’s fine summary of the major tenets of Thomas Aquinas’ contribution to the elaboration of the Christian theology of grace.

Aquinas is the first theologian of the west to carefully distinguish the healing from the elevating function of grace, nature from the supernatural, only to bring them into a sweeping integration which runs through all the categories of his theology. Humanization and divinization for him are utterly inseparable. The former is inescapably oriented to the latter, the latter poured out in the former. The habitual grace that utterly transforms our horizon towards God is the same grace that gives us the power to act with ease, spontaneity, promptitude in the things that lead us to our own fulfilment as human beings. ... Aquinas laid a firm basis for a theology dedicated to unfolding the many virtualities, intra-personal and inter-personal, social, political and economic, of the personal thought-form.  

We might only wish to add to these remarks that Aquinas also inscribed the human person in a properly cosmological context. The exercise of human freedom is seen impacting on the evolution and history of the entire creation. Its fulfilment, in the person of Jesus Christ (and through him of all human beings renewed in him), consecrates creation’s vocation to the eternal.

For Augustine and Aquinas, the Creator and Lord of creation is a God whose presence and action, despite having been obscured and veiled by the fall, are easily perceptible everywhere, in and through all creatures and especially their harmonious integration into a unique cosmos. God’s existence, absolute transcendence and omnipotence are taken for granted.

God cares for his creatures; he will not deliver them to the powers of darkness, he will not leave them alone in their prison of fear and sin, he will not abandon them to a certain death. The presence and action of divine grace arouse in the human heart such certitude and conviction that Augustine and Aquinas both enjoin their fellow human beings to let go of their freedom and live only in and from grace. Humans are, like Odysseus, to return where they belong after a long perilous and unfulfilling journey away from home. This home is God, the infinite love which is always found accompanying, guiding and assisting (not unlike Homer’s young Athena) humans in their quest for happiness and fulfilment. With Augustine and Aquinas, salvation history becomes a tale of epic proportions and scope. The fate of all, of the whole of creation hangs on the free conduct of one particular man, Jesus Christ the mediator. God having in him created a passage from the divine to the human, it is his mission to manage an access from the human to the divine, healing, uniting and fulfilling all of creation in himself and his grace.

With the advent of the Modern times, with the rise of experimental science, however, the profound sense that orderliness, structure and harmony pervade creation over and beyond evil and sin becomes problematic and is progressively lost. The physical universe is no longer confined to the solar system. Infinite in complexity and size, the boundaries (confines), composition (nature) and structure (organization) of the universe can no longer be easily delineated, defined and laid out. Creation no longer is a cosmos – an ordered whole shining with the beautiful light of intelligibility – but a convoluted, intricate and obscure reality whose nature and purpose have yet to be deciphered. In such a context, the theology of grace is naturally led to leave the realm of external evidence to enter that of human interiority and subjectivity. In a dark and strange world, the human creature needs to possess direct access to the source of absolute meaning and love. Needing to be rescued from herself and the world, the human person looks within herself to recover and follow from there her inner master and teacher (accomplishing in this an explicit return to the theology of Augustine). These are the times of the Reformation. Let us now take a look at the theologies of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Fathers of Trent to gain a sense of the modern appropriation and exposition of the doctrine of grace.
Chapter Four

Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Council of Trent:
The Reformation and Its Aftermath

4.1. Martin Luther: Freedom in Faith

4.1.1. Freedom Lost

Luther’s approach to the problematic of grace has been traditionally characterized as justification or salvation-centered. That he took a clear stance against freedom of indifference (the effective capacity to do both good and evil) and human autonomy is manifested by the fact that he offers many arguments meant to deny the existence of positive freedom in the human will: “Very strong arguments can be drawn from the purpose of grace, the promise of God, the meaning of the law, original sin, or divine election, any one of which would be sufficient by itself to do away completely with free choice.” The first of these is based on the existence and nature of divine predestination and foreknowledge. God – being perfect, strictly eternal, and the source of the existence and being of all creatures – cannot but have foreknown from all eternity what from the time-bound perspective of creatures constitutes the indeterminate future. “God foreknows nothing contingently, but … foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will.” This is so because God, as ultimate principle of all things, cannot admit any kind of limitation: absolutely transcending time, God is not bound by and inscribed within the sequence of past, present, and future; these three moments rather are

424 See Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 124: “The doctrine of justification by faith alone was for him [Luther] to the end of his life the sum and substance of the gospel, the heart of theology, the central truth of Christianity, the article of the standing or falling church.”; George W. Forell, “Justification and Eschatology in Luther’s Thought,” Church History 38 (1969): 164: “Justification is undoubtedly the central concern in Luther’s theological effort.”; Jared Wicks, “Justification and Faith in Luther’s Theology,” Theological Studies 44 (1983): 4: “Justification frequently was the place where much of Luther’s thought fused into cohesive unity.”; Else M. W. Pedersen, “Justification and Grace. Did Luther Discover a New Theology or Did He Discover Anew the Theology of Justification and Grace?” Studia Theologica 57 (2003): 143: “That justification by grace through faith propter Christum is the central doctrine in Luther’s theology can hardly be disputed.”; Peter Manns, “Absolute and Incarnate Faith – Luther on Justification in the Galatians’ Commentary of 1531-1535,” in Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther, ed. J. Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 123: “For Luther the doctrine of justification, not an existential theology of the Word, served as the foundation which could not be lost without destroying the whole of Christian doctrine and the Church itself.”


426 Ibid., 37.
simultaneously and eternally present to him and his action on creation cannot be limited in any way by the latter. “The will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered.”\cite{427} The direct consequence of this evidently is that human beings – or any creature for that matter – cannot be considered free in the sense of possessing a strictly autonomous capacity of choice, and this because a being endowed with the latter is able to determine itself independently from external constraints and influences.

Luther speaks of a “necessity of infallibility,” which he distinguishes from a “necessity of force,” a necessity in which coercion is exerted by a principle or cause on its effect.

Let us have two sorts of necessity, one of force with reference to the work, the other of infallibility with reference to time; and let anyone who listens to us understand that we are speaking of the latter, not of the former; that is to say, we are not discussing whether Judas became a traitor involuntarily or voluntarily, but whether at a time preordained by God it was bound infallibly to happen that Judas by an act of his will should betray Christ.\cite{428}

In other words, in Luther’s mind it is possible to separate efficient coercive causality from time-bound predetermination, directly suggesting that God can foreknow everything without necessarily having to be the primary (and sufficient) efficient cause of all events. Such a distinction enables Luther to argue for God’s omniscience while at the same time preserving God’s absolute goodness, for God can foreknow that evil will happen, but cannot be accused of having immediately generated it. Luther unambiguously admits that he considers creation to be completely under divine control when he asserts that “it is God who works everything in everyone.”\cite{429} The pervasiveness of God’s empire over creation admits no restriction; Luther almost seems to be making a case for (natural) determinism.

God is omnipotent, not only in power, but also in action … he knows and foreknows all things, and can neither err nor be deceived. These two points being granted by the hearts and minds of all, they are quickly compelled by inescapable logic to admit that just as we do not come into being by our own will, but by necessity, so we do not do anything by right of free choice, but as God has foreknown and as he leads us to act by his infallible and immutable counsel and power. Thus we find it written in the hearts of all alike, that there is no such thing as free choice.\cite{430}

God’s will is absolute and its exercise cannot be hindered in any way by other beings. God controls everything and is responsible for everything, for only God can be said to be “free.”

\cite{427} Ibid., 38.
\cite{428} Ibid., 193.
\cite{429} Ibid., 35.
\cite{430} Ibid., 191.
“Free choice is plainly a divine term, and can be properly applied to none but the Divine Majesty alone; for he alone can do and does (as the Psalmist says [Ps. 115:3]) whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth.”431 In and through human beings, God even works evil. “God works evil in us, i.e. by means of us, not through any fault of his, but owing to our faultiness, since we are by nature evil and he is good; but as he carries along by his own activity in accordance with the nature of his omnipotence, good as he is himself he cannot help but do evil with an evil instrument, though he makes good use of this evil in accordance with his wisdom for his own glory and our salvation.”432 Luther means that God allows for evil to be perpetrated within his creation and grants human beings with genuine responsibility for their wrongdoings and sinfulness (which is highly reminiscent of Aquinas’ teaching).433 Human beings must therefore enjoy a freedom such that the evil they perpetrate can be imputed to them and God exonerated from any direct involvement in its production. Does not, however, such an ability to commit evil actions also suppose the conjoint existence in human free will of at least as potent an ability to do good and work towards one’s own salvation? If the ability to generate evil coexists with an equal but opposite ability to do good, what need and use does human nature actually have for divine grace?

That the affirmation of human freedom threatens the supremacy and importance of divine grace seems to be precisely what Luther foreshadows and wishes to avoid when he says that “when we do not let God’s will alone have the will and power to harden and to show mercy and to do everything, we attribute to free choice itself the ability to do everything without grace.”434 Since absolute sovereignty and power must be attributed to God, and to God alone, then, says Luther, free choice must be denied to human beings. This follows from the fact that he understands the divine will as normatively defining the good and right, and not the other way around.

He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause

431 Ibid., 38. See also ibid., 103: “Free choice properly belongs to no one but God alone.”
432 Ibid., 178.
433 We will not discuss here the question of the possibility of relating the more objective and universal perspective favoured by ancient and medieval theologians with the more subjective, personal one of the modern theology of grace embraced by Luther, Calvin and the Fathers of Trent. The question of integrating the universal objective and the subjective transcendental approaches and methods is an explicit concern of the theology of grace in the twentieth century, which we will be addressing explicitly in chapter five. It took four more centuries for Christian theology to elaborate the categories and method needed to solve this question.
or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right. Cause and reason can be assigned for a creature’s will, but not for the will of the Creator, unless you set up over him another creator.\textsuperscript{435}

To be free thus implies not being subjected to the rule of a higher power, not even to the good and right as such. “Tell me, how can every mouth be stopped if there still remains a power by which we can do something? For we shall be able to say to God: ‘There is absolutely nothing here; there is something you cannot condemn, a measure of ability you yourself have given; this at least will not be silenced, and will not be accountable to you.’”\textsuperscript{436} More precisely, freedom seems to lie in one’s capacity to estrange oneself from the dominion of others and in delimitating (positively creating) an empire of one’s own. God, by willing, actually defines the good and the right, establishing for others the norm of their action, while himself not being bound by anything. Luther thus envisions the relationship tying God to the human creature through an analogy of power relations where a ruler presides over the destiny of those being ruled. In this respect, the ruled cannot be said “free,” for any kind of dependence constitutes a form of servitude, a lack of autonomy and independence which translates into a proportionate diminution of the freedom enjoyed by the subject. “The term ‘free choice,’ in the judgment of everyone’s ears, means (strictly speaking) that which can do and does, in relation to God, whatever it pleases, uninhibited by any law or any sovereign authority. For you would not call a slave free, who acts under the sovereign authority of his master.”\textsuperscript{437}

Who then, of the human being and of God, effectively rules and ought to be ruling over the other? “What we are asking is whether he [man] has free choice in relation to God, so that God obeys man and does what man wills, or rather, whether God has free choice in relation to man, so that man wills and does what God wills and is not able to do anything but what God wills and does.”\textsuperscript{438} It goes without saying that all sovereignty, in Luther’s mind, is to be ascribed to God.

What is man, compared with God? How much is there within our power compared with his power? What is our strength in comparison with his resources? What is our knowledge compared with his wisdom? What is our substance over against his substance? In a word, what is our all compared with his? … We confess, as even nature teaches, that human power, strength, wisdom, substance,

\textsuperscript{435} Ibid., 181.  
\textsuperscript{436} Ibid., 256.  
\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., 103.  
\textsuperscript{438} Ibid., 285.
and everything we have, is simply nothing at all in comparison with divine power, wisdom, knowledge, and substance.\textsuperscript{439} Luther also considers it highly inappropriate to “call a man or angel free, when they live under the absolute sovereignty of God (not to mention sin and death) in such a way that they cannot subsist for a moment by themselves.”\textsuperscript{440} He is here fully making his Aquinas’ teaching that creatures have no being of their own, obtaining everything they are and do from another. The freedom of a creature cannot take the form of genuine (positive) autonomy and independence.

\textbf{4.1.2. Overtaken by Sin}

Scripture moreover teaches that human nature in reality is plagued with an illness – original sin – running so deep within it that all freedom of choice has now been lost without hope of recovery (except if it were to be granted anew from without). Luther endorses Augustine’s (and Aquinas’) teaching on human beings’ radical incapacity, after the fall, to accomplish deeds deserving of salvation. “Original sin is not only the lack of righteousness, but a kind of inborn evil … which makes us guilty of sin and of eternal death, subject to divine wrath. It remains in us even after baptism and resists the law of God and the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{441} In truth, however, original sin seems to identify, in Luther’s mind, with the appetitive (desiring) part of the human being, namely concupiscence. “Concupiscence is sin after baptism … concupiscence is really that evil which is innate in us.”\textsuperscript{442} Luther seems to reduce original sin to what Aquinas considers its “material aspect,” that is, the disorder pervading the human body and soul, experienced as an inner struggle where each faculty or power aims at taking hold of the whole individual, having a will of its own. He neglects what for Aquinas was more fundamental; the fact that this disorder is the consequence of the loss of the grace of original justice enabling the human spirit to stably cling to God in love and – in this love – integrate and order all its powers in appropriate fashion. Jared Wicks aptly remarks that for Luther “acts are the fruits or consequences of sin, while sin itself consists in the concupiscent inclination toward evil making one reluctant toward the good recognized as one’s duty. Consequently, sin is a pervasive infection of the heart with which even the righteous person must contend and struggle.”\textsuperscript{443}

\textsuperscript{439} Ibid., 290.
\textsuperscript{440} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{443} Jared Wicks, “Justification and Faith in Luther’s theology,” 6.
Luther clearly is drawing from Augustine’s treatment of sin as an acquired habit progressively taking hold of the individual by dividing and setting the human will against itself. Perceiving human beings to be so inherently corrupted by nature, he is logically led to assert that only with the help of God’s grace can humans hope to please God and be saved; whatever they may do by themselves is of no avail in God’s sight.444 “No man is brought any nearer to righteousness by his works; no works and no aspirations or endeavours of free choice count for anything in the sight of God, but are all adjudged to be ungodly, unrighteous, and evil.”445 Henry Chadwick comments, “Luther advances a full-blooded doctrine of the total incapacity of the human will to move itself in any degree towards the good, and therefore of man’s absolute need for a sovereign and irresistible grace to which he can only surrender himself as clay in the hands of a potter.”446 In Augustinian fashion, he uses numerous shocking formulas to express the nullity of human free choice: “the power of free choice is nothing,”447 “free choice can do nothing but evil,”448 “free choice cannot will good but is in bondage to sin,”449 “free choice in all men alike has the same limitations: it can will nothing good,”450 “all the good in us is to be ascribed to God.”451 Spelling out more sharply what he means, Luther further claims that “the mercy of God alone does everything, and our will does nothing, but rather is passive; otherwise, all is not ascribed to God.”452 Because, in matters of human salvation, everything is to be attributed to divine mercy, human free will must yield way and lose all efficiency, limiting its contribution to consenting to the action of an external agent upon itself. Luther does not have an understanding of grace and human freedom – such as Aquinas’ – that would allow for much positive cooperation and involvement on the part of human freedom which, once it has been healed and elevated to the supernatural, collaborates with divine agency in the working out of its own salvation. For Luther, human beings never are positively free, for they serve either a good

444 As Forell notes, human beings themselves are aware of their own enslavement and call to God for liberation: “Justification is, indeed, the liberating act of God because man is and knows himself to be enslaved. It is this slavery to sin which brings the judgment upon him” (“Justification and Eschatology in Luther’s Thought,” 168). Wicks also argues in favour of the importance of self-accusation in Luther’s doctrine of justification: “Paradoxically, confession of sin is a form of justification itself, and not simply a disposing precondition. Personal appropriation of God’s verdict on human sinfulness transforms the self-understanding and self-assessment of the believer from the falsehood of secure self-approbation to the truth and righteousness of self-accusation” (“Justification and Faith in Luther’s theology,” 3).
447 Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, in Career of the Reformer III, 68.
448 Ibid., 180.
449 Ibid., 173.
450 Ibid., 171.
451 Ibid., 35.
452 Ibid., 35.
(God) or an evil (Satan) master. “In relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.”

Luther believed intensely, as did Augustine, that humans were naturally inclined to pride, i.e. to turn themselves away from God and assume they can sustain and develop themselves, by depending only on their own natural abilities and powers. To defend the freedom of the will in human beings ultimately is identical, in Luther’s mind, with asserting human independence from God, which is, to him, most impious for “God has assuredly promised his grace to the humble, that is, to those who lament and despair of themselves.” The solution he proposes (mainly a pastoral one, again paralleling Augustine’s) to counter this unfortunate inherent tendency consists in humiliating the human self to the point of having it relinquish every bit of freedom to God, thereby preventing the occurrence of any surge or outburst of pride based on merits already or to be earned.

No man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavours, will, and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely, of God alone. For as long as he is persuaded that he himself can do even the least thing toward his salvation, he retains some self-confidence and does not altogether despair of himself, and therefore he is not humbled before God, but presumes that there may be – some place, time, and work for him, by which he may at length attain to salvation.

Those who refuse to surrender to self-despair “remain secretly proud and enemies of the grace of God.” Humiliating human beings in their relation to God automatically implies elevating God and the significance of his gracious liberating action on human beings. As Wicks explains, “the outcome of the insistent assertion of human sinfulness is the profound realisation of the need of the grace of Christ, in whom alone is found salvation, life, and resurrection.” Attempting to produce this effect, Luther intently magnified the importance of sin and the decrepitude of human nature. “In order that justification may be esteemed as greatly as it can be, sin must be magnified and amplified exceedingly. For justification is healing for sin, which slays the whole world eternally and brings it to destruction with its infinite evils.”

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453 Ibid., 70.
454 Ibid., 61.
455 Ibid., 62.
456 Ibid., 62.
457 Jared Wicks, “Justification and Faith in Luther’s theology,” 13.
458 Martin Luther, Disputation Concerning Justification, in Career of the Reformer IV, 156.
complete incapacity of human action and will to perform meritorious actions is in part a counter-
reaction and response to the overemphasis laid on good works by the theology and practice of the
Christian faith in his day: “Luther’s endeavour to defend the role of grace in justification against
the incursion of good works is totally justified if we consider the over-emphasis on works in late
scholasticism and in ecclesiastical practice.”

But still more deeply Luther’s advocacy and defence of humankind’s utter dependence on
grace for salvation is to be explained through his own spiritual torments and turmoil. The sheer
difficulty of living as a free human being and of having to assume entire responsibility for all his
actions and the angst, the anguish of not knowing if the man he had become would ultimately be
pleasing to God and deserve eternal life convinced him to entrust somebody else with the task of
saving his stained nature. In 1505, Luther became an Augustinian friar mainly in order to earn
God’s favour and his own salvation and also to overcome the deep feelings of anguish and
despair indwelling his heart concerning his personal worth before God. According to Arthur B.
Crabtree,

> Once inside the monastery, Luther applied himself wholeheartedly to his primary
task – the winning of salvation. … Luther entered the monastery bent upon the
quest for merit. He prayed, he studied, he mortified himself by fastings and vigils
and long exposure to cold. … Yet he could never feel that he had done enough to
earn the merit of congruence that would render God gracious to him. … All his
efforts seemed destined to fail. … Was he among those predestined to damnation?
Despair, blank unending despair, invaded his soul.

Following a similar line of thought, Wicks argues that for Luther

> One must have experience of sin and grace, and of life and death, to become a
theologian worthy of the name. … Consequently Luther’s teaching on
justification bears the marks of profound, often anguished, moments of personal
involvement with deep feeling. Sin and guilt are terrifying in this world of
thought, grace and forgiveness liberating and full of delight. Theological
discourse on justification is at times only the explanatory and protective
superstructure built over the religious core and substructure of experience.

The only person in whom he could absolutely place his trust, knowing he would not fail him and
would fulfill his word and promises, was God.

> For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish
to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own hands by
which I might strive toward salvation. For I should be unable to stand firm and

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459 Peter Manns, “Absolute and Incarnate Faith – Luther on Justification in the Galatians’ Commentary of 1531-
1535,” in Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther, 125.
461 Jared Wicks, “Justification and Faith in Luther’s theology,” 15-16.
keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils … and … I should nevertheless have to labour under perpetual uncertainty and to fight as one beating the air, since even if I lived and worked to eternity, my conscience would never be assured and certain how much it ought to do to satisfy God. … But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break him or to snatch me from him.462

Since everything, in regards to redemption, must come from God due to humanity’s complete impotence to accomplish the good, salvation cannot be earned in any way by human beings and must thus be received from God as a purely gratuitous (unmerited) gift. Luther thus equates good and divine grace; because, he says, “free choice without the grace of God is not free at all, but immutably the captive and slave of evil, since it cannot of itself turn to the good,”463 one is justified to pretend that “what the grace of God does not do is not good.”464 On this point, the Reformer fully agrees with both Augustine and Aquinas for whom there cannot be any preparation to the reception of grace which is not accomplished by divine grace; justification essentially is an act of God effecting the transformation of the individual without the individual contributing anything to it, not even her consent, for the ability to assent also is provided by grace. Human beings, left to themselves, are irretrievably and rightfully lost, for in the person of the first human beings they have incurred a guilt before God worthy of eternal damnation. To this inherited guilt, they add some of their own which is contracted through the committal of actual sins, the natural and only effect of their unassisted freedom. If a human being is saved, it is only due to the mercy of God who undeservedly shows favour to whomever he wishes as he pleases.

4.1.3. Saving Merits

In Luther’s mind, Christ’s coming proves beyond doubt the truth of these latter assertions. The fact is that Christ came on earth and humbled himself to assume the human condition, live and die on the cross, and be resurrected in order to save and redeem humanity, i.e. to mediate between human beings and God the Father and ensure that the latter would on account of his own merits bestow eternal life upon human beings. Chadwick explains that for Luther “salvation is the gift of sovereign grace on the ground of the merit of the redeeming work of

463 Ibid., 67.
464 Ibid., 66.
Christ. If human beings are still essentially free and capable of meriting salvation for themselves, what is the purpose of Christ’s incarnation? “For if it is by my own effort that I obtain the grace of God, what need have I of the grace of Christ in order to receive it?” Christ cannot simply have come in order to save an incidental and accessory part of humanity, for then he would not be the principle of their salvation in any essential fashion. To Christians, the denegation of the redeeming action of Christ in their lives amounts to falling prey to sheer impiety. “If we believe that Christ has redeemed men by his blood, argues Luther, we are bound to confess that the whole man was lost; otherwise, we should make Christ either superfluous or the redeemer of only the lowest part of man, which would be blasphemy and sacrilege.”

Luther affirms, as did Augustine and Aquinas before him, humankind’s absolute and irreducible need of the grace of Jesus Christ to obtain salvation. The way to eternal life passes through Jesus Christ, the unique and unavoidable mediator. “In the New Testament the gospel is preached, which is nothing else but a message in which the Spirit and grace are offered with a view to the remission of sins, which has been obtained for us by Christ crucified; and all this freely, and by the sole mercy of God the Father, whereby favour is shown to us, unworthy as we are and deserving of damnation rather than anything else.” Luther’s interpretation of the New Testament centers on his reading of the Pauline Epistles and of John’s Gospel, with special emphasis being placed on Romans. Luther believes that in this last text “what Paul means to say is that apart from faith in Christ there is nothing but sin and damnation,” which is to say that “his whole concern here is to make grace necessary for all men,” and this, to him, brings support to his stance against the existence of free will, for if human beings “were able to initiate anything of themselves, there would be no need of grace.” Crabtree concludes from what precedes that “Luther’s fixed conclusion was that justification comes not by the merit of works but by the grace of God,” Thomas N. Schulz that “there is no room in Luther’s conception of justification for works of merit,” George W. Forell that “God initiates justification and the

466 Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, in Career of the Reformer III, 279.
467 Ibid., 293.
468 Ibid., 150.
469 Ibid., 274.
470 Ibid., 255.
471 Ibid., 255.
472 Arthur B. Crabtree, “Luther’s Discovery of Justification by Faith,” 421.
same God completes it,” and Chadwick that “there is no such a thing as a neutral mediating power in the soul called the freedom of the will.”

In reality, since humans after Adam’s fall are absolutely incapable of producing any good and meritorious action on their own, divine grace expressed in the gift of faith is indeed the necessary prerequisite to the accomplishment of all good deeds. Far from denying the existence of divine grace, good actions perpetrated by human beings in the fallen state actually affirm it because they find in it their legitimate and proper origin and source. The first thing to know is that for Luther all possible good actions (and evil ones as well) are reducible to and contained in God’s commandments. “There are no good works except those works God has commanded, just as there is no sin except that which God has forbidden. Therefore, whoever wants to know what good works are as well as doing them needs to know nothing more than God’s commandments.”

The first of the divine commandments (and therefore of good works) is faith itself, the act of believing in Christ. “The first, highest, and most precious of all good works is faith in Christ, and as it says in John 6:28-29, when the Jews asked him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the good work of God?’ Jesus answered, ‘This is the good work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” The importance of faith in Christ for Luther ought not to be underrated, for all other good works obtain their worthiness from faith; their value is thus always and only borrowed and incidental, never essential. “For in this work [faith] all good works exist, and from faith these works receive a borrowed goodness.” The reason for the ascription of such importance to faith lies in the fact that it alone absolutely and completely trusts (and thus entrusts) God with the salvation of the soul. Good works are not deeds accomplished by free agents in order to win the assent of another more powerful yet independent being, but actions accomplished in absolute humility by a lowly servant whose powers and abilities to perform any good she directly obtains from her master, naturally possessing none herself. In Luther’s crystalline words, “faith desires to be the only way of serving God,” a way of life in which the faithful “start by trusting that grace [of faith] and perform all works in that grace, whatever those

474 George W. Forell, “Justification and Eschatology in Luther’s Thought,” 171.
477 Ibid., 23.
478 Ibid., 24. Reaffirming the same idea, Luther also says on p. 26: “Works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith.”
479 Ibid., 33.
works may be.\textsuperscript{480} Luther straightforwardly asserts elsewhere that “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all,” and this, because “love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved.”\textsuperscript{481} Faith itself, thus, cannot be a good work, since it essentially consists in the surrender of oneself to God, but rather constitutes the very gift of God’s grace, giving the strength and fortitude which enable weak human beings to look for and accomplish the good. Luther’s understanding of faith as foundation for the production of good works closely parallels Aquinas’ treatment of charity. Through subjection to God, the human being is made to share in a created supernatural participation in the very love which defines God as such. Only on the basis and foundation of this partaking in divine love, is the human being then empowered to love others in supernatural fashion.

Without any doubt it [faith] does not come from your works or from your merits, but only from Jesus Christ, freely promised and freely given. … This is how you must cultivate Christ in yourself, and see how in him God holds before you his mercy and offers it to you without any prior merits of your own. It is from such a view of his grace that you must draw faith and confidence in the forgiveness of all your sins. Faith, therefore, does not originate in works; neither do works create faith, but faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ.\textsuperscript{482}

All good works thus flow from faith, from the grace of God and in that respect they are not in any way meritorious; they cannot help to gain what they presuppose: the saving grace of God. “Faith alone suffices for salvation. I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty.”\textsuperscript{483} Crabtree aptly summarises the idea by saying that according to Luther “we are not justified because we do good works, but we do good works because we are justified,”\textsuperscript{484} and Wicks rightly notes that “works are not the cause of righteousness but its fruit.”\textsuperscript{485} Luther yet again reaffirms a central teaching from Augustine (fully endorsed by Aquinas): actions meritorious of eternal life are the effect and fruit of grace which is the main cause and principle of their generation.

Despite the fact that Luther blatantly denies human beings the possession and enjoyment of positive freedom – understood as strict autonomy –, he nevertheless admits that they do experience freedom in a certain sense. Insofar as and precisely because they are not positively

\textsuperscript{480} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{482} Martin Luther, \textit{Treatise on Good Works}, in \textit{The Christian in Society I}, 38.
\textsuperscript{484} Arthur B. Crabtree, “Luther’s Discovery of Justification by Faith,” 423.
\textsuperscript{485} Jared Wicks, “Justification and Faith in Luther’s theology,” 25.
free, human beings can be freed and receive the freedom belonging properly to servants, namely, God’s. Luther dryly asserts that “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.” Since God takes over all the duty and responsibility of freeing the human being, the latter no longer is subjected to the task of pleasing God and earning her own salvation out of meritorious deeds and an exemplary life. This gruesome and most demanding task of fulfilling God’s commandments and laws on her own being lifted off her shoulders, the Christian can now help her fellow human beings freely, i.e. graciously, without awaiting anything in return, purely out of uninterested love, in this imitating Christ himself and fulfilling her duty of service. “A Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law.” Thus, because “the works themselves do not justify him before God,” the Christian “does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things.” The yoke of earning her own redemption having been removed by Christ, the Christian can now simply lead a life in complete obedience to her gracious master, having no more incentive to interact with other human beings and creation purely out of egotistic concerns. The freedom of a Christian is thus that of not having to care for herself, and of opening herself to the world independently from human appetites, desires, and needs, but rather through the noblest wish of imitating Christ and pleasing God, independently from any consideration of merit. Because they flow from faith as a natural effect, good works are a sure sign of genuine faith. “Works save outwardly, that is, they show evidence that we are righteous and that there is faith in a man which saves inwardly,” works “show that we have been justified, just as his fruits show that a man is a Christian and believes in Christ.” This is to say that whoever accomplishes good works (uninterested, gracious actions in favour of the fellow human being) is righteous and has been justified; she has received God’s grace. “Works indicate whether I have faith. … A Christian is righteous when I see that he does good works.”

Human beings can also be said to be free, according to Luther, from a natural point of view insofar as they are the pinnacle of natural creation and, as such, enjoy lordship over all

487 Ibid., 348.
488 Ibid., 359.
489 Martin Luther, Disputation Concerning Justification, in Career of the Reformer IV, 165.
490 Ibid., 161.
491 Ibid., 161.
creatures of inferior ontological status. “We know that man has been constituted lord over the lower creatures, and in relation to them he has authority and free choice, so that they obey him and do what he wills and thinks.” It is thus only when human beings are related to God, and only in terms of what concerns their salvation that the existence of their free will is denied, and not inasmuch as they enter into relationships with other creatures. For in this latter respect, human beings in fact are acting as representatives of God stewarding creation and enjoying in regards to it (excluding the realm of purely spiritual creatures) a dominion analogous to that exercised by God over themselves. On this point, Luther’s theology parallels and agrees with Aquinas’.

Emphasizing the importance of Christ’s redeeming work by magnifying and amplifying the significance of original sin and human intrinsic corruption and depravity, Luther promotes humankind’s absolute need of God’s grace to obtain salvation and eternal life. In the wake of the Neo-Scholastic overemphasis on the theoretical analysis of the human freedom and divine grace interaction, Luther returns to Augustine and brings the existential, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the problem of sin back to the fore. The anguish he suffered and the difficulty he experienced in his attempt to gain these desired goods out of merit and exemplary conduct assured him of the necessity for human beings to surrender completely their salvation and their souls over to God, perfectly trustworthy and powerful. As for Augustine and Aquinas, Luther’s fallen human beings, once they have been justified by Christ and live by faith in him, enjoy the freedom of being obediently submitted to the good master and ruler that is God. Luther’s theology, through its denial of positive autonomy and freedom of indifference to human beings, illustrates Luther’s profound sense that the human condition supposes the enjoyment of much more freedom and responsibility than most human beings are ready and able to assume.

Experiencing creation as dreadful and tempting, Martin Luther’s theology of grace focuses on the human heart and soul’s personal relationship to God. Setting aside the external objective consideration of the divine design and providence as expressed throughout creation, this theology retreats inside the human person. Luther, like Augustine, senses God’s presence and action in the context of his own emotional and spiritual existence and life. Unlike Augustine, however, Luther experiences his forsakenness in solitary fashion, away from the world and society (disordered and pervaded with sinfulness). Like the philosopher René Descartes, but working within the perspective of Christian theology and spirituality, Luther needs to find an

absolute foundation for his existence as a subject, utterly distinct from objective (external) reality. These grounds for existential certitude he finds not in the reflexive self-awareness of human consciousness (Descartes), but in the saving merits and grace of Jesus Christ. Luther finds spiritual solace in letting go of, in entrusting someone else with the duty to save him. He begins to breathe and live again, to experience and exercise freedom once this burden has been lifted from his shoulders. Luther is existentially and spiritually free when he can place his personal destiny and trust in someone else, when he has found an absolutely legitimate spiritual master to serve.

4.2. John Calvin: Predestined for Grace

4.2.1. Retrieving Augustine

John Calvin follows Martin Luther and also lays the focus on the existential, properly subjective aspect of the human person and of her relationship to God. He however perceives, in human subjectivity, a profound need for objective grounding and guidance. Subjective evidence of one’s personal salvation in Christ does not suffice to quench the human thirst for existential certitude, to take away the anguish generated by a doomed existence deserving of eternal death. Hence, Calvin strongly emphasizes the need and necessity to go back to essentials in matters of Christian faith and religion, that is to say, to do away with mediations, artifices and intermediaries and resume a more direct, immediate interaction with the Lord and his redeeming action through close contact with Scripture, the mysteries it conveys and the experience of God’s grace in each individual’s daily life, experience and worship. Calvin considers himself a faithful follower of Augustine. According to him, the core of Augustine’s theology coincides with the orthodox expository interpretation of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and claims the strict gratuity of divine grace and redemption, in no way obtainable through works of the law (revealed [divine commandments] or natural [summons of moral conscience]). “No works of ours can of themselves render us acceptable and pleasing to God; nor can even the works themselves please him” because “to man we assign only this: that he pollutes and contaminates by his impurity those very things which were good. For nothing proceeds from a man, however perfect he be, that is not defiled by some spot.” Elsewhere, Calvin uses even starker terms: “We clearly see how destitute and devoid of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore, if he seeks resources to succour him in his need, he must go outside himself and get

494 Ibid., III, xv, 3 (790-91).
Works apart from faith in God through Christ are only worthy of condemnation. “Whatever a man thinks, plans, or carries out before he is reconciled to God through faith is accursed, not only of no value for righteousness, but surely deserving condemnation.”

As for preparation to justification and justification itself, Calvin, like Augustine and Aquinas before him, argues that it is effected by grace alone, the individual and her will – enslaved to sin – experiencing the transformation in purely passive fashion. “As regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God’s favour but receiving from Christ that which we lack.” If any form of merit were to be obtained through the accomplishment of works independently from the supernatural gift of faith in Christ, then redemption could be deserved and earned by human beings without recourse being had to grace, the latter being thereby declared unnecessary. For sure, Calvin does not agree with such a stance. “We deprive man of all righteousness, even to the slightest particle, until, by mercy alone, he is reborn into the hope of eternal life, since if the righteousness of works brings anything to justify us, we are falsely said to be justified by grace.” In truth, for justification to occur, no works at all are required from human beings. “Those who are justified by faith are justified apart from the merit of works – in fact, without the merit of works.”

4.2.2. Justified in Jesus Christ

Calvin rejects all forms of mediation of grace apart from Christ; Christ is the only mediator of divine grace, only through faith in him (expressed and received by means of baptism and membership in the community of believers) can one obtain redemption. No merits, no good work or action can ever redeem a human being apart from Christ’s grace, no merit and/or good action can reclaim the grace of Christ as its due reward or payment. “The Lord freely and willingly reveals himself in his Christ. For in Christ he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him.” There is no hope for salvation apart from Christ; all intentions and actions accomplished apart from Christ’s intercession can only lead to perdition.

495 Ibid., III, xx, 1 (850).
496 Ibid., III, xiv, 4 (771).
497 Ibid., III, xiii, 5 (768).
498 Ibid., III, xiv, 5 (772).
499 Ibid., III, xi, 18 (748).
500 Ibid., III, xx, 1 (850).
and death. “There is no life apart from the Son of God, those who have no part in Christ, whatever they may be, whatever they may do or undertake, yet hasten their lives to destruction and to the judgment of eternal death.”

Incorporating in his unique person both the human and the divine, Christ is the perfect mediator because in his divinity he constitutes the goal all human existence and life tend to and in his perfect humanity he embodies the model to follow and the way to God all others are called to take. “The way that is most fortified against all errors is he who was both God and man: namely, as God he is the destination to which we move; as man, the path by which we go. Both are found in Christ alone.”

Christ’s grace is utterly free and given by God to certain human beings purely out of mercy.

He [John, the Gospel writer] makes him [Christ] a perpetual advocate in order that by his intercession he may always restore us to the Father’s favour; an everlasting propitiation by which sins may be expiated. ... He, I say, not another, takes them away; that is, since he alone is the Lamb of God, he also is the sole offering for sins, the sole expiation, the sole satisfaction. For while the right and power of forgiving sins properly belong to the Father, in which respect he is distinguished from the Son, Christ is here placed on another level because, taking upon himself the penalty that we owe, he has wiped out our guilt before God’s judgment. From this it follows that we shall share in the expiation made by Christ only if that honour rest with him which those who try to appease God by their own recompense seize for themselves.

For those upon whom God has chosen to pour out his mercy, the merits gained by Christ through his passion are imputed, covering their unworthiness which, no longer visible to God, does not incur anymore punishment and rejection. “Since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all his things are made yours, that you are made a member of him, indeed one with him, his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he intercedes that your unworthiness may not come before God’s sight.”

In and through his self-sacrifice, Christ purified human nature, atoned for human sinning and pleased God with his perfectly obedient surrender. As Calvin explains, “Christ ever remains the Mediator to reconcile the Father to us; and his death has everlasting efficacy: namely, cleansing, satisfaction, atonement, and finally perfect obedience, with which all our iniquities are covered.”

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501 Ibid., III, xiv, 4 (770-71).
502 Ibid., III, ii, 1 (544).
503 Ibid., III, iv, 26 (652-53).
504 Ibid., III, ii, 24 (570).
505 Ibid., III, xiv, 11 (779).
Justification – the process by which human beings are renewed by God and in God, freed from their sinfulness and guilt and set on a path of progressive sanctification culminating in the achievement of personal salvation – is understood by Calvin essentially in a legal context and with legal terms. The point, for Calvin, is to make sure that human beings pass the test when they appear before God for judgment. In order to obtain from God a verdict of clemency or acquittal, human beings do not need to be made (proven) innocent, they simply have to make theirs the innocence, purity and merits of someone else – Jesus Christ. “‘To justify’ means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed. Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.”

Human beings therefore only appear righteous to God as they are made to share in Christ’s genuine righteousness; their righteousness only being a borrowed, transferred one. Even as it is applied to other human beings, Christ’s righteousness remains fully his, so that they remain intrinsically unrighteous and unworthy of God’s love and mercy.

Man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation. ... There is no doubt that he who is taught to seek righteousness outside himself is destitute of righteousness in himself. ... Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches. ... The Lord Christ shares his righteousness with us, in some wonderful manner he pours into us enough of his power to meet the judgment of God.

Calvin, therefore, “define[s] justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ’s righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat.”

4.2.3. Election to Death

No one deserves to be saved; in fact, and this is perfectly in line with Augustine’s teaching, Calvin believes that humankind as a whole constitutes a massa damnata, a lump of the damned, of sinners who in fair justice all deserve to go to hell and suffer eternal retribution.

As all of us are vitiated by sin, we can only be odious to God, and that not from tyrannical cruelty but by the fairest reckoning of justice. ... Let all the sons of Adam come forward; let them quarrel and argue with their Creator that they were by his eternal providence bound over before their begetting to everlasting

506 Ibid., III, xi, 3 (728).
507 Ibid., III, xi, 23 (753).
508 Ibid., III, xvii, 8 (811).
calamity. What clamour can they raise against this defence when God, on the contrary, will call them to their account before him? If all are drawn from a corrupt mass, no wonder they are subject to condemnation! God, in sending all humans to hell would not be unjust or unfair, he would simply be giving them what they deserve for the fact that they all stand under condemnation by reason of the sins they themselves have committed and that inherited through generation (original sin). When left to themselves, human beings are essentially lost, estranged from God and enslaved to sin, for Adam lost for all humankind the ability to accomplish meritorious actions (i.e. actions deserving personal salvation). Calvin follows and fully endorses Augustine’s teaching on original sin and its hereditary transmission. “Men’s whole righteousness, gathered together in one heap, could not make compensation for a single sin. For we see that man was so cast away and abandoned by God for one transgression that he lost at the same time all capacity to recover his salvation. Therefore, the capacity to make satisfaction was taken away. Those who preen themselves on it surely will never satisfy God, to whom nothing is pleasing or acceptable that comes forth from his enemies.”

Human beings, in the person of the first individual, are completely responsible for their demise and downfall, for God had created them pure of sin and able to remain in their initial state of integrity (reminding us of Aquinas’ original righteousness). “Even though by God’s eternal providence man has been created to undergo that calamity to which he is subject, it still takes its occasion from man himself, not from God, since the only reason for his ruin is that he has degenerated from God’s pure creation into vicious and impure perversity.”

Once fallen, human beings no longer appear pleasing to God because the very image and likeness of Godself that their Creator had imprinted in them has been shattered and lays in ruins. “Just as by the rebellion of the first man the image of God could be wiped out from his mind and soul, no wonder he illumines wicked persons with some rays of his grace, which he later allows to be quenched.” This image and likeness must be restored, if human beings are to relate with God again. “I interpret,” argues Calvin, “repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.” Such restoration can only be effected by God’s grace bestowed out of pure mercy. “God finds nothing in man’s nature but his miserable condition to dispose him to mercy.

509 Ibid., III, xxiii, 3 (950-51).
510 Ibid., III, xiv, 13 (780). See also ibid., III, xxiv, 10 (976), where Calvin, speaking of God’s elect, asserts that “if you look upon them, you will see Adam’s offspring, who savour of the common corruption of the mass.”
511 Ibid., III, xxiii, 9 (958).
512 Ibid., III, ii, 12 (556).
513 Ibid., III, iii, 9 (601).
... God’s sole reason to receive man unto himself is that he sees him utterly lost if left to himself, but because he does not will him to be lost, he exercises his mercy in freeing him.”

For Calvin, all sins are mortal, for they estrange the sinner from God and therefore deprive her of both grace and salvation.

Though they are always talking about venial and mortal sins, they still cannot distinguish one from the other, except that they make impiety and uncleanness of heart a venial sin. But we declare, as Scripture, the rule of righteous and unrighteous, teaches, “the wages of sin is death”; and “the soul that sins is worthy of death”; but that the sins of believers are venial, not because they do not deserve death, but because by God’s mercy “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because they are not imputed, because they are wiped away by pardon.”

Even those individuals who have already been granted regeneration in Christ – who have been imputed with his merits and righteousness – are incapable of fully meritorious deeds and works. Their actions remain to some extent burdened and tainted by sin. “There never existed any work of a godly man which, if examined by God’s stern judgment, would not deserve condemnation; secondly, if such a work were found (something not possible for man), it would still lose favour – weakened and stained as it is by the sins with which its author himself is surely burdened.”

Calvin believes that the strict unworthiness of human works is professed by Scripture itself. “Scripture shows what all our works deserve when it states that they cannot bear God’s gaze because they are full of uncleanness.” The truth is, says Calvin, that in order for human works (those of individuals renewed in Christ) to be considered by God meritorious of salvation, God must be merciful and forgive the unclean, inappropriate and sinful elements they contain. “The righteousness of good works depends upon the fact that God by pardon approves them.”

No human account or reason can be given or presented to explain why the grace of Christ has been offered to a given individual and not to another; God’s election transcends human morals and rational criteria. Most human beings have been predestined by God to suffer eternal retribution and punishment in just payment for their sinfulness; only a few elect will God save from eternal damnation through the meritorious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Throughout his

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514 Ibid., III, xvii, 4 (806-07).
515 Ibid., III, iv, 28 (654-55).
516 Ibid., III, xiv, 11 (778).
517 Ibid., III, xv, 3 (790).
518 Ibid., III, xviii, 5 (827).
exposition of double-predestination, Calvin shows himself to be thoroughly Augustinian, perhaps more than Augustine himself.

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation. Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of its manifestation, until they come into the glory in which the fulfilment of that election lies. But as the Lord seals his elect by call and justification, so, by shutting off the reprobate from knowledge of his name or from the sanctification of his Spirit, he, as it were, reveals by these marks what sort of judgment awaits them.519

The elect are given clear signs of their favourable election by God. The call to conversion and the gift of faith persevering to the end are manifestations of the outpouring of grace upon a given individual. Conversely, ignorance of the true God revealed in Christ and the absence of conversion and faith are telling indications of divine election to eternal damnation. The elect (and damned) cannot understand why they have been so chosen; their selection has nothing to do with merit already, currently or to be earned. Not even Christ can claim to have been elected on the basis of his future merits, but only from pure grace and in view of the redemption of humankind. Calvin acknowledges his debt toward Augustine. “Augustine wisely notes this: namely, that we have in the very head of the church the clearest mirror of free election that we who are among the members may not be troubled about it; and that he was not made Son of God by righteous living but was freely given such honour so that he might afterward share his gifts with others.”520

The doctrines of election and double-predestination are necessary to prove – beyond all doubt – the pure gratuitousness of salvation. “Salvation comes about solely from God’s mere generosity ... when the salvation of a remnant of the people is ascribed to the election of grace, then only is it acknowledged that God of his mere good pleasure preserves whom he will, and moreover that he pays no reward, since he can owe none.”521 The justification for the election of some to eternal life and of most to damnation resides in God’s unfathomable will. “If, then we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except that it so pleases him,

519 Ibid., III, xxi, 7 (931).
520 Ibid., III, xxii, 1 (933).
521 Ibid., III, xxi, 1 (921-22).
neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will."

As was the case with Luther, the divine will cannot – according to Calvin – be bound by anything, for it is the norm of the good and just. Because God so wills, the right and just are thus defined and not the other way around. “God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. ... The will of God is not only free of all fault but is the highest rule of perfection, and even the law of laws.” The will of God is moreover all powerful, so that no other will can oppose or resist its action; God’s will cannot be denied. “The will of God ... cannot be resisted by human wills so as to prevent his doing what he wills, since he does with the very wills of men what he wills.”

4.2.4. Salvation Free

Christ frees human beings not only in the sense that he covers their sins with his personal merits so that they can appear before God and hope in Christ to be granted salvation through adoption, but also in the sense that due to Christ’s merits being made theirs, graced individuals no longer need to fulfill the law with righteous works (which in any case is impossible and can only lead to damnation when attempted). No longer having to redeem themselves through the perfect fulfilment of the divine commandments, Christians can devote themselves entirely to loving their neighbour, expecting no reward, no honour in return, faithfully following in the footsteps of Christ, in humble obedience to the Father’s will. For Calvin, in and through faith, i.e. genuine conversion and repentance, brought about only by divine grace, justification is granted to human beings who have nothing to do and cannot do anything to obtain it. Completely distrusting themselves, Christians more and more come to deny themselves any positive worth and capacity in regards to their salvation and place all their trust in Christ, from whom and through whom redemption is made most secure to those who truly believe.

It is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity; to feel your own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself; to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God; to rest with a trustful heart in God that, relying upon his help, you may persevere unconquered to the end; to take your stand in his grace that you may comprehend the truth of his promises; to have unquestioned certainty of his promises that your hope may thereby be strengthened.

522 Ibid., III, xxiii, 11 (947).
523 Ibid., III, xxiii, 2-3 (949-50).
524 Ibid., III, xxiii, 14 (964).
525 Ibid., III, viii, 3 (704).
Calvin, like Luther, is looking for certainty in matters of salvation, because his own spiritual experience is pervaded with anxiety and doubt. There being nothing reliable and trustworthy in human nature, certitude of one’s salvation can only be found in God.

Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. We say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God’s mercy.526

Reassuring the human heart is quite difficult a task to accomplish, for “the heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought.”527 The human heart bears a heavy burden of guilt before God, the source of all the anxiety abiding and expressed by it. The human heart is restless until it knows for sure that its sinfulness has been washed away. “If there is anything in the whole religion that we should most certainly know, we ought most closely to grasp by what reason, with what law, under what condition, with what ease or difficulty, forgiveness of sins may be obtained! Unless this knowledge remains clear and sure, the conscience can have no rest at all, no peace with God, no assurance or security; but it continuously trembles, wavers, tosses, is tormented and vexed, shakes, hates, and flees the sight of God.”528 Only God can forgive the offense human beings perpetrated against him, only God can take away human misery once and for all. Human beings must find reassurance and certainty in divine grace. “If we ask in what way the conscience can be made quiet before God, we shall find the only way to be that unmerited righteousness be conferred upon us as a gift of God.”529

One must not understand, for all that, that works are not required or demanded from the Christian, they simply do not contribute to the obtainment of salvation. If faith is real and effective, that is, if the individual has indeed been freed from the burden of saving herself through the accomplishment of righteous works, if she only lives in the absolute trust that Christ has accomplished for her all she has to do in order to be loved by God and accepted by him, then she will naturally want to follow Christ like a disciple and give thanks and praise to God by means of good works, works entirely oriented towards the good of the other and not serving a

526 Ibid., III, ii, 17 (562).
527 Ibid., III, ii, 36 (583-84).
528 Ibid., III, iv, 2 (625).
529 Ibid., III, xiii, 3 (765).
self-centred aim or goal. Those effective works do not contribute or add anything to faith, they do not form part of what obtains salvation for the individual but rather simply follow from genuine faith as a natural effect and product. On this point, Calvin’s theology echoes Luther’s. “Justification is withdrawn from works, not that no good works may be done, or that what is done may be denied to be good, but that we may not rely upon them, glory in them, or ascribe salvation to them.” Works are a necessary manifestation of the action of grace generating faith in the individual, without the individual having anything to do with the transformation occurring within herself. Authentic holiness draws no pride from meritorious works, but ascribes them all to God, considering them as gifts received from him by reason of the faith already bestowed upon her. “The saints have not a confidence in works that either attributes anything to their merit, since they regard them solely as gifts of God from which they may recognize his goodness and as signs of the calling by which they realize their election, or in any degree diminishes the free righteousness that we attain in Christ, since it depends upon this and does not subsist without it.” And God welcomes and is pleased with good works precisely because they constitute a further dimension and expression of his unique grace. “God ‘accepts’ believers by reason of works only because he is their source and graciously, by way of adding to his liberality, deigns also to show ‘acceptance’ toward the good works he has himself bestowed.”

To understand in more concrete fashion how Calvin conceives of the process of justification and sanctification, it is helpful to take a closer look at his understanding of its end: the renewed people of God living in and as the kingdom of God. Calvin describes the kingdom of God in the following manner: “God reigns where men, both by denial of themselves and by contempt of the world and of earthly life, pledge themselves to his righteousness in order to aspire to a heavenly life. Thus there are two parts to this kingdom: first, that God by the power of his Spirit correct all the desires of the flesh which by squadrons war against him; second, that he shape all our thoughts in obedience to his rule.” The key characteristics of renewed humankind in the kingdom are for Calvin self-denial and indifference (if not despise) toward the goods of the present life and world. Calvin clearly favours the spiritual over the bodily and material and defines spiritual life in terms of complete obedience to the divine will. Such wholesome fidelity and immediate response to the divine summons in turn supposes that God

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530 Ibid., III, xvii, 1 (803).
531 Ibid., III, xiv, 20 (786).
532 Ibid., III, xvii, 5 (807).
533 Ibid., III, xx, 42 (905).
534 See ibid., III, xix, 9 (840): “Christian freedom is, in all its parts, a spiritual thing.”
supplies special assistance (in the form of the Holy Spirit) to help human beings control their lower appetites and powers, the root of disorder and sin. Humans are to subject their earthly, bodily dimension, desires and powers to their spiritual ones and the latter to God, for in him lies the source of everlasting happiness. Sharply contrasting the present life with the one to come, and this, to the latter’s benefit, Calvin’s rhetoric reveals his eschatological leanings.

When it comes to a comparison with the life to come, the present life can not only be safely neglected but, compared to the former, must be utterly despised and loathed. For, if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulchre? And what else is it for us to remain in life but to be immersed in death? If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, what else is the body but a prison? ... Therefore, if the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, it is doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot.535

Adam’s downfall introduced disorder – internal confusion, conflict and division – into creation which now yearns for its healing and renewal. Creation as we experience it is a damaged, suffering creation craving for wholeness and perfection. Following Paul and Augustine, Calvin claims that “because formless ruins are seen everywhere, everything in heaven and on earth strives after renewal. For since Adam by his fall brought into confusion the perfect order of nature, the bondage to which the creatures have been subjected because of man’s sin is heavy and grievous to them ... they naturally long for the undamaged condition whence they have fallen.”536 Human beings are responsible for the disorder observed in creation which stems from the disorder they themselves introduced within their own wills and persons. Calvin agrees with Augustine and Aquinas in saying that the multiplicity of desires and powers existing within the human body and soul no longer are ordinate and united; divided, they possess a tendency or will of their own which is not easily controlled or subdued.

Sin mainly consists in the inordinate tendency of any given power, especially the lower ones, to take over others, and ultimately the whole individual.

We do not condemn those inclinations which God so engraved upon the character of man at his first creation, that they were eradicable only with humanity itself, but only those bold and unbridled impulses which contend against God’s control. Now, all man’s faculties are, on account of the depravity of nature, so vitiated and corrupted that in all his actions persistent disorder and intemperance threaten because these inclinations cannot be separated from such lack of restraint. Accordingly, we contend that they are vicious. Or, if you would have the matter summed up in fewer words, we teach that all human desires are evil, and charge

535 Ibid., III, ix, 4 (716).
536 Ibid., III, xxv, 2 (989).
them with sin – not in that they are natural, but because they are inordinate. Moreover, we hold that they are inordinate because nothing pure or sincere can come forth from a corrupt and polluted nature.\(^{537}\)

As seen above, human beings do not have it in their power to free themselves from their sinful condition, to reorder their multiple desires and powers and to orient their entire persons toward God and the accomplishment of his will. This is all the work of grace from which flows a new condition and then a life in faith, a journey of sanctification where God himself, in and through Jesus Christ, guides the believer to eternal life. “Christ was given to us by God’s generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”\(^{538}\)

4.2.5. Inhabitation Divine

To be transformed and renewed, human beings must be part of Christ who must therefore indwell each of them as their principle and source of life. “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for use. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.”\(^{539}\) Christ indwells human beings by means of his Spirit – the Holy Spirit – which he sends as the most perfect gift: divine, uncreated grace itself. “Through his Holy Spirit he [Christ] dwells in us and by his power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified; we are indeed sanctified.”\(^{540}\) The Holy Spirit works in the human hearts and minds that they believe and progressively increase, deepen their faith until they live it out in a way deserving of eternal life. “Faith is a singular gift of God, both in that the mind of man is purged so as to be able to taste the truth of God and in that his heart is established therein. For the Spirit is not only the initiator of faith, but increases it by degrees, until by it he leads us to the kingdom of heaven.”\(^{541}\) Calvin further claims that “the advancement of every man in godliness is the secret work of the Spirit,”\(^{542}\) because indwelling the human heart and soul, the Holy Spirit becomes the latter’s first and primary principle of knowledge and wilful action.

\(^{537}\) Ibid., III, iii, 12 (604).
\(^{538}\) Ibid., III, xi, 1 (725).
\(^{539}\) Ibid., III, i, 1 (537).
\(^{540}\) Ibid., III, xiv, 9 (776).
\(^{541}\) Ibid., III, ii, 33 (581).
\(^{542}\) Ibid., III, xxiv, 13 (980).
The Holy Spirit stirs the human mind and will to act in accordance with his divine will. Supernatural being and action call for a supernatural principle and source. Calvin here at least implicitly endorses Aquinas’ teaching on the spiritual instinct. “By the inspiration of his power he [the Holy Spirit] so breathes divine life into us that we are no longer actuated by ourselves, but are ruled by his action and prompting.” The ideal, for renewed humankind, precisely is to let go of creaturely principles of decision and action, of human reason and will to obey the divine summons without deliberation at all times and in all circumstances, “so we may wish nothing from ourselves but his Spirit may govern our hearts; and while the Spirit is inwardly teaching us we may learn to love the things that please him and to hate those which displease him.” Immediate correspondence with and faithful obedience to the inner stirrings of the Holy Spirit are however the result of a long process of purification and sanctification which involves the mortification of inordinate desires and the humiliation of the human ego through suffering.

4.2.6. Not Our Own

To become part of Christ, Christians must become his disciples and follow him. “Christ, through whom we return into favour with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life.” True discipleship in turn means that Christians must, like Christ, experience suffering and bear their cross. “Then only do we rightly advance by the discipline of the cross, when we learn that this life, judged in itself, is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy; that all those things which are judged to be its goods are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and vitiated by many intermingled evils. From this, at the same time, we conclude that in this life we are to seek and hope for nothing but struggle.” Like Christ, humankind renewed in him is called to sacrifice itself, its human existence and life to someone and something greater, God and his will. Like Christ, Christians are called to die to themselves in order to be reborn and live for the Other and, in and through him, for all others.

Christ wants disciples who deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. He who has denied himself has cut off the root of all evils so as to seek no longer the things that are his own. He who has taken up his cross had readied himself for all patience and gentleness. But the example of Christ embraces both this and all other duties of piety and holiness. He presented himself to the Father as obedient even to death. He entered completely into the accomplishing of God’s works. He

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543 Ibid., III, i, 3 (541).
544 Ibid., III, xx, 43 (907).
545 Ibid., III, vi, 3 (686).
546 Ibid., III, xix, 1 (713).
breathed heart and soul the glory of the Father. He laid down his life for his brothers. He did good to his enemies and prayed for them.\footnote{Ibid., III, xv, 8 (796).}

For Calvin, the core and heart of the theological articulation of human freedom to divine grace lie in the essential relationality of the human person. Human beings do not control, master or possess their essence and identity; they can only find, become and be themselves in openness and self-offer to others. Receiving and finding everything they are and are meant to be from and in God, it is only by looking up to him, by investing all their being and energy into deciphering and accomplishing God’s will that they can be themselves. They are God’s and are meant to fulfill a purpose that is essentially his, not theirs. “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: insofar as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. ... We are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions.”\footnote{Ibid., III, vii, 1, (690).} Hence, humility is in Calvin’s mind the primary attitude and virtue Christians ought to cultivate. Aware of and responsibly assuming their intrinsic poverty, the humble willingly submit themselves to God, hoping and trusting he will provide them with all they need. “Humility is an unfeigned submission of our heart, stricken down in earnest with an awareness of its own misery and want. ... The humble are ... those who lie afflicted with the knowledge of their own poverty. ... The humble ... hope in the Lord.”\footnote{Ibid., III, xii, 6, (760).}

In regards to the goods of this life and world, Christians are therefore intended by Christ himself to be content and satisfied with little, they are to make use of goods and enjoy pleasure with strict moderation so as to be able to devote themselves entirely to the spiritual and divine, to subject everything to God’s will and its accomplishment in and out of love. “He [Christ] has greatly commended abstinence, sobriety, frugality, and moderation, and has also abominated excess, pride, ostentation, and vanity; who approves no other distribution of good things than one joined with love; who has already condemned with his own lips all delights that draw man’s spirit away from chastity and purity, or befog his mind.”\footnote{Ibid., III, x, 5 (723).} If genuine humility and self-denial are to prevail in the Christian’s heart and soul, if the passions of the body are to be kept at bay and under control, daily effort and repetition are required. The Christian way of life is a never-
ending challenge and struggle. “The life of a Christian man is a continual effort and exercise in the mortification of the flesh, till it is utterly slain, and God’s Spirit reigns in us.”

Faith in Christ gains expression and power through hope that he will provide for the Christian’s essential poverty, that he will have her partake in his own perfect eternal life. “Faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when his truth shall be manifested; faith believes that he is our Father, hope anticipates that he will ever show himself to be a Father toward us; faith believes that eternal life has been given to us, hope anticipates that it will some time be revealed; faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith.”

And hope itself is grounded in the sure belief that what has already begun in Christ will be completed in each and every one of his members. Christ bound himself to all of humankind for the sake of the latter’s salvation. Risen from the dead, everlasting life and joy flow from and through him to all those who have become part of his one body, the Church. “In the nature he took from us, he [Christ] so completed the course of mortal life that now, having obtained immortality, he is the pledge of our coming resurrection. ... To separate him from ourselves is not permissible and not even possible, without tearing him apart. ... There was begun in the head what must be completed in all the members, according to the rank and station of each.”

Calvin’s theological articulation of divine grace and human freedom is profoundly critical of human agency and its capacity to generate good in the form of both intention and action. Filled with anxiety and doubt, this theology finds refuge in Jesus Christ and his grace who alone can free human beings from the burden of their responsibility before God. In and through the merits of Jesus Christ’s passion, the fearful Judge who justly condemns them to eternal damnation is turned into a loving Father who, out of mercy, lavishes human beings with all sorts of gifts enabling them to behave as his adoptive children. Placing her life and destiny into God’s hands, faithful humankind is led to learn how to let go of itself and follow the stirrings of the indwelling guide and teacher. For Calvin, human freedom culminates in humble self-denial and suffering experienced in faithfulness to and as a response to God’s summons and will. Freedom, for human beings, is located in the assumed awareness that they are not their own masters, but can only reach their fulfilment in service voluntarily offered to God. Only if they allow God to act in and through them, as the main principle and source of their being and action, can human beings authentically actualize their personal identity.

551 Ibid., III, iii, 20 (615).
552 Ibid., III, ii, 42 (590).
553 Ibid., III, xxv, 3 (990-91).
Because he senses human existential and spiritual depravity with more depth than anyone (even Luther), John Calvin cannot be satisfied with a strictly subjective and experiential foundation for the theology of grace. His own existential and subjective experience of sin demands objective determination and foundation within and for human subjectivity and spirituality. For human salvation to be a reality, God must exercise complete command over human destiny. Human salvation can only be ensured when it is grounded in the divine design and predestination in the form of eternal election. Divine election is expressed and unfolds in and as the history of salvation bound, directed and fulfilled by and in divine law. Divine law evolves from an external mode of guidance – embodied in the precepts of the Mosaic Law – to a strictly interior one. The Spirit of Christ’s indwelling of the human heart and soul constitutes the New Law. Human beings are saved because God alone effects salvation, for only God really fulfills the promises he makes. Those are saved who can attest of the presence, in their existential and spiritual lives, of the sure signs of eternal election. To gain absolute and objective certitude about his own personal salvation, Calvin is ready to pay the price of the eternal damnation of most of humankind.

4.3. Trent: A Roman Catholic Response

4.3.1. Irremediable Loss

Trent’s decree and canons on justification constitute momentous official statements of the Church; any sound Roman Catholic theology of justification must be based on and respect their teaching. Whoever speaks of justification speaks of human condition in relation to God before and after having received (and still receiving) the grace of Jesus Christ, the redeemer. Trent’s decree and canons on justification therefore inevitably delineate, set boundaries to any orthodox exposition of the human predicament within the context of the economy of salvation. How much does humankind stand in need of God’s grace to obtain salvation? Human natural powers (more particularly human free will), even when guided by the God-given Mosaic law, cannot obtain salvation, because all humans are subject to original sin. Original sin results from the first human beings’ free transgression of God’s command which itself caused, as direct consequence and punishment, the loss for all human beings (not only the first ones) of “original justice,” a particular grace from and intimate relationship with God enjoyed by the first humans which prevented them from being subject to any form of division, corruption, suffering and death.

(originating from causes either interior or exterior to themselves) all characteristic of the current human condition (this no doubt reminds us of Aquinas’ theology of original sin).

4.3.2. Quid Justification?

Justification, which involves the remission of all past sins (personal and original sins) and the inner transformation of the individual enabling the free reception of divine grace and of the infused theological virtues (faith, hope and charity all required for the unification of the individual to Christ), can only be obtained through the merits of Jesus Christ, themselves only communicated to human beings by means of conversion to, baptism and continuously developing faith and life in Jesus Christ. Conversion to and faith in Christ are not the products of human natural powers and endowments, for then Christ’s redemptive merits would be declared unnecessary to the acquisition of salvation, but are entirely prepared and made possible through the action of further graces from the saviour, the free agency of the converted person simply assenting to the changes being operated within herself by God. “Actual justification in adults takes its origin from a predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from his invitation which calls them, with no existing merits on their side; thus, those who had been turned away from God by sins are disposed by God’s grace inciting and helping them, to turn towards their own justification by giving free assent to and co-operating with this same grace.”

Preparation to justification involves going through multiple stages which progressively lead the person to believe in the gospel preached, to move away from the perspective of an overwhelming expectation of the divine (just) retribution into that of hoping in God’s mercy through Christ’s advocacy and merits, and finally to love God as the source of all righteousness and reject all that takes her away from him (i.e. sin).

555 See the first two chapters of Trent’s decree on original sin (in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 666).
556 See ibid., chap. 7 (673): “Actual justification ... consists not only in the forgiveness of sins but also in the sanctification and renewal of the inward being by a willing acceptance of the grace and gifts whereby someone from being unjust becomes just, from being an enemy becomes a friend, so that he is an heir in hope of eternal life. ... In the process of justification, together with the forgiveness of sins a person receives, through Jesus Christ into whom he is grafted, all these infused at the same time: faith, hope and charity. For faith, unless hope is added to it and charity too, neither unites him perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of his body.”
557 See ibid., chap. 7 (673): “No one can be just unless the merits of the passion of our lord Jesus Christ are communicated to him.”
558 See ibid., chap. 4 (672): “By those words there is suggested a description of the justification of a sinner: how there is a transition from that state in which a person is born as a child of the first Adam to the state of grace and of adoption as children of God through the agency of the second Adam, Jesus Christ our saviour; indeed, this transition, once the gospel has been promulgated, cannot take place without the waters of rebirth or the desire for them.” The justified therefore are those who, through Jesus Christ, are adopted by God as children. This adoption supposes the conversion of the individual to Christ through the hearing of the gospel and baptism. The Fathers of Trent assert the effectiveness of a baptism of/from desire (to be baptised in the faith).
559 Ibid., chap. 5 (672).
People are disposed for that justice when, roused and helped by divine grace and attaining the faith that comes from hearing, they are moved freely towards God and believe to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised, and in particular that the wicked are justified by God. ... At the same time, acknowledging that they are sinners, they turn from fear of divine justice, which profitably strikes them, to thoughts of God’s mercy; they rise to hope, with confidence that God will be favourable to them for Christ’s sake; and they begin to love him as the fount of all justness. They are thereby turned against sin by a feeling of hatred and detestation, namely by that repentance which must occur before baptism. Finally, when they are proposing to receive baptism, they are moved to begin a new life and to keep God’s commandments.560

Faith can thus be conceived as the first stage and foundation of justification, which also demands that the person be made capable of genuine hope in God’s will to redeem all through his Son Jesus Christ and of absolute love for the God who gave his only Son to save humankind (and through the latter, the entire creation). Just as hope supposes faith, charity supposes both faith and hope. “Faith is the first stage of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and come to the fellowship of his children.”561

4.3.3. Development in Faith

The Fathers of Trent do not conceive of justification as a static event occurring at the moment of baptism, where all the grace of God is poured into the baptised and the complete and perfect transformation of the latter is instantaneously effected. They rather think of it in developmental terms: even though, at conversion and baptism, past sins are entirely forgiven and the person transformed in such a way as to now have her being completely oriented towards God, this positive and renewed intimacy with God also immediately calls for the further growth of the person in her new condition so as to share still more deeply in God and with others (as witness of God to and with others). This personal progression and development of the person in God is itself made possible by the reception of further graces from God. “So those justified in this way and made friends and members of the household of God ... are renewed from day to day by putting to death what is earthly in themselves and yielding themselves as instruments of righteousness for sanctification by observance of the commandments of God and of the Church. They grow and increase in that very justness they have received through the grace of Christ, by faith united to good works.”562 The fulfilment of the divine commandments by the person renewed and living in Christ rendered possible by divine grace poured in the latter’s heart and

560 Ibid., chap. 6 (672-73).
561 Ibid., chap. 8 (674).
562 Ibid., chap. 10 (675).
soul, the progression of the person in sanctification only is stopped or prevented from further advance by the person herself, God never abandoning the justified. “God does not command the impossible, but by commanding he instructs you both to do what you can and to pray for what you cannot, and he gives his aid to enable you. ... The just ... can make progress through Jesus Christ, through whom they had access to that state of grace. For God does not abandon those once justified by his grace, unless he is first deserted by them.” To abandon God and lose her condition of justified, the human person must commit a mortal sin, that is, she must go astray (away from God) in such a way as to seriously wound and break her intimate relationship to God, though such action need not imply her losing faith altogether.

The grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin, though faith is not lost. Thus is defended the teaching of the divine law which excludes from God’s kingdom not only unbelievers, but also the faithful if they are guilty of fornication, adultery, wantonness, sodomy, theft, avarice, drunkenness, slander, plundering, and all others who commit mortal sins from which, with the help of divine grace, they can refrain, and because of which they are severed from the grace of Christ.

Certain sins (venial), if they undoubtedly do negatively affect the person’s relationship to God, do not immediately provoke the latter’s irremediable severance (from a human standpoint). “In this mortal life men and women, however holy and just, will sometimes fall into sin, at least light and everyday sins which are also called venial, but they do not therefore cease to be just.” The Fathers of Trent presuppose Aquinas’ rationale accounting for the distinction between mortal and venial sin. A sin is mortal when it directly opposes God as the ultimate end of all human actions and venial when it does not make use of the appropriate means to fulfill the end. For the justified having mortally lapsed, hope of salvation is not forever lost, for God, in his great mercy and forgiveness offers to the fallen justified, through the sacrament of penance, a renewed justification (prepared and made possible by God alone). “Those who fall away by sin from the grace of justification which they had received, can again be justified when at God’s prompting they have made the effort through the sacrament of penance to recover, by the merit of Christ, the grace which was lost. For this kind of justification is a restoration of the fallen, which the

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563 Ibid., chap. 11 (675).
564 Ibid., chap. 15 (677). Noteworthy is the fact that you can lose the grace of justification without losing faith. Canon 28 describes the faith of a mortal sinner as not being “a living faith” (Ibid., canon 28 [681]). How is one to conceive of a dead faith? Faith being grace and an essential element of justification, how can one lose the latter without thereby losing the former?
565 Ibid., chap. 11 (675).
holy fathers suitably call a second plank for the grace shattered in a storm.”\textsuperscript{566} God, therefore, always provides those he justifies (even those who fall again) with the grace they need to come to, remain in his good favour and grow in holiness and sanctity. “For Jesus Christ himself continually imparts strength to those justified ... and this strength always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works, and without it they would be wholly unable to do anything meritorious and pleasing to God.”\textsuperscript{567}

4.3.4. Will for Human Freedom?

The question that naturally ensues from the previous exposition is that of the status of human freedom. The grace of Christ alone prepares the individual to receive justification, justifies the individual (with the latter freely cooperating), and enables the perpetration of meritorious actions (i.e. actions gaining merits toward the obtainment of salvation). Without the immediate transformative and elevating assistance of the grace of Christ, human beings are totally incapable of any meritorious action. All merits, for what pertains to human salvation, belong to Christ. “No Christian should ever either rely on or glory in himself and not in the Lord, whose goodness towards all is so great that he desires his own gifts to be their merits.”\textsuperscript{568} Yet the redeeming grace of Christ is imparted to the unworthy human beings justified through its indwelling action and presence in such wise that it is also in a real sense ascribed to them. “Thus our own personal justice is not established as something coming from us, nor is the justice of God disregarded or rejected; what is called our justice, because we are justified by its abiding in us, is that same justice of God, in that it is imparted to us by God through the merit of Christ.”\textsuperscript{569} Christ as us, Christ in us, Christ for us, earns our salvation. “For, unless they themselves neglect his grace, as God has begun the good work, so he will bring it to completion, bringing about both the will and the performance.”\textsuperscript{570} Strictly speaking, then, human beings contribute absolutely nothing to their own salvation, their positive action and freedom uniquely consists in letting God’s grace operate in and through them their own redemption (i.e. inner transformation and ensuing meritorious actions). “Though God touches a person’s heart through the light of the Holy Spirit, neither does that person do absolutely nothing in receiving that movement of grace,

\textsuperscript{566} Ibid., chap. 14 (676-77).
\textsuperscript{567} Ibid., chap. 16 (678).
\textsuperscript{568} Ibid., chap. 16 (678).
\textsuperscript{569} Ibid., chap. 16 (678).
\textsuperscript{570} Ibid., chap. 13 (676).
for he can also reject it; nor is he able, by his own free will and without God’s grace, to move himself towards justice in God’s sight.”\textsuperscript{571}

The Fathers of Trent are adamant in simultaneously upholding two at least apparently contradictory statements: 1) humans can only find redemption in Christ; 2) human freedom is not annihilated by sin (even original sin). “Since all lost their innocence in the sin of Adam, became unclean and by nature children of wrath ... they were so far slaves of sin and under the power of the devil and death, that not only could the gentiles not be freed from or rise above it by the force of nature, but neither could the Jews even by the letter of the law of Moses, though their free will, for all that it had been weakened and sapped in strength, was in no way extinct.”\textsuperscript{572} Why do the Fathers of Trent feel compelled to defend the existence of a remnant of freedom in human nature after the fall? If human freedom had truly been annihilated by and through sin, there would be no one to answer God’s summons to redemption, and Christ would have come for nobody, for there would be no one to save (individuals completely incapable to influence their own fate are mere slaves, not genuine relational partners). More than that, without any freedom of their own, human beings cannot be held accountable for anything, including all wrongdoing and evil, which in such a context, would automatically entail that God, the only authentically free being, bears the whole responsibility for the existence of all evil and sin (humans simply being pawns deterministically controlled by divine providence). In very Augustinian a fashion, the Fathers of Trent fully preserve human freedom in its capacity to sin, while at the same time denying human beings any ability to accomplish the good. Left to themselves, they cannot but sin. Helped by God, in and through Christ, they do the good insofar as the grace of God indwelling them provides them with the will and capacity to act meritoriously, which means that they are empowered by grace to be and act supernaturally for their end and fulfilment – to partake of God’s eternal life – is supernatural (following Aquinas). Once justified, human beings retain their capacity to oppose and reject the presence and action of God’s grace within them, which if they were to actually do so would make them even more responsible for their own sinning (as they would be the cause of their rejection of the only principle that can enable them to do good).

\textsuperscript{571} Ibid., chap. 5 (672).
\textsuperscript{572} Ibid., chap. 1 (671).
4.4. Luther, Calvin and Trent: Figures of a Dialogue

The previous affirmations of Trent’s *Decree on Justification* in fact do not assert a doctrine that is so different from what Luther and Calvin had in mind. The Fathers of Trent fully agree with Luther and Calvin in that justification, that is, conversion, remission of sins and sanctification are all effected uniquely by grace. When Trent says that the converts collaborate to their own conversion, this only means that they do not oppose it, not that they positively contribute anything to what is being done, which means that grace is responsible for everything, just as Luther and Calvin said. Luther and Calvin both agree with Trent (and Aquinas for that matter) that free will can still accomplish some good, what they deny is the capacity for human free will to bring any positive contribution to its own salvation. Trent does not say otherwise. Similarly, when Trent argues that the divine commandments can be fulfilled through and by means of grace, it is only restating what Luther stipulates at length in his *Treatise on Good Works*. Of course, the law can be fulfilled in and through grace, Luther and Calvin’s point is that there is no need to fulfill it as if through this action one were to obtain salvation when salvation has already been obtained through Christ; the law cannot be fulfilled by means of self-centred behaviour. Salvation is to be obtained from and in Christ alone, good works follow from life in Christ, as the natural effect of having fully entrusted one’s entire being and person to him. When Trent affirms that meritorious works consequent upon justification and sanctification do indeed win over merits deserving salvation and eternal life, is it saying something substantially different from Luther’s and Calvin’s teaching? Those merits only result from grace (created and uncreated) operating within the individual and cannot be attributed, strictly speaking, to the individual’s nature or will itself. If only grace as principle of meritorious acts can deserve grace in the form of eternal life, how does that differ from claiming that those works are pure gifts following the pure gift of justifying and sanctifying grace and calling for a further grace, that is, eternal life? When Luther and Calvin claim that all of justification essentially resides in faith which is a pure gift from God and that good works naturally follow from faith as a natural effect and fruit, are they not saying that good works are pure gifts, and that as such they do not pertain to the individual’s merits but only to God’s, i.e. Christ’s, so that salvation, here again, only is obtained through Christ and not through works, precisely because works effected by Christ’s grace in and through the individual are necessary for salvation? In both cases, grace is responsible for all merits obtained, so that there are no grounds for essential disagreement between Trent, Luther and Calvin.
Calvin does reject the distinction made between mortal and venial sin, because to him no clear and cogent rationale has ever been given to justify it. Where is one to draw the line between a sin that radically cuts the individual away from God and a sin which only partly does so? How could there be sinning, he argues, that does not deny God’s absolute primacy and rule? How could sinning of any kind not involve self-affirmation at the expense of God? The individual’s awareness of her sinfulness is no objective measure of her effective sinful condition; there is no way for any individual to assess how cut off from God she is so that, practically speaking, the only way out is to assume one’s radical need of grace and repent, asking God for mercy. Trent does not deny the extreme difficulty to distinguish, from the subjective, existential and psychological standpoint of the faulty individual, between grave and light, mortal and venial sin. The Fathers of Trent, like Aquinas, simply do not admit that such difficulty takes away the need and necessity to distinguish objectively the means from the end of every human action. To be wrong in regards to the end pursued is not identical and cannot be reduced to erring in regards to the selection of appropriate means to actualize this end. Because the means are ordained to and presuppose the end as given, to be mistaken in regards to the end is much more consequential and serious than erring in regards to the means.

When Trent says that faith, hope and love are infused together, in this clearly attempting to oppose the Reformers’ sola fide, is it promoting something utterly distinct from what Luther and Calvin have to say? For sure, with Luther and Calvin, the focus is laid on faith. This, however, does not entail for hope and love to be neglected. Calvin is clear: faith without hope is empty, for faith rests on the essential hope of obtaining salvation from God. Without this hope, there can be no faith, and the security obtained from faith in Christ disappears. Similarly, with Luther, it is complete trust in the fact that Christ is to bestow salvation upon us at the end times that enables us to forget about ourselves and live only in and for Christ, that is to say for the sake of the other in self-giving love or charity. Since faith does not come, in Luther’s mind, without good works, it cannot but be accompanied with hope and love, for otherwise no good works could be performed.

Luther and Calvin would certainly both resist the invocation of habitual (created) grace, and this because to them it would seem like affirming the necessity of a creaturely mediation of grace independent from the person of Christ, again dissolving the unity and integrity of Christ’s salvific and redeeming mediation. Luther and Calvin would certainly agree with Aquinas,

though, on the fact that the indwelling of the individual by Christ and his Spirit induces a radical and stable transformation of the individual in such a way that it affords the individual with new capacities and aptitudes she did not possess before. The very presence of uncreated grace in the soul of the individual must generate some durable effects and changes in the very constitution of the indwelled individual; that is the very basis of conversion and the progress towards sanctification. If the indwelling did not produce any major change, then Christ’s grace would simply be declared ineffective. If it does induce a radical transformation, a change whose effects are lasting (unless sin is committed), it is necessary to claim that a certain durable alteration (habit, in Aquinas’ words) affects the very spiritual being of the individual in such a way that she is now capable of actions she previously could not accomplish. Luther and Calvin would not sincerely oppose a defence of habitual grace presented in this way. It is not a question of habitual grace replacing or substituting for Christ’s grace, but rather that Christ’s grace, to be effective, must produce concrete effective changes in the very constitution of the believer who cannot simply remain unaffected, if God’s redeeming action really is operating and at work within her.

One major line of disagreement remains: Trent denies double predestination, while Luther and Calvin – with the late Augustine – are rather adamant on affirming it. For Luther and Calvin, Scripture plainly affirms that most of humankind is destined to perdition, while only a small fraction of human beings, actually a definite number, unknown to us, constitute God’s elect destined to enjoy eternal life and salvation. Trent certainly does not deny the possibility of eternal damnation but refuses to attribute responsibility for it to God. All those who are lost are because they have not received sufficient help from divine grace, for only grace can obtain and provide salvation; Trent fully agrees with this latter assertion. Now one wonders how God could avoid being accused of abandoning human beings to perdition (and this even if the latter have condemned themselves through their own guilt), for only he could save them from it. Augustine’s thesis was that since all have incurred condemnation, God does not have to save them, damnation is a fair punishment for what they have done, so that whoever is saved only is out of pure mercy. No injustice is involved in God condemning one or many and saving a few others, for no one deserves salvation, and God is free to grant it to whomever he wills. Luther and Calvin essentially opt for this stance, and that is why they are not afraid of defending the doctrine of double predestination, for to them God is justified in all eventualities. The Fathers of Trent seem to agree with and presuppose Augustine’s stance, but they simply refuse to admit that
God positively willed the eternal damnation of many of his creatures, for that would entail denying his own essence: pure goodness and love.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen how the theological treatment of the doctrine of grace has moved from a cosmic, ontological and systematic perspective to an existential and spiritual, subjective one. With Luther, the human person understands herself in contradistinction with the rest of creation. Conscious of her subjectivity, the external world stands before the human person as an object to dominate by means of knowledge and action. The human person can no longer decipher the meaning of her own existence, gain insight into her own destiny by the intermediary of creation. She finds access to the absolute only within herself, in the irremediable burden of absolute guilt she carries wherever she goes, that is, in her own freedom. Luther experiences grace in the absolute surrender of one’s freedom over to God who, in Jesus Christ, redeems and fulfills it, enabling it to act once more with spontaneity. When he obediently and submissively obeys the will of his Saviour, Luther considers himself free. Grace primarily consists in the transformation and particular modality of the human subject’s relationship to God.

Calvin agrees in principle with Luther’s stance. For him, though, more is needed to ensure any individual’s salvation than liberation experienced in a purely subjective manner. Calvin does not wish to return to the ancient (Augustine) and medieval (Aquinas) perspective of a cosmic, universal objectivity. Following Luther, he rather wants to find objective grounds for his own personal salvation within his subjective experience, within the constitution and structure of human subjectivity. Calvin conceives human subjectivity, as intrinsically (objectively) constituted by and in its relation to God. Human beings exist and live within and as the product of the divine power and will infallibly and irresistibly actualizing in history and as salvation the eternal divine election and predestination. Calvin experienced grace as absolute command and law at work within his heart and soul, turning the latter from stone into flesh and invincibly stirring them to act in complete obedience. God commanding and moving from within the human self to act; that is, according to Calvin, the surest proof of one’s eternal election to salvation. It is only in the eternal decree and design to redeem that a given individual can find sure grounds for hope and trust in her salvation, doing away once and for all with the radical anguish defining human existence (in its modern figure).

As for the issues of grace and justification, the Fathers of Trent found themselves agreeing with Luther and Calvin on the essentials. Like Luther and Calvin, the Fathers of Trent understand grace in the context of the human being’s personal relationship to God. Like them,
they emphasize human beings’ radical incapacity to fulfill themselves and please God. As Luther and Calvin do, the Fathers of Trent adamantly defend human nature’s absolute need of the supernatural assistance undeservedly offered by God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. However, in contradistinction with Luther and Calvin, they also emphasize the profoundly dynamic character of justification. The full reception and expression of Christ’s gift of saving grace takes time; it more exactly demands a lifetime. The Fathers of Trent insist on affirming the dignity of those who receive the grace of Christ. Even as they are entrapped in and enslaved to sin, human beings remain free spiritual creatures personally loved by God and called by him to an eternal vocation. The Fathers of Trent moreover teach that as grace induces the radical transformation of the human person, it produces and leaves lasting measurable effects. Grace and its effects are not only and purely invisible; they find visible embodiment in the person’s newly acquired supernatural abilities and accomplishments. Sanctification is most surely made patent in and through a life led by and expressing charity, which is nothing else than a created participation in the divine being and life.

We must now turn to the consideration of two remaining defining moments in the history of the theology of grace. Both occurred during the twentieth century. More precisely, we must study how Calvin’s theology of divine election and predestination gains radical depth and concreteness in the person of Jesus Christ. We must also analyze how the human self and subject transcends itself and reaches out to creation, rediscovering in the dynamism and structure of the universe the expression of the divine design and power at work. That is, we must now meet the theologies of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner.
Chapter Five

Karl Barth and Karl Rahner:
A Personal Response to God’s Self-Communication

5.1. Karl Barth: Grace as Freedom

5.1.1. Election in Jesus Christ

Karl Barth argues for the absolute lordship of God over all creaturely existence. God’s absolute sovereignty over all creation is expressed in God’s providence and predestination. God, before all the ages, elected his Son and through his Son, all human beings and has willed for the latter to enter into fellowship, partnership, covenant with him through his Son.

God elects himself to be gracious toward man, to be his Lord and helper, and in so doing he elects man to be the witness to his glory. This election, decreed from all eternity in Jesus Christ and executed in him in time, is the mystery of the will of God. Preceding all other resolutions and actions of God, it is his basic mystery, which he reveals in his Word, and which may be known and grasped in faith in his Word. To say divine election, to say predestination, is to name in one word the whole content of the Gospel, its sum.574

Jesus Christ, therefore, is the unique and perfect end of all evolution and history for in him, not only have sin and death been conquered, but also the will of God perfectly accomplished and fulfilled.

Man’s election is his election in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom the Father, and he himself, has not elected for this or that man but for all men, and who has not elected this or that man but all men for himself. In this twofold election he has taken to himself and away from them all the rejection which applies to all men as sinners and separates them from God. Not in and of himself, but in Jesus Christ as the eternal beginning of all God’s ways and works, no man is rejected, but all are elected in him to their justification, their sanctification and also their vocation.575

Jesus Christ – that is, God having entered history and perfected it in his own person – is the paradigm toward which all human beings are intrinsically oriented, be they aware of it or not; a paradigm whose normative character forces them to assume responsibility for themselves,

placing them under absolute and undeniable — divine — judgment. Jesus Christ is the criterion according to which human action and existence are measured.

Barth here reframes Calvin’s teaching on divine election and predestination in Christological terms, providing it with much more concrete and personal character and content. Jesus Christ himself is the divine pre-decision, made in God’s eternal decree and at the heart of time, from which we already come when we approach God’s judgment seat. He is the image to which we have to conform ourselves, the basis, assurance and significance of the relationship between God and man. He himself is the command which tells us first and foremost that we are to live as the beloved of God, and as such to give account of ourselves before him. For he himself in person is the act of love in which God has turned himself to man, to every man, from all eternity and in time. In him God deals with us so seriously that he cannot spare us the judgment, that he cannot condone anything, that we must experience the full severity of his measuring, weighing and assessing.  

Election and predestination are not abstractions; they directly impact human life defining its existence, context and intrinsic orientation in very particular ways. In and through Jesus Christ, God commands human existence, orders and ordains it to a supernatural purpose.

God judges us, and gives us nothing, because he has given us everything in his Son Jesus Christ. He has given us himself, and direct fellowship with him. It is in him that he judges us. In him he must deal sternly and inexorably with us. In Jesus Christ he has chosen man from all eternity as his own, for life in his kingdom, to be a member of his people, his possession. In him he has bound himself to us, before he bound us to himself, and before we bound ourselves to him. In him he has decided himself for us before all our decisions, before we recognized ourselves as his servants, his unprofitable servants indeed, before ever he forgave us our sins and called us to a new obedience. In him, the everlasting Son, he has recognized us as his servants from and to all eternity.

By electing his own Son, God elects all humankind, that is, he vows to love humankind eternally, before and beyond any wrongdoing and misgiving human beings might fall prey to. “For the sake of his Son God has elected the creature from all eternity, in his Son he loves it eternally and for the sake of his Son he will not allow it to perish.”

All the histories of particular individuals are thus inserted in and defined by the history of Israel, the elect people of God, and of Jesus Christ, who brings it to definitive fulfilment, well before they actually unfold.

[Man’s] vocation took place before it became an event in his own life, and in a way which was decisive for his situation, existence and history, in the work of

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577 Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 736.
God’s free grace to him which in time followed and corresponded to his eternal counsel, in the divine work of reconciliation which was simply effected for him in Jesus Christ without any cooperation or even presence on his part. For this has also a prophetic character. It encloses within itself the Word of reconciliation declared to man. The vocation of man is thus comprehended within it from the very outset, i.e., before it takes place in his own life-history. In Jesus Christ it already applies to him; it is already his vocation. For Jesus Christ did not only die for him. He also rose again and lives for him. He proclaims himself as his mediator and saviour ... there is no man who can be neutral in relation to the history of Jesus Christ. There is no man whose history is not decided in the history of Jesus Christ, in the sense that whatever may or may not take place in it in whatever way will do so in relation to and according to the standard of the fact that in Jesus Christ he, too, is justified, sanctified and called.\textsuperscript{579}

God’s command in and as Jesus Christ imposes itself upon human beings as a norm they cannot achieve, as a goal they cannot fulfill, as too high an aim for human nature to pursue. In this command, Jesus Christ is revealed as the only mediator, bridging the abysmal gap existing between the divine and the human.

Primarily and properly it is Jesus Christ who has rendered this obedience, for primarily and properly he is the elect of God, sanctified man. It is he, and not Adam, who is in the state of original innocence. ... It is we whom from all eternity he has seen in him as unable to stand in face of his command, as able to be sanctified and rescued only by his judgment of wrath, and yet as neither willing nor able to bear this judgment of wrath, as incapable of reconciling ourselves with God, of being our own mediators between himself and us.\textsuperscript{580}

Human freedom is therefore meant by God to exist within Christ’s freedom as a response claimed by and owed to God by virtue of God’s gracious self-offer to human beings. Human beings are intended to live and exercise their freedom within the realm of divine grace and as divine grace, making use of the gifts received in and through Jesus Christ. Hence human freedom must at all times subject itself to the divine rule.

There is no humanity outside the humanity of Jesus Christ or the voluntary or involuntary glorifying of the grace of God which has manifested itself in this humanity. There is no realisation of the good which is not identical with the grace of Jesus Christ and its voluntary or involuntary confirmation. For there is no good which is not obedience to God’s command. And there is no obedience to God’s command which is not the obedience of Jesus Christ or his positive or negative glorification.\textsuperscript{581}

\textsuperscript{579} \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 3, § 71, 486.
\textsuperscript{580} \textit{Ibid.}, II, 2, § 39, 740.
\textsuperscript{581} \textit{Ibid.}, II, 2, § 36, 543.
5.1.2. The Faith to Surrender

Human beings are to find in grace both the principle and the end goal of their exercise of freedom. To wilfully reject this subjection to divine grace and to set oneself as the absolute principle of one’s actions constitutes sin in its very essence. “Man is righteous and holy before God and on the way to eternal life to the degree that he lives by the grace of God and therefore for the grace of God, for its glorification in his creaturely existence. Sin, on the other hand, can obviously be only the surrender of this righteousness and holiness, a deviation from this way which is the open but also the only way to eternal life.”582 And this, for two reasons: 1) human beings are completely unable to free themselves from the stronghold of sin (cf. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin) and 2) grace is a sufficient principle for healing (human nature) and meritorious (supernatural) action.

Sin consists in our yielding to the prompting of the desire to be like God, to cleanse and justify and sanctify ourselves before God, to lord it against him. When we listen to this desire and obey it ... man ... becomes a sinner. He becomes guilty before God. He has fallen under his judgment. What God has forbidden is forbidden because in its root and essence it is always this one forbidden thing. It is the act of our desire for self-glorification against God. It is the act of our hatred of the all-sufficiency of God’s grace. ... There can be no doubt about one thing. By his own efforts man will never deliver himself from this body of death, from existence under the Law of sin and death.583

In fact, fallen humankind cannot even become aware of its sinful condition if it does not receive extraneous supernatural assistance from divine grace, for sin can only be known as such from within the perspective and the power of grace, because sin pretends to self-sufficiency.

The transgression of the sinner must first have been forgiven and he himself acquitted if he is to recognize and confess that he has no possible hope of standing his ground before the claim and decision of God. No exhortation and no persuasion can create this situation. We can none of us put either ourselves or others in it. ... If we really understand that we are transgressors, that we are all apostate and worthless, that the people of God is always and at all points a people of the lost, which cannot of itself receive or pronounce its own justification, which can live only by the justification of God, we shall always remember this, knowing that every demonstration of judgment in which we stood or stand or will stand has validity only when it is actually executed upon us by the Word and work of God.584

It is consequently only because they have received the gift of faith, because they have been radically transformed by and in faith, that human beings are able to acknowledge their

582 Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 576.
583 Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 590.
584 Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 748.
sinfulness before God and their absolute need of grace for the healing of their wrongfulness and the fulfilment of their nature. “Faith corresponds exactly to the judgment and grace of God. In faith we acknowledge that we are judged, or rather that we are directed to live by God’s grace. In faith, and only in faith, we can meaningfully ask what this reality necessarily means for us. ... We believe when we live before God and with God as those who are judged by him, whom he has made his own, in whom he has glorified himself by humbling and exalting them as he has done in his judgment.”585 The life of faith – that is, authentically lived human existence – entails being in a relationship with God where his Word commands the individual to be and take action in a certain way (and no other) here and now. God in his grace, in and through Jesus Christ, addresses human beings in such a way that they are compelled to behave according to his will, for that constitutes what is good and right to do each and every time.

It is God in whom we may believe as the Lord who is gracious to us – gracious in the sense that he gave himself for us in order that we might live before him and with him in peace and joy. And we know what it is that is ordered. We have to live as those who accept as right what God does for us. We have not to do that which contradicts but that which corresponds to his grace as it is directed to us. We have to believe in Jesus Christ, and in and with the fact that we live in this faith to do the right.586

Faith thus understood involves a profound conversion where the individual is led to let go of all hope, power and trust she might put in herself so as to be able to draw all her personal identity, her elective and active power from the grace of God.

Faith is conversion – in the freedom in which we are placed by God’s pardon. To believe is to turn away from every opinion and conviction which we may have in our own strength about good and evil to the truth in which we stand before God according to the divine verdict. To believe is to turn from the obedience of our own works in the cleverness and power with which we might invest our being and action, to the obedience in which the same works can be done under the lordship of God. ... The new man is born who as such can only do good works, to whom the desire and love for the will of God are fitting and natural, who as he breathes and eats and drinks and sleeps will definitely do what God approves and this alone, both in the secret recesses of the heart and in every relationship to his neighbour both in Church and state, at every stage and in every situation of life.587

The believing person hears God’s command and obeys it without resistance, because she is empowered by divine grace to do so. Barth, making his Luther’s imagery, argues that the believer is freed from evil and sin by becoming enslaved to Jesus Christ who now exercises

585 Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 766.
586 Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 585.
587 Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 772.
lordship over her life. “Awakened and moved by God, man can and does believe. ... Faith must consist in a complete enslavement of man. If he believes, he necessarily acquires a Lord. ... He must accept the fact that the Word of God disposes concerning him, and demands obedience.”

5.1.3. A Free Witness

In a radical sense, then, there is nothing left to accomplish for human beings, or more exactly there has never been anything to be done by human beings, if by doing is understood something to be accomplished apart from Christ’s redemptive ministry and work.

The relation between God and man is not that of a parallelism and harmony of the divine and human wills, but of an explosive encounter, contradiction and reconciliation, in which it is the part of the divine will to precede and the human to follow, of the former to control and the latter to submit. Neither as a whole nor in detail can our action mean our justification before God. ... Salvation has come to us of grace and pure goodness. It is not intrinsic to ourselves but extrinsic. Our sanctification is God’s work, not our own.

Christ has already accomplished everything that is to be done, and if human beings ever do anything, it can only be in and through Christ’s own doing.

Man neither is nor can be a second Jesus Christ. He can be obedient to God only as he follows Jesus Christ, so that in his place and within his limits he with his action is the witness of Jesus Christ and therefore of God’s will and work. He can be active for God only as the recipient of the creaturely freedom given by God and constantly given back to him, not as its author or owner, let alone in the majesty of the divine freedom itself. He can never satisfy nor justify himself, nor can he ever be his own meaning and goal, in virtue of his active participation. He can never accomplish the will and work of God by himself and in the place of God.

There are no such things as abstract, general ideas of God and humankind. The universal action of God takes form and is manifested, realized in the concreteness and singularity of the one Jesus Christ. Christ is the fulfilment and paradigm of human action in relation to God.

What right conduct is for man is determined absolutely in the right conduct of God. It is determined in Jesus Christ. He is the electing God and elected man in one. But he is also the sanctifying God and sanctified man in one. In his person God has also acted rightly towards us. And in the same person man has also acted rightly for us. In his person God has judged man and restored him to his image. And in his person again man has reconstituted himself in the divine likeness. We

588 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 250-51.
589 Ibid., II, 2, § 38, 644-45.
590 Ibid., III, 4, § 55, tr. A. T. Mackay et al. (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 482. See also ibid., II, 2, § 36, 539: “The grace of Jesus Christ itself and alone is the reality in which from the very start man himself has his reality. ... Man in virtue of this Word and work, does not exist by himself. He is not an independent subject, to be considered independently.”
do not need another image of God nor another image of man and his right conduct; neither another Gospel nor another Law.\(^591\)

All human beings receive a particular call from God, to become definite and not generic individuals; their vocation takes a very concrete and unique form and their following of Christ is to do the same. Grace precedes (defines, situates, provides with all the necessary prerequisites to action), accompanies (empowers, moves and supports) and follows (ensures the existence and production and lasting continuation of effects) any given act of finite freedom.

The creature understands the Creator as the one who has associated himself with it in faithfulness and constancy as this sovereign and living Lord, to precede, accompany and follow it, preserving, cooperating and overruling, in all that it does and all that happens to it. ... The creature understands itself as what it is in relation to its Creator, namely, as upheld, determined and governed in its whole existence in the world by the fact that the Creator precedes it every step of the way in living sovereignty, so that it has only to follow.\(^592\)

Humans are to let go of all their ideas, conceptions, worldly endeavours and expectations and, forgetting any form of self-accomplishment, act simply as pure witnesses of the action of God’s grace in Christ into creation and upon humankind. “We return to our main thesis that the Christian is a witness, a witness of the living Jesus Christ as the Word of God and therefore a witness to the whole world and to all men of the divine act of grace which has taken place for all men.”\(^593\) Here again, anthropology finds its fullest and unsurpassable expression in Christology. Human beings are to be and behave like Christ. Christ had nothing for himself, kept nothing for himself and was nothing of himself apart from what he received from the Father.

He submitted himself to God in all the fullness of a free and loving childlike obedience, and in so doing he was content to suffer the punishment of human sin, and to be delivered up to death because of it. Jesus Christ asks, that is, he takes up towards God the position of one who has nothing, and has claim to nothing, who has to receive everything, and to receive it from God. He trusts in God that he will in fact receive it from him. He trusts only in God, but he trusts in God fully. He entrusts everything to him. This is how he lives.\(^594\)

Christ is obedient and submissive in the same measure than he is free; obedience supposes freedom and freedom – in its authentic human expression – is obedience. Hence, Christ – as human – experienced the majesty of God and responded appropriately. With Jesus, says Barth, “it is not a matter of any kind of subjection to a power of fate, nor of any kind of subordination to a self-imposed rule. It is a matter of the obedience to the one who is received

\(^{591}\) Ibid., II, 2, § 36, 538-39.
\(^{592}\) Ibid., III, 3, § 48, 14.
\(^{593}\) Ibid., IV, 3, § 71, 652.
\(^{594}\) Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 275.
and accepted by God in free grace, and who for that very reason is terrified to the depths at the majesty of God placed completely at his disposal. It is a matter of the obedience of the free man to the free God. And for that very reason it is a matter of real obedience.\(^{595}\) Jesus Christ is not coerced to accomplish the will of the Father; the Father’s will and his are one. As a human being, Christ embraces what the Father wills for him as what is best to do in all situations. He follows the will of the Father as his primary and unique principle of action; it is for him a law by which he must abide. From his standpoint, his actions flow from and follow the divine command in spontaneous fashion and this, to him, is the sure sign of his freedom in God. “In what Jesus does, everything is permission, freedom, spontaneity. The will of God is his own will. To do it is the meat by which he lives. For he is the Son of the Father. ... He is therefore genuinely free, the one who is subject to the Law by his own volition. ... Like God, he lived in the freedom of the one who is law to himself. Indeed, he lived out the freedom in which God from all eternity has bound and tied himself for his own sake and for our good.”\(^{596}\) Christ so finds his personal fulfilment in acting according to the Father’s will that he freely offers and sacrifices himself to preserve and remain himself and free. Christ, as a human being, was and still is not principally defined or characterized by qualities attributable to him but rather through the very unique, immediate and profound relationship he entertained, like no other human being (precisely because he was not simply and uniquely a human being), with the Father. “Jesus Christ stands before God according to the will, in the name, and by the commission of God, in all the wisdom and the fullness of the might of God – so stands before God that he is completely covered by him, completely destroyed both in his weakness and in his self-will, completely offered as a living sacrifice, but in this way made completely holy and completely glorious.”\(^{597}\)

In fact, Christ was so free in his spontaneous obedience to the Father that he was able to do what no other human being could: to take upon himself the sinful condition and fate of humankind, to offer himself as a pure sacrifice on behalf of all human beings out of love for and as an expression of his faithfulness to the Father. He suffered a judgment he did not deserve and for this enjoys a glory accessible and known to no other.

He was the Bearer of our sin and took our place before God, and therefore accepted God’s sentence and punishment for us. As our head and representative, he was sinful, and died for sin. And as our head and Lord he also rose from the dead, and beyond that sentence received God’s justification. Having first been

\(^{595}\) Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 561.
\(^{596}\) Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 605-06.
\(^{597}\) Ibid., II, 2, § 37, 559.
humiliated, he was now exalted to the right hand of God. ... The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals the fact that God makes no mistake in his faithfulness to his dear Son, and therefore that the latter does not cease to be this because he stands before the Father at Golgotha burdened with all the actual sin and guilt of man and of each individual transgressor of the divine command. The Father in his faithfulness has set him there, and the Son in turn evinces a corresponding faithfulness by allowing himself to be set there. His name, therefore, represents and includes our name, his person our person, both in what he suffers and in what he does, in what he undergoes both as condemnation and as justification.  

Christ fulfilled the Father’s will by assuming the one human nature, by living in history as a concrete and real human being, accomplishing particular actions in given time and place. He fulfilled his divine vocation in and through the singularity of a unique human existence and life, thereby subjecting himself to the contingency of historicity.

Actualizing humankind in his own humanity, Jesus Christ became the centre – the defining and structuring principle – of creation by becoming an abode, a temple for God.

Jesus Christ is the centre and meaning of the cosmos and history. ... In Jesus Christ the divine calling, covenant and salvation are shown not merely in a negative correspondence but as a positive reality, experience and revelation. Again and again we must point to the fact that in Christ God himself has entered the limitation and singularity of man, that in him God himself has tabernacled as one no less transient than we are, that in him God has had a tent like ours and recognized it as his creation and found it a worthy dwelling place, that in him God himself has gone the way from birth to death. The Word became flesh. The fullness of the Spirit was at one place, a place like ours. ... His revelation occurred and its proclamation took place. The repentance, faith and obedience in man were enacted, not merely in a kind of transcendence, but in supreme immanence, at the heart of cosmos and history. ... Hence the time of this man, which as such was like that of every other man, was the time filled and controlled by this particular event. In other words, it was a human time which as such was also God’s time.

Human beings are called by God to assume their central position and role within creation by living their existence and freedom within the divine ones. Coming from God and assisted by God, creation is to return to God in and through human beings. Barth adopts this traditional framework of the history of salvation, masterfully exposed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*. “Proceeding from God and accompanied by God, the creature must also return to God. It must; for this is its greatness and dignity and hope. The movement towards God is the meaning of its history. Basically there is nothing greater or richer or finer that we can say

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concerning its goal, and therefore concerning the goal and intention, the plan and purpose of the
divine government, than that God himself is the goal.”

5.1.4. Following a New Master

God surrounds human freedom and action with his grace. “God was, and was at work,
even when the creature had not commenced its work. God is, and is at work, in the
accomplishment of this work. God will be, and will still be at work, in relation to this work,
when the creature and its work have already attained its goal.” Providing it with conditions of
exercise and existence, healing and elevating it to the supernatural, God’s grace precedes human
freedom in action. Moving it from within and granting it an external context suitable to its
actualisation, God’s grace accompanies human freedom in action. Allowing it to bear lasting
effects and offering it new possibilities, God’s grace follows human freedom in action.

Following Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Barth defends the position that in regards
to truly meritorious actions, God and his grace are responsible for both human willing and acting.
“The one God effects both the will and its accomplishment, the decision and its execution.”

Human beings are to “obey without speculation” the command of God – which is always adapted to their particular situation and personal vocation – they receive from within their hearts and souls, from Christ himself indwelling them in and through his Spirit.

Barth follows in the footsteps of Aquinas and Calvin, appropriating and adapting to his
own purposes the latter’s teaching on the spiritual instinct. “That Christ should live in the
Christian by the Holy Spirit is the purpose of his vocation. ... The Holy Spirit ... controls and
indwells him. ... It is only the Holy Spirit who can command him, giving the orders and
prohibitions which he must and can obey. ... It is only the Holy Spirit who can give him the light
for right decisions and the power to make them.” Commanded and empowered by the Holy
Spirit, the Christian is used by Christ as an instrument to accomplish his divine will. The
Christian only has to listen both in the sense of hearing what is being asked of her and of obeying
the divine command. Again, Barth adopts Thomist insights; this time the notion of the
instrumentality of the believer who has been made a member of the body of Christ.

Christians are the children of God, and as such they are the true and proper
servants of God ... by whose activity God wills at a specific time and place to

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600 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 158.
601 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 151.
602 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 121.
603 Ibid., III, 4, § 55, 369.
604 Ibid., IV, 3, § 71, 594 and III, 3, § 49, 256 and 258.
accomplish something specific in the context of his own activity. ... And as the Christian is obedient, and to the extent that he is obedient, he is used to this end, and is in service of the will, the positive will of God, and of the divine providence and world-governance. ... All that he has to do is to listen. As he does listen, and to the extent that he does, he has his function in the divine world-strategy, doing at some point the duty which is allotted to him as a soldier and servant.\textsuperscript{605}

True obedience does not admit even the possibility of opposition and resistance to the divine command and will; the Christian breathes and lives from divine inspiration and would never desire to stop doing so, for that would lead her directly to her (spiritual) death. “Real obedience has passed the point where there is a possible choice of disobedience. Christian obedience is real obedience because in it this choice was excluded at the source.”\textsuperscript{606} Hence, the freedom of a Christian has for Barth nothing to do with freedom of choice (or of indifference). The ability to choose between good and evil is for him a defective form or mode of human freedom. Genuine freedom has everything to do with the immediate, spontaneous fulfilment of the particular command and will of God addressed to each individual. Barth follows Augustine, Aquinas and Luther in arguing that genuine Christian freedom is embodied in absolute and loving submission to God whose supernatural life constitutes the fulfilment of the human nature (insofar as the latter is enabled by God to partake of it).

If we know and discern that he and no other calls us, we definitively have no choice between obedience and disobedience. The decision has been made even as we are confronted by it. There is absolutely no place for disobedience, unbelief and impenitence. Evil becomes for us the absolutely excluded possibility that it is for God himself. It is the shame that we can only leave under us and behind us. When we obey we do the only thing that we are free to do; the thing that we can do only in real freedom. We can be disobedient only as we are not free. Disobedience is not a choice, but the incapacity of the man who is no longer or not yet able to choose in real freedom.\textsuperscript{607}

Freed by grace from the world, Christians can positively relate to God in receptive, awaiting obedience and thereby also to others, and the world, to which they are no longer bound as slaves. The condition of the faithful human being is characterized by an attitude of active waiting. “Knowing [how God’s grace came to him], he [the Christian] can take it seriously and abide by it, not folding his hands and idly waiting, but waiting for what comes to him with the hastening, active waiting of the Christian. ... He confidently awaits that which cannot fail to come, that which will be given him as his true good in a familiar or perhaps very unfamiliar

\textsuperscript{605} Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 260.
\textsuperscript{606} Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 261.
\textsuperscript{607} Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 779.
form.” They await for God to express, each time in a puzzling and unsettling manner, his will again and anew, a will they know they can always trust because it is his. And when the command does actually come, authentic human beings receive it as it is, being willing to adapt and transform themselves in order to fulfill it.

Whatever comes, and in whatever form it comes, he [the Christian] will see that it comes from this one source [God]. However strange it may seem, however irksome in the form in which it comes, he will approve it as coming from this source. He will always be willing and ready – again a daring expression – to cooperate with it instead of adopting an attitude of supercilious and dissatisfied criticism and opposition, or, if it were possible, retiring sulkily into a corner as a sceptical spectator.

Barth considers, like Luther before him, that the individuals freed in Jesus Christ no longer have to work at their personal salvation. The work they accomplish is not for themselves and in a radical sense not of themselves, since it is of God at work within them. Christians allow for God and his grace to be at work within and through them and that is why they ascribe all they do to God and not to themselves.

If his [the human being’s] obligation to work is not his invention but God’s commission, then he cannot and should not imagine that what is going to become of him, his future and that of his fellow-men, lies in his own power. Rather should he continually prepare to expect and encounter it as a work and gift of the grace of God over which he has no disposal. He certainly must not try to comfort, help and justify himself with what he can and actually should plan, will, work and achieve of himself for his own sanctification, for the deepening of his piety, for the improvement of his morals, in the service of the community, of men and of humanity.

Christian freedom always sets God as its direct and proper goal; everything is done from God, for God, to praise God and in accordance with God’s will. “The peculiarity of all human activity Godwards is that if man’s action is to be right it can be concerned only with God and not with a detour round God or the attainment of ends even in the name of God.”

Because they neither are the source, the sustaining principle or the end of their own existence and actions, human beings renewed in Christ are not masters of their own destiny. Authentic humanity does not culminate in complete autonomy and self-possession, but finds its perfect expression in complete openness and receptivity to extrinsic determination from God and his grace.

608 Ibid., IV, 3, § 71, 668.
609 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 243.
610 Ibid., III, 4, § 53, 54.
611 Ibid., III, 4, § 53, 77.
In the last analysis man has no more knowledge of himself than mastery over himself. Again and again he must let himself be shown who he is. His faithfulness to himself, then, cannot consist in an inner faithfulness to principles, but only in constant attention and openness to that which, as God claims him, will be continually disclosed to him as his true self, as the real aptitude which he has been given together with its limits, and then in the corresponding decision for perhaps a much more daring or possibly a much more humble action than that to which he has hitherto considered himself called.\(^{612}\)

By virtue of their profound awareness of and receptivity to the abiding presence of God and his grace within their heart and soul, authentic human beings understand that the part they are called to play in the history of their personal salvation and in that of others is not the part of an active agent, but rather that of faithful sign and witness of that which is being accomplished in and through them. “Insofar as the creature is the object of the divine activity and the recipient of the grace of God, it becomes \textit{ipso facto}, not the means of this grace, for grace works directly or not at all, but its witness and herald and proclaimer.”\(^{613}\)

\textbf{5.1.5. Meeting New Challenges and Demands}

They know themselves to have been freed from sin in Jesus Christ. They know that they owe their supernaturally renewed and perfected human nature to the grace of God. Christian hearts are therefore pervaded with a profound sense of responsibility for the good use of all the gifts God undeservedly and lavishly bestowed upon them. “The only thing that I can do is recognize that my sin is really dead – the sin from which I cannot cleanse myself, the sin which I cannot even recognize and confess, the sin which I could only see awakening, and myself awaken, to constantly new forms of life if it were not already dead in the fact that God has pronounced and executed his sentence on his beloved Son in my place, and that the latter has accepted it in my place.”\(^{614}\) Barth, following Calvin, argues that it is precisely because human beings do not belong to themselves – because they are not their own, but God’s – that they fall under the judgment of God, that they are made responsible before him. Owing everything to him, they must render an account of who they are and what they have become to God. “Man does not belong to himself. He does not exist in a vacuum. He is not given over to the caprice of an alien power, nor to his own self-will. He may or may not know and will it, but because Jesus Christ as very God and very man is the beginning of all the ways and works of God, man is inseparably

\(^{612}\) Ibid., III, 4, § 56, 629.
\(^{613}\) Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 64.
\(^{614}\) Ibid., II, 2, § 39, 751.
linked with God and confronted by him. He is subjected to the divine will, Word and command, and called to realise the true purpose of his existence as a covenant-partner with God.”

The claim God makes on human freedom is total, that is, unlimited as to its radicality and scope, human responsibility before God therefore also is complete. The weight of every decision made by a human being has become, in and through the person and redeeming ministry of Christ, absolute. “That God is gracious to us in Jesus Christ means a total divine claim to our obedience and a total decision concerning good and evil in the choice of our decisions. It means our total responsibility. For the love of God in Jesus Christ intends and seeks and wills us in our totality. The work of atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ refers to the whole of our lives.” Depossessed of their own selves, liberated from sin and indwelled and empowered by God to act in accordance with the divine will, it would seem that the existence and life of authentic, renewed humankind has been made very comfortable and easy.

Reality actually differs greatly from such an interpretation, for God expects and demands from Christians that they become disciples of Christ and follow him, bearing their own crosses.

To want to be where Jesus is, is to abandon oneself to this total claim: to take one’s cross, to deny oneself, to leave all, to love one’s enemies. ... It is not possible to be with Jesus without necessarily being called and drawn into the occurrence indicated by these demands. What Jesus says cannot be heard, and what he does cannot be seen, without coming under the lordship which consists in the fact that he is subject to this servitude, to these demands in the obedience which he renders to the will of the Father. His servitude is his Lordship because in it he lives and proclaims the grace of God by his obedience.

The Christian life thus inevitably takes the form of a constant challenge and struggle. Each individual will be confronted with a particular set of difficulties with respect to the harmonious integration and ordering of all the components of her individuality: body, soul, sensible and spiritual desires and powers, emotions, etc. Barth follows Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin in saying that while justification takes away all sins and provides the individual with a new heart capable of loving God first and foremost, before everything else, the human composite is still prone to inner conflict, disorder and division. Part of the Christian identity and life consists in fostering and preserving the dynamic integrity and unity of the human person with the help of God’s grace, for the human being’s “particular existence lies in the hierarchically ordered unity,
awakened, ruled, preserved and continually renewed by the Holy Spirit, of soul and body, of inner and outer reality, of reason and organised substantiality.”

More profoundly, though, the Christian life is demanding and difficult because of extremely high ethical and spiritual requirements and standards placed on it by and in Christ. Christians are to love God with all their heart and mind and are to love their neighbours like themselves, even their enemies. Christians must always resist and respond to evil and sin with love. “Christian intransigeance, the Christian resistance to evil, consists in this, that the Christian never allows himself to be seduced from his offer of reconciliation, never lets himself be overcome by evil, is never enticed to requite evil with evil, is never led astray from the overcoming of evil with good, and therefore from the path of fellowship with the enemy. He does not refuse communion to the enemy, but to evil. And for this reason he seeks it even with the enemy.”

The Christian life is a most exacting one, because it demands sincere love, absolute love expressed towards God and others, all others in all circumstances and in the face of all difficulties and limitations.

The human heart and soul are called to transcend themselves and convey the divine as such, for God is of the nature of love, to integrate and unite human beings and through them the whole of creation through the fostering of lasting bonds of spiritual love. Such a task and vocation is an infinitely demanding one, one that only God and his grace can accomplish; human beings must at all times make sure, with the constant and ever renewed assistance of grace, that they do not prevent God from actualizing this unification in and through them. We can therefore conclude that for Barth, authentic human freedom is made possible through the supernaturally realized healing and elevating transformation of the individual which, providing her with a new heart, enables her to love God and enter in a sustained intimate relationship with him where she finally submits herself entirely to his action and will. This willing subservience – for at no time is God found coercing the individual into feeling and expressing love for him – in turn frees her from her sins and from the duty to earn or deserve her own salvation. Elected in Jesus Christ from all eternity to be entrusted with a personal vocation, the renewed person is called to bear witness to the action and presence of God within her and to radiate the redeeming and transformative love of the living God outward, outside her own person, reaching out to others who also share her absolute need for God. As Barth himself teaches, “the very essence of

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618 Ibid., III, 4, § 55, 518.
619 Ibid., II, 2, § 38, 721.
Christian obedience is subjection by emancipation, emancipation by subjection.”

Genuine responsibility is discovered and exercised in letting go of the sufficient self and wholeheartedly listening to God who has made of the human heart a temple in which he can now dwell and potently manifest Godself.

5.2. Karl Rahner: Openness to the Divine Mystery

5.2.1. Evolving Christianity

For Rahner, a universally valid understanding of the fundamental constitution of the human being can be obtained and thematically formulated, and this, despite the fact that the human being will always remain a mystery to herself. Following in Kant’s footsteps, Rahner elects a transcendental method, which entails that all objects are known by a subject or consciousness open to the world. If anything can be known, it is not first and foremost because there are objects but rather because there are subjects intrinsically transcending their own being, reaching out to other realities. Being, in its most complete and perfect expression, identifies with consciousness, that is, self-aware responsible existence. “In their ultimate meaning being and consciousness are the same thing ... an existent possesses being to the degree the existent is ‘present to itself’ and ‘returns’ to itself, and thereby is responsible for itself in knowledge and freedom, and precisely in this way becomes open to the whole of reality.”

Experimental science (physical cosmology and biology) has moreover established that the entire universe and the earthly biosphere have been evolving in accordance with a continual trend of complexification and diversification, generating ever more developed, advanced and sophisticated forms of life, until, with human beings, the natural universe has become self-aware. Rahner simply assumes these findings of natural science as a given and attempts to discover their theological significance. “We are not concerned here in the first instance with a presentation of Catholic Christology, nor with what can perhaps be vaguely designated as an ‘evolutionary view of the world.’ Our question is the possibility of coordinating the two. We are presupposing thereby the evolutionary view of the world as a given, and we are asking whether Christology is compatible or can be compatible with it, and not vice versa.”

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620 Ibid., III, 3, § 49, 252.
622 Ibid., 178.
5.2.2. *Potentia Oboedientialis Revisited*

Rahner argues that freedom increases as the free creature grows into intimacy with God. “The relation between God and creature is characterized, precisely in contrast to any causal dependence otherwise met with within the world, by the fact that self-possession and dependence increase in direct, not in inverse proportion. It is God’s causality itself which posits genuine difference from God and constitutes the creation of what is independent and has its own being.” Rahner provides an original and rather modern interpretation of Aquinas’ doctrine of the *potentia oboedientialis* by means of his teaching on the supernatural existential. Human beings (and all of the creaturely realm) find their fulfilment in the supernatural, in God and in being used by God as instruments for the actualization of his will in history. “In their innermost essential ground creatures must be understood as the possibility of being able to be assumed, of being the material for a possible history of God.” Rahner fully agrees with Aquinas that the end of human life is supernatural and that it consists in the beatific vision.

Without transcendence open to the supernatural there is no spirit; but spirit itself is already meaningful without supernatural grace. Its fulfilment through grace is not, therefore, an exigency of its nature, although it is open to this supernatural fulfilment. ... We can only fully understand man in his “undefinable” essence if we see him as *potentia oboedentialis* for the divine life; this is his nature. His nature is such that its absolute fulfilment comes through grace, and so nature of itself must reckon with the meaningful possibility of remaining without absolute fulfilment.

He adamantly insists, however, on the fact that the beatific vision does not entail the clear, distinct and exhaustive knowledge and understanding of the triune God (he argues that this is what Aquinas also meant). “It is not divergence from the Thomist theology of justification and glory to make use of insights hinted at by Thomas and to interpret created grace and created light of glory as a disposition which is formed by the self-communication of God in grace and glory as its effect and the condition of its possibility.”

To him, God, in the beatific vision, is to be experienced as the absolute mystery immediately made present. “So, despite the doctrine of the created light of glory, which is quite correct in itself, we are still dealing here with the pure mystery of faith, incomprehensible in

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itself and experienced as such, the mystery namely, that the incomprehensibility of God can make itself directly present in an encounter with a created spirit, for whom there exists the experience of incomprehensibility which gives God his ultimate name.\textsuperscript{627} For God to be God and not be confused with the creature, and for the latter not to be dissolved in God’s being, it is necessary, from the creature’s viewpoint, for God to remain, in the experience of the beatific vision, an unfathomable, uncircumscribable though immediately present mystery. “This incomprehensibility of God alone which for Aquinas makes possible the revelation of God as such, without man becoming God ... the incomprehensibility of God persists also in the immediate face-to-face vision of God.”\textsuperscript{628} God can never become a thematic object of the human mind, for all thematic objects are finite and posterior to God’s very revelation of Godself as absolute mystery. “This incomprehensibility follows from the essential infinity of God which makes it impossible for a finite created intellect to exhaust the possibilities of knowledge and truth contained in this absolute fullness of being. ... One and the same God is known and is at the same time fundamentally incomprehensible. ... God remains incomprehensible even in the beatific vision.”\textsuperscript{629}

God’s opening of the human mind to the infinite in the effecting of the human act of self-transcendence, more radical than thematic knowledge (of finite objects), reveals God as the infinite and absolute bringing into existence the very act of self-transcendence. The knowledge of any finite object supposes, on the part of the knowing subject, self-awareness. These two acts, in turn, themselves suppose the transcendence of all knowable and lovable finite objects as well as self-transcendence. Capable of reflection, the human subject transcends all knowable finite objects and herself (despite the fact that she is not finite in the sense in which a mere object is). The act of self-transcendence requires that the human subject share in a negative form of infinity. The human subject experiences herself as a radical desire for the positively limitless, absolute and eternal, that is, as a desire for God. Since no finite object can fulfill this most radical human desire, because this infinite desire – in fact a desire of the infinite – is the condition for any desire or knowledge of the finite, and therefore of any finite desire and knowledge, both its principle and object cannot be finite. “Reason must be understood more fundamentally as precisely the capacity of the incomprehensible, as the capacity of being seized by what is always

\textsuperscript{627} Ibid., 252.
insurmountable, not essentially as the power of comprehending, of gaining the mastery and subjugating. Reason must be understood as the capacity of *excessus*, as going out into the inaccessible.  

Only God can be responsible for the effectuation of this act of self-transcendence and only God can be the suitable object of the movement of self-transcendence. Only God, says Rahner, fulfills such a desire, “Man is understood as the existent of transcendental necessity who in every categorical act of knowledge and of freedom always transcends himself and the categorical object towards the incomprehensible mystery by which the act and the object are opened and borne, the mystery which we call God. This is true in all of the dimensions of his existence: his knowledge, his subjectivity, his freedom, his interpersonal relations, his relationship to the future, and so on.” Human beings must surrender themselves over to God and find in their love for him true happiness. Human fulfilment does not reside in the clear and distinct knowledge of God, but in human knowledge transcending itself and turning into trustful and loving surrender to the absolute divine mystery. Rahner adopts Aquinas’ distinction of the acts of understanding and loving as opposed in direction, knowledge being an inward and love an outward movement. “Love is precisely the acceptance of the incomprehensibility which we call God, in his nature and his freedom, as sheltering, as affirmed as for ever valid, as accepting us ... the act of self-surrendering love trusting entirely in this very incomprehensibility, in which knowledge surpasses itself, rising to its supernature, and is aware of itself only by becoming love.”

Human experience, conceived as limited (finite) responsible self-consciousness (conscience being its inner norm), involves and identifies with an experience of God, which itself need not be thematic (need not involve explicit awareness).

The unity between the experience of God and the experience of self is too ultimate and too all-embracing for it to consist solely in the simple fact that, as in every other “subject” of human knowledge, so too in the knowledge of God, the subject experiences himself at the same time. This unity consists far more in the fact that the original and ultimate experience of God constitutes the enabling condition of, and an intrinsic element in, the experience of self in such a way that without this experience of God no experience of self is possible. ... The reason is that an orientation to being in the absolute, and so to God, can be present only when the subject is made present to himself as something distinct from his own act and as the subject of that act. In accordance with this we can then likewise go

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on to assert: the personal history of experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God.\textsuperscript{633} This experience of God – initiated, sustained and fulfilled by God – determines and defines human nature as the locus and free recipient of God’s self-communication. In and as the human person, God’s word is heard and responded to. By virtue of their nature, all human beings are therefore supernaturally determined and called to enter in a free relationship with God.

Man is the event of God’s absolute self-communication. ... The statement that man as subject is the event of God’s self-communication is a statement which refers to absolutely all men, and which expresses an existential of every person. ... It is present in all men as an existential of their concrete existence, and is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience. ... In this sense everyone, really and radically every person must be understood as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God.\textsuperscript{634}

Human nature never exists as a purely natural entity, independently from this supernaturally infused determination to the supernatural. Nature and grace are consequently always seen at work together in and as the human person, for human nature as we experience it already is situated in a supernatural context. “Actual human nature is never ‘pure’ nature, but nature in a supernatural order, which man (even the unbeliever and the sinner) can never escape from; nature superformed (which does not mean justified) by the supernatural saving grace offered to it.”\textsuperscript{635} Grace is so active in human nature and existence that it can be experienced as the source of events occurring in both. “Many things which [the human person] concretely experiences in [her]self and ascribes almost involuntarily to [her] ‘nature’ are in fact due to the working in [her] of what [s]he knows from theology to be unmerited grace.”\textsuperscript{636} For Karl Rahner, human beings have been determined in their nature by their Creator to be part of a personal relationship with God in such wise that they are requested to respond to God’s free self-revelation to them in their very being.

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. ...

\textsuperscript{634} Karl Rahner, \textit{Foundations of Christian Faith}, 127.
\textsuperscript{635} Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” 35.
\textsuperscript{636} \textit{Ibid.}, 35.
For absolutely every human being this supernatural existential itself constitutes a revelation of God through his self-communication in grace.\(^\text{637}\)

5.2.3. Jesus Christ, Absolute Saviour

Creation’s evolution and history are therefore defined by God’s will to reveal Godself in such a way that in and through this revelation creation is elevated and empowered to receive and offer a positive response. In and through humankind, creation is made and turned into an immediate and infinite desire and quest for God which can only be fulfilled by and as God. That is why, according to Rahner, history can only find its complete actualization and fulfilment in the perfect unification of the human and the divine (a union without confusion). This unification has already been accomplished by God in the person of Jesus Christ.

We could define man, driving him all the way back to his deepest and most obscure mystery, as that which comes to be when God’s self-expression, his Word, is uttered into the emptiness of the Godless void in love. ... Man is the radical question about God which, as created by God, can also have an answer, an answer which in its historical manifestation and radical tangibility is the God-Man, and which is answered in all of us by God himself. This takes places at the very center of the absolute questionableness of our being in and through what we call grace, God’s self-communication and beatific vision. When God wants to be what is not God, man comes to be.\(^\text{638}\)

The hypostatic union is the most intimate and unrepeateable unification, without confusion, of the human and the divine, in the same numerical person. In Christ, humanity always is in immediate presence of the divine mystery which it cannot intellectually fathom but nevertheless absolutely and fully embraces in faith, hope and love. Christ is the goal, end, finality of all creaturely evolution and history, because in him the radical desire for God that is human nature is suitably answered in and through personal intimacy with the divine nature itself. With Jesus, the whole of creation (through his humanity) is taken up in God and God fully embraced by creation. “Because he is God’s assent to the world and the acceptance of the world into God, he is the eschatological event that will never be superseded. After him, no prophet can appear who will displace him. For there are two words and things, each ordered to the other, which cannot be superseded: man as infinite questioning, and God as the absolute answer which necessarily remains mysterious because it is God’s answer. That is why the God-Man cannot be superseded.”\(^\text{639}\)

\(^{637}\) Karl Rahner, “Revelation: Theological Interpretation,” in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 5, 350.


Christ’s fulfilment of creation and history does not bring the latter to an end, but rather radically opens and redefines it. The coming of Jesus Christ and his perfect accomplishment of the divine will present humankind with an absolute unavoidable choice: to assume or not to assume their true nature before and in God. With the history of Israel culminating in the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, human beings have been explicitly confronted with their personal vocation. Each individual must provide both an answer and an account to God.

Through him the world and history have found their own meaning – but not as though now the world could no longer have any history worthy to be enacted and pondered. Quite the contrary: now human history, which takes place in knowledge and freedom, has caught up with its true principle, can perceive its true destiny to be a partaking in the God-Man Jesus Christ. And so with him history only begins on its proper level: the obscure and incalculable history of a mankind that knows it is hidden away in the love of God.640

Because in Jesus Christ the divine irremediably and definitively entered the realm of the human and the human the realm of the divine, because in him, “God himself is man and remains so for all eternity,”641 creation and history have entered a new phase where the final overcoming of evil and the fulfilment of creation and history, while they still pertain to the future, have become certain.

In the genuine history of a dialogue in freedom between God and the human race, a point is conceivable at which God’s self-communication to the world is indeed not yet concluded, but nevertheless the fact of this self-communication is already given unambiguously, and the success, the victory and the irreversibility of this process has become manifest in and in spite of this ongoing dialogue of freedom. It is precisely this beginning of the irreversible and successful history of salvation which we are calling the absolute saviour, and hence in this sense this beginning is the fullness of time, and it is the end of the previous history of salvation and revelation which was, as it were, still open.642

Hence, the destiny of all human beings born after the coming of Jesus Christ is determined by their free orientation and relation to him, for in him alone does salvation reside. Jesus is the unique redeeming mediator. “The salvation of a person is decided by his relationship to Jesus, and the new and everlasting covenant between God and man is established in his death. … The absolute event of salvation and the absolute mediation of salvation by a man mean exactly the same thing as church doctrine expresses as Incarnation and hypostatic union.”643 All human beings are therefore intended by God to receive from Jesus Christ the grace they need to be

640 Ibid., 13.
642 Ibid., 194.
643 Ibid., 299.
healed and elevated (empowered) to their supernatural existence in and with God. It is in grace, therefore, that they commit themselves to God or reject his self-offer.

The supernatural existential. This means: the person is called to direct personal communion with God in Christ, perennially and inescapably, whether he accepts the call in redemption and grace or whether he closes himself to it in guilt (by the guilt of original sin and of personal sin). The person is addressed by the personal revelation of the Word of God in saving history which finds its climax in Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father become flesh; the person is unquestionably situated within the offer of his interior, saving and divinizing grace; he is called to the community-forming visible manifestation of this personal state of “being directly called before God” which is the Church. 644

5.2.4. Atmospheric Sinfulness

Following Aquinas, Rahner defends the need of divine grace not simply to elevate (divinize) human nature to the supernatural, but also to free the latter from slavery to evil and sin. Each human being born into this world is within an atmosphere, a context burdened with guilt. Like Aquinas, Karl Rahner opts for a definition of original sin as lack or privation of divine grace which he embeds in a situational understanding of human freedom. Moreover, he lays distinctive emphasis on the first sin, the sin of “Adam”: “Because of Adam grace is not at man’s disposal as the content and means of the decision about salvation which is required of him. That is the essence of original sin.” 645 Through grace God communicates Godself in such a way that this revelation of the divine provides the created freedom with its proper context, meaning, and conditions of possibility; the loss of this grace thus inevitably entails a severe depletion of human freedom, if not the plain impossibility to exercise it:

This divine self-communication, which is called the grace of justification, is what is most radical and most deep in the existential situation of human freedom. As divine grace it lies prior to freedom as the condition of possibility for freedom’s concrete action. Self-communication of the absolutely holy God designates a quality sanctifying man prior to his free and good decision. Therefore the loss of such a sanctifying self-communication assumes the character of something which should not be, and is not merely a diminishing of the possibilities of freedom as can otherwise be the case in the instance of a “hereditary defect.” 646

Because from the beginning of creation, God has willed human beings to possess such a grace, the lack of the latter can only be imputed to a guilt incurred by human beings themselves. “The will of God is that man should have the divinizing Pneuma. And that will is antecedent

even to God’s moral demand on the freedom of the individual. Consequently if the divinizing Pneuma is not there, this is only conceivable because of the guilt freely incurred (otherwise its absence would be unintelligible, in view of God’s will).”

Neither is the guilt tied to original sin personally incurred by the individual nor does the latter inherit personal guilt from another (first) human being (or group of human beings), for “personal guilt from an original act of freedom cannot be transmitted, for it is the existentiell ‘no’ of personal transcendence towards God or against him. And by its very nature this cannot be transmitted, just as the formal freedom of a subject cannot be transmitted. This freedom is precisely the point where a person is unique and no one can take his place.”

If neither personally incurred nor biologically inherited, how then is the “guilt” pertaining to original sin “transmitted” and in what way does this “guilt” relate to the guilt imputed for personal wrongdoing? It is transferred via the existential situation in and through which all humans, both in time and space, are tied together into one community of race and fate. Original sin only analogically relates to personal sin; it designates the situationally inherited privation of sanctifying grace incurred by all humans because of a primal transgression committed by the first human being (or group of human beings). “The universality and the ineradicable nature of the codetermination of the situation of freedom by guilt in the single history of the human race implies an original determination of this human situation by guilt already present at the beginning. It implies an ‘original sin.’” But why exactly is a qualitatively distinct primal transgression necessary for the formulation of the doctrine of original sin? Because, argues Rahner, there is no other way to explain the universal diffusion of sin (and by consequence the universality of the need for redemptory grace): “The determination of our own situation by guilt is an element within the history of the freedom of the human race, an element which is embedded

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648 Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 111. See also Rahner’s very clear words on the previous page of the same work: “‘Original sin’ does not mean of course that the original, personal act of freedom at the very origin of history has been transmitted to subsequent generations in its moral quality. The notion that the personal deed of ‘Adam’ or of the first group of people is imputed to us in such a way that it has been transmitted on to us biologically, as it were, has absolutely nothing to do with the Christian dogma of original sin.”
649 See Karl Rahner, “Theological Reflexions on Monogenism,” in Theological Investigations, vol. 1, tr. C. Ernst (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 280: “By ‘original sin’ we must at least mean a general situation of damnation embracing all men prior to their own personal free decision, a situation which is nevertheless historic and not an essential condition, one which has come to be through man and is not simply given in the fact of creatureliness. If there were no situation of damnation prior to the sin of the individual, it would be impossible to speak of an hereditary original sin, a cosmic sin.”
in its beginning, because otherwise the universality of this determination of the situation of freedom and of the history of the freedom of all men by guilt is not explained.”

If special significance had been ascribed by God to the conduct of the first human (or first group of human beings), a significance having consequences impacting on all the generations yet to come, then, according to Rahner, it becomes much easier to explain why all humans born after her (or them) are embedded in a graceless existential situation, subject to both sin and death, and so estranged from God.

God was willing to give grace (in subordination to and in dependence on Christ) to man in the unity of the human race and its original “covenant” with God, precisely inasmuch as men are the descendants of the first man endowed with grace … Since God owes grace to no one, he could link it to any meaningful condition, and therefore to the steadfastness of the first man. If this condition is not verified, then men receive the offer of the divine Pneuma not as “children of Adam” but only because of Christ to whom as head of mankind the will of God remains attached even despite sin. As children of Adam standing in a physical, historical connection with the beginning of humanity, men do not have the divine Pneuma. They “inherit” generatione the “origin-sin.” The mode of that connection, normal (libidinous) generation, or artificial insemination, has no significance.

The word “adam,” does not here necessarily refer only to a single individual, it can (and most probably does) designate a primary group of human beings whose conduct would rule the fate of all, for after having strongly advocated monogenism, Rahner came to perceive in polygenism no threat at all for orthodoxy. “A polygenetic view of mankind’s origin also allows for that first sin, whether individual or collective, which created that unredeemed situation for the whole of mankind that came after them, and which we call original sin.” The fact is that nothing prevented God from considering a first group of humans as a unit whose grace-transmitting ability, as a whole, was determined and affected by that of each individual (whether there must be unanimity within the group or not).

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651 Ibid., 112.
653 See Karl Rahner, “Theological Reflexions on Monogenism,” 282: “This historical origin of the situation of damnation at the beginning of the stock can only proceed from an individual: in other words, it cannot there and then have been posited by a multitude. The plurality of those to posit the situation of damnation is something which is in direct contradiction with what we are here concerned to maintain: that a situation of damnation is to be found prior to the freedom of any individual you like. … There would [then] be many who do not act out of the solidarity of an historically realized disposition of things in their regard.”
655 See ibid., 70: “Only a whole sinless original group can transmit grace to its descendants.” Rahner admits both possibilities: 1) only one or a very few individuals need to sin to prevent the group as a whole to transmit grace to subsequent generations; 2) all its members need to commit sins for the same effect to occur. See also ibid., 71: “This
then there appears to be no real difficulty at all about a polygenetic origin insofar as the teaching on original sin is concerned.”

“Adam”, whether denoting one or a group of individuals, had thus been meant to bequeath grace to his descendants, the medium, channel for that grace itself being generation. Finally, the first human beings enjoyed an existentially situated freedom substantially identical to that characterizing the condition of all other human beings, except for the fact that theirs had not beforehand been qualified by the actions of any previous generation; it would only be qualified by their own personal actions as well as by those of the other members of the original group.

Because of original sin (and of all the personal sins which followed it), divine grace does not come to human beings through their human origin (“Adam”), but must be provided purely gratuitously by God in the person of Jesus Christ who, entering and fulfilling history, renders redeeming grace immediately available and accessible to all again. “Original sin, therefore, expresses nothing else but the historical origin of the present, universal and ineradicable situation of our freedom as codetermined by guilt, and this insofar as this situation has a history in which, because of the universal determination of this history by guilt, God’s self-communication in grace comes to man not from ‘Adam,’ not from the beginning of the human race, but from the goal of history, from the God-Man Jesus Christ.” Rahner therefore adds his voice to those of the authors already considered in this dissertation and asserts the complete impotence of human agency and freedom to effect human salvation. Human beings are trapped in a sinful situation and help must come to them from without. Only God can free them from their prison of sin.

Our freedom is finite, the restrictedness and stubborn facts of the psychological, historical and sociological material of our freedom can never be abolished in the course of history, not even as a result of the greatest psychological and sociological changes for the better in our state of freedom; as long as our earthly unit may contain individuals who determine in a special way the common historical situation of all and so ‘represent’ this unit and situation. … Even one individual can block the grace-transmitting function of the original group, even if we would not accept that every sin of any member of the group would have this effect. … It is quite thinkable that the original group denied God in all its members at the beginning and that all together thus compose this ‘Adam’ who blocked the grace-transmitting function of the original group for its descendants.”

Ibid., 71. See the yet more limpid terms used in Karl Rahner, “The Sin of Adam,” in Theological Investigations, vol. 11, tr. D. Bourke (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 252: “The opinion that polygenism is not irreconcilable with the doctrine of original sin is no longer exposed to the danger of being censured by the authorities of the Church.”

See Karl Rahner, “The Sin of Adam,” 259: “Descent from ‘Adam’ was in itself intended according to the will of God as Creator to be the ‘medium’ of grace.”

Ibid., 260-61: “That beginning of the single human race which is withdrawn from our view and control is characterized by the fact that in it a state of original freedom existed, i.e. one such that the situation in which it existed was still unspecified by any decision of human freedom.”

history endures, we are always faced with the unresolved contradiction between the claim of our freedom and its actual opportunities; in this sense we are not free, our freedom can be liberated only by the act of God giving himself.660

All human beings born in sin, i.e. after “Adam,” must face their situationally inherited and personally acquired sinfulness and guilt before God and receive from God, in and through the saving ministry and person of Jesus Christ, the assistance and empowerment they need to become and be who they were meant by God to be from all eternity. Like Luther, Rahner believes that human beings are simultaneously righteous (in and through Jesus Christ and his grace) and sinners (in and through their own agency and situation).

For Christian anthropology, man is essentially the historical being for whom divine revelation and salvation are encountered through his specific history. At the same time he is the being who is always already endowed by what we call the Holy Spirit of grace with the saving reality of God himself, as offer made to his liberty, which can be realised in all history. He is always the sinner who cannot justify himself before God and who is yet surrounded by God’s self-communicating love.661 Due to the universal availability of redeeming grace which reorients them toward God and accomplishes in and for them not only the work, but also the willing of what in the eyes of God is good and meritorious, human beings are fully responsible for the fact that they remain enslaved to sinfulness. In Jesus Christ, God out of free (undeserved) love reconciles humankind to God. “God is reconciled as one reconciled by himself, and it is as reconciled in this way that he obviously wills on his own initiative one and the same grace which both establishes Christ and gives us the possibility of freely turning to God.” Sin therefore identifies with the wilful rejection of God. “The essence of sin is an actualization of transcendental freedom in rejection of God.”663

5.2.5. Communal Vocation

In this context, divine grace – expression of the free love of God – is made available to human beings for the actualization of their personal vocation in God only if they have assented to surrender themselves fully to this love first. “Grace is God himself, his communication, in which he gives himself to us as the divinizing loving kindness which is himself. Here his work is really himself, as the one communicated. From the very first this grace cannot be conceived as

663 Ibid., 115.
separable from God’s personal love and man’s answer to it. ... Grace is always the free act of God’s love which man can ‘dispose’ of only in the measure in which he himself is at this love’s disposal."^{664} Human freedom can therefore only be defined and exist within divine freedom insofar as the latter projects and provides it with a context, external conditions, a fundamental orientation and unique vocation. Human freedom and will can only accomplish themselves within the divine freedom and will whose existence and operation they always presuppose. “In essence [man] is not so much the author of projects as the one who has been ‘projected,’ one whom God has already made dispositions for, and who is always only partially in a position to make fresh dispositions on his own account.”^{665} Genuine human freedom finds expression in the complete obedience and surrender to God. Such freedom has been historically and paradigmatically embodied and exercised by Jesus Christ and his self-sacrifice.

We see a human being whose life is characterized by an unsurpassable nearness to God. It is a life of absolute obedience to God and at the same time of unconditional solidarity with the human race regardless of how these human beings might act toward him. ... The fate of Jesus which comes as a result of this is death in which he surrenders definitively and completely to God and to his inscrutable decree, while still maintaining his unconditional love for humankind. In this plunge into the absolute powerlessness of death, however, he is the one who is definitively affirmed and accepted by God and this is the way we experience him, precisely as the “risen one.”^{666}

All human beings have access to God, to their fully realized – divinized – humanity in and through Jesus’. They can fully realize their nature and freedom if they surrender them both to Jesus, believe in him and become member of his body, the Church, by means of baptism.

God has made known in his Son the irrevocable decision to set freedom free. Hence the history of freedom is salvation history. It is the experience realized in Jesus Christ that God has given himself to man’s freedom in what we call deifying grace in absolute nearness and as the ground of the free acceptance of this nearness. God himself has given himself to the freedom that surrenders itself to him in his inmost activity, he is not only the distant horizon to which man directs his free self-understanding, but has become the object of the exercise of this freedom in absolute immediacy. ... This freedom which is Christ and which he gives is appropriated by the man who obeys the call to this freedom in faith and through the baptism which is its expression, submitting himself to the event

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that opens the prison of the world; namely the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son.\footnote{667} Following a typically Lutheran line of argument, Rahner argues that human beings will authentically realize their personal and unique humanity in Christ if and only if like him they forget themselves and their salvation and care only about God and others, who like them, are loci of manifestation for God in this world. To be Christlike, humans must be altruistic and selfless. Genuine human freedom resides in self-giving dedication to God’s will and the salvation of others. “This man Jesus is the perfect man in an absolute sense precisely because he forgot himself for the sake of God and his fellow man who was in need of salvation, and existed only in this process of forgetting.”\footnote{668}

The essence of Christianity, of Christian faith and of the Christian way of life so much reside in the complete orientation of the person toward God and the good of other human beings which translates into concrete action that the ontological and theological presuppositions of such graceful behaviour need not be explicitly known to the human agent to be genuinely embodied and expressed. As long as an individual understands herself as a creature essentially situated within the freedom of God, hears and listens to the divine summons expressed through her conscience and dedicates herself entirely to God and the love of her neighbour, whomever that may be, she acts and exists as a Christian, even if she is not aware of doing so.

The heart of our thesis is that, because the universal and supernatural will of God is working for human salvation, the unlimited transcendence of man, itself directed of necessity toward God, is raised up consciously by grace, although possibly without explicit thematic reflection, in such a way that the possibility of faith in revelation is thereby made available. Thus one can speak of genuine faith on condition that a man freely accepts his own unlimited transcendence which is raised up by grace and directed to the immediate presence of God as its final goal.\footnote{669}

From the standpoint of Rahner’s understanding of faith, even explicit atheists and agnostics can actually be genuine Christians, inasmuch as their rejection of God or of the possibility to know and believe in God does not contradict their conscience and faithfully reflects the current state of their knowledge of their own condition (does not involve self-deception and refusal to face the truth).

Even if a man does not think of God as part of his conscious vocabulary or even feels that he has to reject such a concept as self-contradictory, he is nevertheless

always and inevitably involved with God in his secular awareness. Without reflection he accepts God when he freely accepts himself in his own unlimited transcendence. He does this when he genuinely follows his conscience with free consent, because by such an action he affirms as well the condition of possibility of such a radical option which is implicitly bound up with this decision, i.e. he affirms God. 670

Rahner is entitled to argue in favour of what he calls “anonymous faith” by his multi-level understanding of human subjectivity which supposes that the deepest layers, more central dimensions of the personal identity remain mostly implicit (and might never reach explicitness) but are nevertheless to some extent always involved in any particular act or decision thematically done or made by the individual. With or without the individual’s explicit awareness, the moral value of all human actions (goodness or badness in terms of how they affect the modality of the relationship of the individual to God) does influence and determine the individual’s core self in some measure and conversely all particular moral actions are determined by the individual’s ontological situation (existential). “Not every individual act of freedom has the same actual depth and radical nature of self-disposal and ... although each individual act of freedom wants to venture total and final self-disposal, all such acts always enter into the totality of the one, total act of freedom of the one, whole temporally finite life, precisely because each one of these acts is exercised within, and receives its weight and proportion from the horizon of the whole of human existence.” 671

For Rahner, human freedom takes the form of a lifelong journey of self-discovery where the individual progressively learns the truth about herself and gains the capacity to act responsibly in relation to this truth. Human freedom is a task and a vocation calling the individual to integrate and gather all the dimensions of her being and existence into the unity of explicit and responsible self-awareness. Human freedom ultimately identifies with the individual’s free disposal of herself before God.

Man, by his freedom of being, is always the incomparable being who cannot be adequately classified into any system and cannot be adequately subsumed under any concept. He is in an original sense the untouchable, but therefore also the lonely and insecure, a burden to himself, who cannot by any means “absolve” himself from this once-and-for-all lonely self-being and who can never “unload” himself on others. ... Freedom is not originally the capacity of choosing any object whatsoever or the ability of adopting an individual attitude towards this or that; it is rather the freedom of self-understanding, the possibility of saying yes or no to

670 Ibid., 55-56.
oneself, the possibility of deciding for or against oneself, which corresponds to the knowing self-possession, the understanding subject-nature of man. ... This self-realization is a task he cannot avoid and, in spite of all the differences within the concrete material of his self-achievement, it is always either a self-realisation in the direction of God or a radical self-refusal towards God.\textsuperscript{672}

The human life and vocation unfold in time; at each moment of an individual’s life, the whole of her past weighs in, inevitably determining her present which, at the same time, always remains open to an indeterminate future filled with a myriad of possibilities. The individual cannot elude having to decide by and for herself what she is to do and who she is to become each time anew, re-appropriating herself and entering a new present. In every instance, in the face of each challenging situation, the individual must – with the help of grace and under the immediate guidance of Christ – find out the proper course of action to follow. As a Christian, she must find her own way in life.

The Christian is not given any concrete directions for his life in this world as such, which could relieve him of the anguish of planning the future and of the burden of his passage into the dark unknown. ... The intramundane and Christian task of the Christian is really and truly a problem whose solution must be looked for laboriously amid surprises, pains, fruitless and false steps, false detachment and restoring, timidly conservative reserve and false fascinations with novelties.\textsuperscript{673}

To assume responsibly their condition and life, human beings must let go of all desire to control their destiny by themselves and remain under the guidance of God and his grace which never fail to inspire the suitably disposed individual (this disposition itself being an effect produced by grace).

Humans must deal with the obscurity and unfathomable character of their existence and place their trust wholly in God no matter what is being asked of them.

Only the life which lets itself unfold in an uncalculating manner, stage by stage, here below is a truly Christian life, evincing the humility appropriate to a creature, trust in God, recognition that one alone knows what is adequate as the formula of our life and its reality, namely God and not ourselves. This acceptance of the fact that our life is arranged by God, and this obedient acceptance of the fact that our life is unforeseeable and subject to the vicissitudes of history, is an essential element in Christian life.\textsuperscript{674}

When lived in truly Christian fashion, human existence undoubtedly involves difficult sacrifices and intense suffering, for such is the life of those who choose to follow Christ, whose own

\textsuperscript{672} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{674} Karl Rahner, “Being Open to God as Ever Greater,” 37.
existence was replete with hardship and turmoil. Freed in Christ and threading in his footsteps, Christians tackle the challenge of creaturely existence to its full extent, with all its limitations.

For us who were born without being asked, who will die without being asked, and who have received a quite definite realm of existence without being asked, a realm which ultimately cannot be exchanged, there is no immediate freedom in the sense of an absence of any and every force which codetermines our existence. But a Christian believes that there is a path to freedom which lies in going through this imprisonment. We do not seize it by force, but rather it is given to us by God insofar as he gives himself to us throughout all of the imprisonments of our existence.⁶⁷⁵

Human beings, through the action and power of the grace of Christ, are led to realize that their being and life are not theirs; in fact, nothing is theirs because they are and have nothing which they have not received. Rahner is here following a line of thought which was dear to Calvin. Once – in grace – they have been enabled to assume the truth that they are not their own, human beings can also offer that which they have received – themselves – to and for others. Human existence and life are in essence offerings to be made to God for others. “If we are really concerned for the freedom of others, we shall be prepared to give up part of our own freedom. We shall make this sacrifice, appearing as weak and stupid, incapable of defending ourselves, as men who give without receiving anything in return. This is the attitude of the Sermon on the Mount and of him who could freely have saved his life, but surrendered it to the guilty freedom of others even unto death.”⁶⁷⁶ And this sacrifice of themselves, human beings always and only make in response to God’s summons which anticipates and defines the personal vocation in its content and form for each individual.

5.2.6. Redeemed as Church in the Eucharist

Rahner moreover argues that all valid forms and expressions of Christian faith tend to take and culminate in explicit Christian belief and practice. Explicit Christians, aware of the truth, witness to it before other human beings. Because the offer of redemption and salvation made by God in Christ is definitive and universal, the Church, as witnessing community, must exist and persist in history. “The church was founded in the first place by the fact that Jesus is the person whom the believers professed to be the absolute saviour and to be God’s historically irreversible and historically tangible offer of himself, and by the fact that he would not be who he is if the offer of himself which God made in him did not continue to remain present in the world.

⁶⁷⁶ Karl Rahner, Grace in Freedom, 239.
in an historically tangible profession of faith in Jesus.\footnote{Karl Rahner, \textit{Foundations of Christian Faith}, 329-30.} The Church is an essential instrument, manifestation and mode of salvation precisely because the human being is by nature socially determined and situated. Salvation must come to socially defined and oriented beings as and by means of a community. In pastoral terms, if human beings are to learn how to love God with all their heart, with all their mind and to love their neighbours as themselves, they must be raised in, taught by or at least be provided with the example of a community embodying those two forms of love in real life. To follow Christ, to be and act like Christ, human beings must be provided with a place where they can meet him, listen and witness to him. This place is the Church.

When a Christian understands the church as the historical tangibility of the presence of God in his self-communication, he experiences the church as the place for the love of both God and neighbour. Both “loves” are experienced in human life when they are taken seriously as a given, as something in which and in which alone a person discovers himself and his true essence, but which nevertheless are always a gift from another. And insofar as the church is the concreteness of Christ in relation to us, and insofar as Jesus Christ is really the absolute, irrevocable and victorious offer of God as the absolute mystery who gives himself to us in love, the church is the tangible place where we have the assurance and the historical promise that God loves us.\footnote{Ibid., 398.}

And the Church herself is essentially and primarily constituted by and in the celebration of the Eucharist, whose main purpose is to make Christ present, in flesh and spirit, amidst and within his community as the very principle of life of this community. The Eucharist, argues Rahner, is the very sacrament of human salvation, and in this most basic regard, is the sacrament grounding and founding all others and actualizing the Church as such.

Insofar as the Eucharist is the sacrament of the most radical and most real presence of the Lord in this celebration in the form of a meal, the Eucharist is also the fullest actualization of the essence of the church. For the church neither is nor wants to be anything else but the presence of Christ in time and space. And insofar as everyone participates in the same meal of Christ, who is the giver and the gift at the same time, the Eucharist is also the sign, the manifestation and the most real actualization of the church insofar as the church is and makes manifest the ultimate unity of all men in the Spirit, a unity which has been founded by God in grace.\footnote{Ibid., 427. See also Karl Rahner, “The Word and the Eucharist,” in \textit{Theological Investigations}, vol. 4, tr. K. Smith (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 282: “The Eucharist is simply the word of God in the Church which supports and conveys all other words, which forms the centre whence all the reality of the Church derives its meaning. The Eucharist is the word of the Church absolutely. ... It is the word which when uttered and heard in faith, alone gives full reality to what the Church is: the presence of Christ and his redemption in the world.”}
In and through the Eucharistic celebration the faith and heart of the believers are strengthened, enabling them to return to their daily life and better to cope with the struggles, hardships, sufferings, and evils encountered there. The Eucharist, by having the faithful share in Christ’s very sacrifice, provides redeeming significance to all the suffering and turmoil endured in their everyday life. Through this sharing in Christ’s sacrificial path and journey, believers discover the deeper meaningfulness undergirding their existence and grow into greater intimacy with Christ.680 This process of spiritual maturation accompanied and assisted by Christ occurs over time, gradually and not without setbacks. That is precisely the reason why the Eucharist must continually and frequently be renewed: in order to provide the faithful with the necessary resources they need to tackle the absurdity, the difficulty and the obscurity characterizing the human condition in this world.681

The previous considerations show that Rahner’s theology is built in order to fully acknowledge and infer the consequences of the Christian God’s universal will to save humankind. Rahner’s theology takes account of and integrates the input of contemporary evolutionary science (cosmology and biology) and of the philosophy of interiority (transcendental analysis of the subject) to produce a description of divine grace reaching out to every human being, beyond the latter’s explicit commitment to (or rejection of) the Christian faith. Rahner conceives of the human person as being constituted by the social environment, network and situation of which she is part: human existence can only find fulfilment and happiness in and from the other. The human is a composite of spirit and matter; by means of her body – the most complex product of evolving creation – the universe becomes self-aware, that is, capable of self-transcendence. In and through the human person, creation is integrated and enters in a relationship with its Creator on a personal level. In and as her very being, the human person immediately experiences God, the absolute mystery from and toward which she has come and is oriented. Humankind having lost and forfeited, through the actions of the first human beings, the

680 See Karl Rahner, “The Eucharist and Suffering,” in Theological Investigations, vol. 3, tr. K.-H. Kruger and B. Kruger (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 166: “In those who are in Christ Jesus … suffering and death no longer have the character of punishment in the proper sense but rather are a participation in the fate of Jesus and an effect of that living union with him which began in baptism. … We always bear about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame.”

681 See Karl Rahner, “The Eucharist and Our Daily Lives,” in Theological Investigations, vol. 7, 216: “The Eucharist is the food of souls, by means of which they are nourished and strengthened. The Eucharist, therefore, is here regarded as our daily bread. … The Eucharist is regarded as the food of a man who becomes hungry again and again, who becomes weak again and again – in other words one who, so far as his spiritual life is concerned, is a man of the everyday. … The Eucharist has a remedial function too in that by means of it we are freed from our daily sins and preserved from mortal sin.”
enjoyment and ability to bequeath divine grace because of sin – the free rejection of their nature and of God –, it can only obtain salvation from Jesus Christ, the fulfilment and goal of history. In Jesus’ unique person, human agency and freedom are fully inserted within the divine freedom and made subservient to the divine will. In and through him, the human person is healed, elevated and empowered to follow her own unique Christian path, to bear her cross and suffer the challenges, contradictions and limitations of the present life. Whoever accepts her human nature as such, as oriented toward and defined in and by God, who follows the dictates of her conscience, who forgets herself and wills and does good to others is a true disciple of Christ, guided and empowered by him, even if she is not aware of it. The Christian vocation culminates in the explicit witness borne to Christ by the community of those who profess belief in him and draw in and from the Eucharist (particularly and especially, but not exclusively), supernatural life and power bestowed by Christ himself to create a new historical situation – the Church herself and the world as transformed by her – where other human beings will come to life and grow in faithfulness to their true nature and God.

In regards to the doctrine of grace, the theologies of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, with the help of a new understanding of the human person as dynamically situated in and relating to the evolving society and universe, successfully operate the integration of the ancient and medieval perspectives with those of Modernity and the Reformation. Profoundly indebted to Luther and Calvin, Barth’s teaching on grace opens the latter’s subjectively focused theology to the whole of creation through the agency and person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the creator and redeemer, the elector and eternal election of creation are found and accomplished. The human subject elected, redeemed in Christ is freed from herself and her existence opened to creation, empowering her to act within creation. Following the divine command and inspiration, the human person reaches out to the world, finding fulfilment in the accomplishment of the divine will for others and the world. In and through her (and her fellow human beings), Jesus Christ effects the redemptive transformation and unification of creation. The human person is turned into a lens and prism in and through which the divine action and power are diffused, gaining access to and affecting the whole of creation. Fully acknowledging the intrinsic dynamism of the cosmos, Rahner discovers in Jesus Christ’s personal unification of the human and divine the only suitable goal for evolution. In and through the incarnation, creation’s striving toward the supernatural – realized in and as self-transcendence – reaches completion. In and through Christ’s sinless and supernaturally perfected humanity, creation returns to its creator in full awareness and
responsibility. Creation in its entirety is declared to be under the influence of the healing and elevating power of Christ’s saving grace. God’s will to save permeates and pervades creation; genuine faith can perceive it at work everywhere and in all human beings. Creation as a whole, and especially all human beings, in whom evolution becomes history and nature enters the realm of the spiritual, are summoned and requested by God in Jesus Christ to offer a free personal response. This response is endowed with eternal meaning and implications. This response constitutes and channels divinely effected redemption to other human beings and creation by establishing new humankind and creation in Christ, as the body of Christ, the Church. Nourished in and by Christ, renewed humankind and creation bring Christ to and share him with the world, accomplishing in history God’s will to become and be all in all.
Epilogue: Genesis and Gist of Grace

The argument and developments of the three previous chapters empower us to perceive key tenets and threads preserved and unfolded throughout the history of the Christian west in regards to the doctrine of grace and its relation to human freedom. Western Christianity experiences freedom and grace as something entirely lost by and in the human and wholly found and recovered in and from God through Jesus Christ. Human beings are born into this world already carrying as a burden the nostalgia of a pristine condition they themselves never experience, a condition they nevertheless believe and feel they should now be experiencing if nothing had gone wrong with human freedom. From Augustine to Rahner, with the clear insistence of Luther and Calvin, human agency and freedom are declared profoundly wounded, impotent to accomplish any meritorious deed or good relative to human salvation. There is a clear sense that human beings are by reason of their own free action estranged from God and if left to themselves, destined to justly deserved eternal damnation and death. Humankind’s only hope resides in God, and more particularly in Jesus Christ, the unique and perfect mediator who, out of purely undeserved mercy, in his person reconciled humankind (and the whole of creation) to God, healing, restoring and perfecting the sick and wounded human nature in and through the sacrifice of his own humanity on behalf of all. In and from Christ, human beings receive all the divine assistance, being (existence) and guidance they need to submit themselves to God absolutely and spontaneously, out of genuine love.

Systematically inclined and oriented, Aquinas specifies and integrates further aspects and components to the basic framework and understanding of grace he receives from Augustine. To him, if grace – offered by God in Christ to human beings – heals human nature from sin and its detrimental consequences, it does so not simply by restoring human nature in its strictly natural abilities, but by opening, dedicating and empowering it to supernatural modes of existence and fulfilment. In Christ, the human being becomes the centre of creation, in and through which the whole of creation is integrated anew and returns to its Creator, finding complete and definitive
actualization in him. Following Christ, human beings are to become instruments of the Holy Spirit who indwells them, inspiring and moving them to accomplish his divine will. At every step they take on their Christian way of life, grace precedes, accompanies and assists, as well as follows their human agency which, guided, strengthened and elevated is made to contribute to its own salvation.

Like Augustine, Luther and Calvin suffered in their own flesh and soul the existential, psychological and spiritual aspects of the problem of sin which they articulated in light of the then newly emphasized experience of angst (which would later become a landmark feature of Modernity). Lost in an infinitely vast cosmos and a rationally structured society where it becomes more and more difficult to decipher the presence and action of God, Luther and Calvin insist on going back to the human interiority and self, trapped in sinfulness and unworthy of salvation. Humans are not masters of their own destinies, they belong to God, and must entrust him with the entire responsibility for their salvation. Liberated from the burden of self-sufficiency, humans find their freedom in complete obedience to the divine command which they receive, in the form of a unique and personal address, from the Holy Spirit inhabiting their heart. The Fathers of Trent agree with Luther and Calvin that salvation is the effect of grace alone and that human merits follow from genuine belief in Christ as a result of faith. No one deserves to be saved; whoever is redeemed is out of purely undeserved divine mercy. The Fathers of Trent are adamant on preserving a key insight from Aquinas: uncreated grace (divine indwelling) induces lasting effects in the recipient. Uncreated grace generates created supernatural dispositions empowering the human person to accomplish supernaturally meritorious actions.

With Barth, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is reformulated in highly personal terms. Elected in Jesus Christ from all eternity, human beings are entrusted with a personal vocation: to bear witness to the renewing and perfecting action and presence of God and his grace within their hearts. Subjecting themselves to the divine command, they no longer live for and by themselves, but for and by God and can dedicate their lives to the salvation of others. Renewed each day, the Christian life unfolds as a constant challenge to be coped with each time in a new way in complete hope and trust, with an attitude of patient and active receptivity to God’s inspiration and empowerment. Genuine freedom does not reside in the power to choose between good and evil, but in the ability never to fail in complying with God’s command, in spontaneously following (there is no room for deliberation, doubt and hesitation) the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, in finding innovative ways to make God present in our life and world. The true
Christian never wanders astray from what is good, that is, from what is God, which is the centre and whole of her life.

Lastly, Rahner frames the theology of grace in a way that allows it to reach out to all human beings and to affect their existence in a radical way even before they gain the ability to reflect on it and assume their actions responsibly. Integrating inputs from natural science and transcendental philosophy, Rahner transposes Aquinas’ teaching on the *potentia oboedientialis* in terms of human self-transcendence grounded in the infinite divine mystery. God is the principle of and the answer to the desire and question that is the human being. Grace already is at work within human nature, opening it to what transcends itself, to what transcends all finitude, to God. Grace also is the power enabling the human person to accept her nature, to assent to her innate and intrinsic orientation to God, and to enter the realm of the supernatural and her personal journey toward sanctification, salvation itself culminating in the immediate encounter with God. In the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, grace is made available and offered to all human beings, who are free to accept or reject it, but cannot elude taking a stance before themselves and God. Situationally determined in and to sin, human beings are in and through Christ called to create a new context and history through their participation in the constitution of a witnessing community whose mission it is to make Christ and his grace present and active in this world in a transformative way.
Part III: A Conversation in Kenotic Mode
Chapter Six

Kenotic Christ: Salvation in Weakness

The present chapter is devoted to the development and presentation of a theological interface by means of which to transpose the traditional doctrine of grace into categories immediately accessible to twenty-first century westerners. Drawing from the work of the two theologians who, in the last century, have most positively contributed to the development of kenotic theology and focused the theological discourse on a Christ powerful in and through his weakness and suffering – Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergeǐ Bulgakov – we propose a theology of grace explicitly centered on the person of the vulnerable Jesus Christ. That is, a Christ who, fully assuming the human condition, accepted to live at a distance from God, even be abandoned by him, and remained faithful to him precisely at the time of his most complete separation from him. A Christ who, in and through his very relinquishing of divine power and glory retains and expresses his divinity, but a divinity which at the same time, as his, always appears as veiled and received entirely and uniquely from the Father in and through the Holy Spirit. This Christ, powerful in his very weakness, vulnerability, suffering and self-surrendering is the God who can relate to/with the victims of Auschwitz and all forms of radical evil.

It is our contention that a Christ who is weak, vulnerable, suffers like us and surrenders himself to God (the Father) can relate to radically suffering human beings and act as analogical and perfect paradigm for all human beings in terms of his attitude, behaviour and actions toward himself, other human beings and God. In other words, we demonstrate that a cogently articulated kenotic theology naturally leads to a practical/moral theology of discipleship essentially defined by the categories of martyrdom, obedience, prayer and self-surrendering. In order to fulfill this task, we study the reality of affliction – the most radical form of suffering and detrimental spiritual situation human beings can find themselves into – first with the help of Simone Weil’s and Dorothee Soelle’s philosophical and theological analyses and second through the experience and testimonies of two Christian ordained ministers who were personally afflicted, having both had to suffer years of imprisonment under and 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 very profound theological understanding of the life, ministry and person of Jesus Christ. Drawing from the work of Balthasar and Bulgakov, we then critically expose the tenets of this undergirding theology, which we consider apt to provide us with a coherent systematic approach to the question of grace for our day and age. Like the suggested theological interface, this chapter is composed of three sections respectively dealing with the spiritual context and situation in which such an interface ought to and can only be developed (affliction), its concrete (demonstrated) application (the cases of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp) and the systematic articulation of its theological categories, principles and foundations.

6.1. Entering Darkness: Addressing Affliction with Simone Weil and Dorothee Soelle

We must now turn to the consideration of the only appropriate and suitable context (in regards to Auschwitz survivors and post-Auschwitz western society) for a genuine and fruitful encounter with God today. This context is none other than the spiritual experience and situation of radical suffering, and more particularly of affliction. The task at hand therefore consists in bringing out the fundamental characteristics of affliction and in determining the modalities under which God could be encountered when human beings and the world are subjected to affliction. Let us therefore take a closer look at the reality of affliction with the help of Simone Weil and Dorothee Soelle.

6.1.1. Encounter with Christ in Acute Suffering

Radical suffering such as affliction seems to resist and even preclude insertion and integration into a larger, broader context of meaning and significance to the point that is seems to succeed in radically excluding divine grace. It disrupts the unity and temporal constitutive evolution of a person’s identity. The suffering person is deprived of any hope and future, self-esteem and ability to relate to others which could bring meaning to her existence. According to Simone Weil, “there is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical.” While the essence of affliction is undoubtedly expressed and concretely manifested in and through physical pain, it does not reside in the latter as such, for its effects and impacts are felt and operative even in the very core of the human soul. “Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension

of physical pain.”  

Completely shutting the individual from all kinds of transcendence (the world, other human beings and even God), affliction introduces in the affected individual an absolute darkness which drains all meaning and significance away and out of life, leading the victim toward utter despair and complete incapacity to love. “Affliction causes God to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God’s absence becomes final.”

Her life deprived of all positive meaning and significance and being totally unable to relate to anybody else than herself, the afflicted person can only project upon herself the absolute desolation and despair she has fallen into. To sadness and grief are thus added guilt and shame, which naturally induce the victim to loath herself as the cause of her own infortune. “In the case of someone in affliction, all the contempt, revulsion, and hatred are turned inwards; they penetrate to the center of his soul and from there they colour the whole universe with their poisoned light.”

6.1.2. Losing Oneself

Affliction is moreover distinguished by an essential double indifference: affliction strikes its victims through blind necessity or pure contingency and reduces the afflicted person to sheer anonymity.

If the mechanism were not blind there would not be any affliction. Affliction is above all anonymous; it deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference – a metallic chill – which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul. They will never find warmth again. They will never again believe that they are anyone. ... Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity.

The afflicted person loses personality and identity both in her own eyes and in those of others, because no one but those who have been touched by affliction can understand what it means to be affected by it and once afflicted, human beings no longer have the capacity to help anyone, not even themselves. As a consequence of their condition, the afflicted cannot enter into relation in a positive way with anybody else (not even themselves) and it is impossible for anyone else to meaningfully relate to them (e.g. through the expression of compassion and empathy), for there are no common experiential grounds between the afflicted and non-afflicted.

683 Ibid., 42.
684 Ibid., 44.
685 Ibid., 45.
686 Ibid., 47 and 62.
Those who have never had contact with affliction in its true sense can have no idea of what it is, even though they may have known much suffering. Affliction is something specific and impossible to compare with anything else, just as nothing can convey the idea of sound to the deaf and dumb. And, as for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all and are almost incapable of even wishing to do so. Thus compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility.687

But even if other persons were able to gain insight into what being afflicted means without themselves being afflicted, they would certainly not, in all likelihood, attempt to help the affected person. Foreshadowing the horror that affliction is and entails, they would naturally tend to flee away from the source of such evil and suffering to protect their own lives and selves, thereby leaving the afflicted person to her own fate. “Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush up and peck it. The phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our senses attach to affliction all the contempt, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime.”688 As Dorothee Soelle aptly comments: “The degradation shows itself in the isolation that accompanies affliction. ... The lack of solidarity with the afflicted is therefore the most natural thing in the world. ... It is natural for us more or less to despise the afflicted.”689

Affliction destroys the very identity of the person affected by it, shattering all self-confidence, self-esteem as well as any trace left of a feeling of personal worth and dignity and it must do so without any apparent justifiable motivation (for otherwise it would be meaningful and therefore not afflicting at all). In order to be able to generate such ill effects, affliction must be capable of bypassing, superseding the human free will precisely to bring it down and render it totally inefficient. “Affliction is not a psychological state; it is a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances. The transformation of a man, in his own eyes, from the human condition into that of a half-crushed worm writhing on the ground is a process which not even a pervert would find attractive. ... Affliction is something which imposes itself upon a man quite against his will.”690 Not only are human beings by themselves entirely impotent to repel affliction when they are besieged by it, they cannot even prevent being attacked by taking away their personal vulnerability to become afflicted. This vulnerability, stemming from their very creatureliness, cannot be eradicated. “To be a created thing is not necessarily to be afflicted, but

687 Ibid., 43.
688 Ibid., 45.
it is necessarily to be exposed to affliction. Only the uncreated is indestructible.” If the potentiality to suffer could be eliminated from the human heart, soul and body, the latter would automatically become incapable of any form of openness to others and the world, of any form of feeling and emotion (for these involve a certain experience of passivity) and would thereby find themselves completely isolated and spiritually inert and dead. “The desire to remain free from suffering, the retreat into apathy, can be a kind of fear of contact. One doesn’t want to be touched, infected, defiled, drawn in. One remains aloof to the greatest possible extent, concerns himself with his own affairs, isolates himself to the point of dull-wittedness.” The feeling of powerlessness accompanying all forms of suffering reaches in the experience of affliction its climactic point.

6.1.3. “Self”-Enclosed

Prevented from loving anything or anyone by her incapacity to come out of herself and being completely alone with her guilt and self-hatred, the afflicted person is bound to develop an acute feeling of being cursed, to fall into a lethargic state and to become partly responsible for her suffering condition.

Every innocent being in his affliction feels himself accursed. ... Another effect of affliction is, little by little, to make the soul its accomplice, by injecting a poison of inertia into it. In anyone who has suffered affliction for a long enough time there is a complicity with regard to his own affliction. This complicity impedes all the efforts he might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance.

Induced not to attempt anything in order to change her condition, the afflicted person consents to her own affliction by entirely despairing of herself, by totally renouncing to offer any resistance. Hence, if affliction must in a sense be said to operate independently from the human free will while it is effectuating its deleterious work, because it can neither be resisted nor deserved (for it would then be justified and therefore not be afflicting at all), from another standpoint, it always seeks the human will’s collaborative subservience. Assent to affliction need not be

691 Ibid., 66.
692 Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, 39-40.
693 See ibid., 11: “The consciousness that one is powerless is a fundamental element in suffering. Every attempt to humanize suffering must begin with this phenomenon of experienced powerlessness and must activate forces that enable a person to overcome the feeling that he is without power.”
695 See Eric O. Springsted, “Introduction,” in Simone Weil, 25: “And since affliction has also an essential accidental quality to it (malheur is literally ‘bad fortune’), one who is afflicted can find no reason for this being so. The mind cannot understand and thus cannot find any way to accept this condition.”
granted in full awareness and while affliction as such induces the integral closing of the self upon itself, it also paradoxically entails for one to surrender her own soul to an external power (through the rejection of the exercise of her own free will). Such complicity and responsibility in her very affliction as well as the sheer fact of being afflicted in turn imprint on the soul of the individual an indelible, ineradicable stain qualifying her identity in a definitive way. “A man may yield to the bad at any moment of his life, because he yields to it unconsciously and unaware that he is admitting an external authority into his soul.”\footnote{Simone Weil, “Letter to Joë Bousquet,” in \textit{Simone Weil}, 36.} In the end, then, the afflicted person’s life, paradoxically, seems reduced to a purely absurd biological survival; her condition is worsened by the very fact that she remains alive while her own inner identity, personality, strivings and hopes have been entirely shattered. Nothing but a living body, the afflicted person perfectly identifies with the slave.\footnote{Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in \textit{Simone Weil}, 41.} Finally, because it overwhelms the affected person and cannot be expressed, communicated in any form of meaningful language, affliction generates absolute muteness; there is no way out, from the viewpoint of the victim, of affliction. Affliction thus takes on the garb of a never-ending spiritual death, out of which no good can ever come, not even liberation from this existence through biological death.

There are forms of suffering that reduce one to a silence in which no discourse is possible any longer, in which a person ceases reacting as a human agent. ... It is senseless because the people affected by it no longer have any possibility of determining a course of action, of learning from their experience, or of taking measures that would change anything. ... There is pain that renders people blind and deaf. Feeling for others dies; suffering isolates the person and he no longer cares about anyone but himself. Death becomes increasingly attractive in such situations – and one is then no longer capable of wishing for anything except one thing, that everything might come to an end. ... Extreme suffering turns a person in on himself completely; it destroys his ability to communicate. There is really nothing one can say about this night of pain, whether we find it in insanity or in an incurable disease.\footnote{Dorothee Soelle, \textit{Suffering}, 68-69.}

Once the reality and substance of affliction has been acknowledged and assessed, what is there to be done about it for both those who have and those not yet having fallen prey to it? How are the victims to make sense of a reality precluding all meaning? How are they to recover from the complete deprival of their own identities and personalities, from the absolute incapacity to communicate and to act, to will and desire, to love? How can the victims learn again to love life and perceive light in the world and others? How could those who have not been subjected to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Simone Weil, “Letter to Joë Bousquet,” in \textit{Simone Weil}, 36.}
  \item \footnote{Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in \textit{Simone Weil}, 41.}
  \item \footnote{Dorothee Soelle, \textit{Suffering}, 68-69.}
\end{itemize}
affliction understand anything of what the victims have gone through and be able to relate to them? How could anyone be able to come out of a state of absolute muteness, immobility, indifference and impotence?

6.1.4. A Glimpse of Light in Utter Darkness

They must receive help from God. According to Simone Weil, it is in the very midst of complete darkness, in the heart of endured and assumed affliction, that the latter’s deepest meaning is to be found. Affliction makes possible a genuine encounter with God in which the human creature at once absolutely surrenders herself to the transcendent and refuses to stop loving God at the moment where God appears to be utterly remote. At this point, where the human soul suffers radical forsakenness from the divine, authentic connection with God is made possible in and through Jesus Christ’s own experience of affliction.

As for us men, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father. This distance is only separation, however, for those who love. For those who love, separation, although painful, is a good, because it is love. Even the distress of the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be a greater good for us on earth than to share in it. God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. For us, on earth, this is the only possibility of perfection. That is why the Cross is our only hope. 699

Because God has willed and deigned to humble Godself to the point of taking on human nature, of taking on human sinfulness and to suffer absolute separation from God his Father (most extreme form of affliction possible), therefore bridging the infinite distance separating Creator and creature (which only God can overcome) has been made possible in and through this very experience of affliction.

The man whose soul remains oriented towards God while a nail is driven through it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe; the true center, which is not in the middle, which is not in space and time, which is God. In a dimension which is not spatial and which is not time, a totally other dimension, the nail has pierced through the whole of creation, through the dense screen which separates the soul from God. In this marvellous dimension, without leaving the time and place to which the body is bound, the soul can traverse the whole of space and time and come into the actual presence of God. It is at the point of intersection between creation and Creator. This point is the point of intersection of the two branches of the Cross. 700

But Weil is quite clear about the fact that Christ’s coming, ministry, death and resurrection did not lessen or attenuate the suffering undergone by humankind; in a sense,

700 Ibid., 55.
Christ’s redeeming activity rather multiplied and deepened it. “Divine love which one touches in the depth of affliction, like Christ’s resurrection through crucifixion, that love which is the central core and intangible essence of joy, is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.”

Pope John Paul II fully agrees with Weil on this crucial point when he claims that “the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in his cross and resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence.”

In the end, even God does not provide an intellectual account (explanation) for the existence of suffering: “God himself reproves Job’s friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty. His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent; it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence.”

6.1.5. Distinctions and Nuances

In many cases, though, suffering and the fear of suffering generated and induced by previous experiences of suffering appear to lead only to the expression of a stubborn evilness intently attempting to bring ill upon other human beings (in a desperate attempt to obtain consolation and vengeance). As Theodor W. Adorno rightfully notes, coldness – the incapacity to love and show empathy and compassion toward others – is a self-nurturing attitude and mode of behaviour. Cold cultures and societies give birth to cold children that will be raised to become cold adults inclined to impose suffering on one another precisely because they lack genuine empathy and heart. Coldness and indifference toward the fate 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.

703 Ibid., 15.
Fully agreeing with Adorno, Jean-Marc Laporte pertinently remarks that “oppression entails oppressors as well as oppressed, and our first world as a whole experiences oppression predominantly from the side of the oppressor rather than from that of the oppressed. Oppressors are just as dehumanized and in need of liberation as the oppressed.” The relationship between human affliction and meaningfulness, redemption and God is not a necessary one, in the sense that not all human beings will experience their suffering as the locus of manifestation and sharing in the presence of the divine. Hence suffering cannot be considered an obligatory gateway toward redemption and the kingdom of God for all human beings. Not all suffering (and more particularly affliction) leads to a meaningful encounter with Christ, not all suffering leads to a positive spiritual transformation. A great many individuals simply find perdition and perceive no light at all in the overwhelming darkness of affliction. As Soelle states very clearly: “The letters of those who do not die for a cause, of children, of those who are caught up by chance, of innocent bystanders, testify to the horror of fruitless suffering. In their dying there is no pride, only lament. Their pain cannot be eliminated or given meaning. The suffering of one thrust unconsciously into the role of victim excludes every attempt to give meaning.” For these reasons, Soelle deems it necessary to “distinguish meaningless suffering from suffering that can be meaningful since it impels one to act and thereby produces change.”

The reality is, however, that the victim of absolutely meaningless suffering inevitably has to face and undertake the daunting task of integrating this nonsense within the fabric of her existence, she still has to make sense of the irreducibly and unfathomably absurd, for if she did not her life as a whole would be deprived of meaning and purpose, being torn apart and ruptured by this traumatic experience. We thus find ourselves led back to Weil’s position: help must come to the afflicted from within the heart of darkness itself, which must be conferred with meaning and purpose precisely in and because of its resistance to all human attempts to do so. God must be encountered in the midst of darkness, otherwise, there is no way out for victimized, traumatized, afflicted humankind. The need for such spiritual assistance is so dire and deep that Jennifer E. Beste feels compelled to criticize Karl Rahner’s theology of the supernatural existential: some individuals are so hurt and prevented from becoming their genuine selves that they can neither properly hear nor effectively respond to the gracious self-offer and communication God makes to all human beings. In fact, she goes even further and claims that

706 Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, 141.
707 Ibid., 107.
some cases of rape and incest naturally lead one to question the very efficacy of divine grace to
bring about positive transformation in the life of victims of such atrocious acts.

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 traumatisation and may
resort to suicide as the only escape from their unbearable suffering.\textsuperscript{708}

Is divine grace always efficacious? Are there cases where a given individual cannot be
held morally and spiritually responsible for not having positively responded to God’s call? “To
consider the possibility that interpersonal harm has the power to incapacitate a person’s freedom
for ultimate self-disposal may appear deeply antithetical to Christian faith and hope in the power
of God’s grace. It suggests that human moral evil has the potential to triumph over the efficacy
of God’s grace at definitive moments in a person’s life.”\textsuperscript{709} Beste believes that if nobody can
prevent God from effectively offering his grace to everyone, humans can, through evil deeds,
deprive someone else of the capacity to exercise her freedom to such an extent that the
production of a genuine personal response to God’s call is rendered impossible. Rahner (and all
the theologians subscribing to a multilevel understanding of the constitution of human identity)
might have underestimated the power of interpersonally inflicted suffering. A human being can
be impeded from acquiring a so-called “fundamental option.”\textsuperscript{710}

No earthly or interpersonal harm can take away this ever-present self-offer and
the graced potential to respond to God’s self-communication. However, such
profound harm can gravely, and perhaps entirely, debilitate the process of
realizing freedom to accept God’s grace. In the end, Rahner’s claim that God
provides the condition that makes possible our freedom to love need not mean
that God’s grace ensures realization of this capacity in a way that is invulnerable
to interpersonal harm.\textsuperscript{711}

\textsuperscript{708} Jennifer E. Beste, \textit{God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom}, American Academy of
\textsuperscript{709} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{710} Here is how John W. Glaser characterizes the “fundamental option” theory: “According to this theory, man is
structured in a series of concentric circles or various levels. On the deepest level of the individual, at the personal
center, man’s freedom decides, loves, commits itself in the fullest sense of these terms. On this level man constitutes
self as lover or selfish sinner. This is the center of grave morality where man makes himself and his total existence
good or evil. An act originating in this dimension of man has the character of total and definitive disposition of self”
\textsuperscript{711} Jennifer E. Beste, \textit{God and the Victim}, 106.
6.1.6. An Audacious Proposal

Perhaps it would be more accurate and appropriate to say that with many persons and in several instances, the divine offer of grace and the human response to this offer (grounded in and made possible by grace) take forms and are expressed in ways which completely transcend the normal operation of the human cognitive, deliberative and elective faculties. God can be at work in our lives, and our lives effectively be transformed by him, even if we are not aware of his presence and action, even if to the human eye and mind, there are no objective signs to declare and warrant such a presence and action. It might be precisely when we no longer perceive God in our life, when we no longer feel his transformative influence in our existence that we actually find ourselves most profoundly accompanied and assisted by him, that we are asked by him to accomplish some of the most significant actions of our lives. God might actually ask that we follow in the footsteps of his beloved Son and assert our faith in him in the midst of absolute spiritual desolation and forsakenness in complete humility, surrender and obedience, finding our freedom through radical self-denial. Bearing the cross of our extreme suffering, when all lights have gone out and we no longer see his guiding hand, we nevertheless follow him to the bitter end and we let go of our life and offer it to God, in memory, faithfulness to and gratefulness for the salvation granted in Christ. Suffering, to be endowed with meaning, must be borne in freedom and out of genuine love for God and others, as a response to God’s call and a participation in his redeeming and transformative work.

6.2. Pathway to the Cross: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s and Alfred Delp’s Life and Death in Prison

In order to flesh out and demonstrate the validity of these latter assertions, we will now consider the experiences and testimonies of two German Christian ordained ministers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Lutheran pastor) and Alfred Delp (Jesuit priest), who both suffered the ordeal of imprisonment and execution by the Nazi regime for their active involvement in the resistance. Shaken in their deepest foundations, their faith and relationship to God underwent profound transformations (purification) which, instead of inciting them to reject God, rather induced them to sacrifice their own lives in faithfulness to him. It is precisely in the person of the suffering, weak and crucified Jesus Christ – of God conceived as sharing in the very human condition and affliction – that Bonhoeffer and Delp have found renewed access to the transcendent. Living in, from and for Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp were able to find in him absolute foundation, empowerment and guidance, enjoying inner freedom and peace through obedience to God’s will in the most difficult of times. Their discovery and accomplishments suggest that God
can be found and provide meaning to human existence even in and despite the reality of Auschwitz.

6.2.1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

One year after Hitler’s accession to power, as a direct consequence of the German Lutheran Church’s decision to side with Hitler’s regime, the authorities of the Confessing Church offered Dietrich Bonhoeffer the opportunity to found a new theological training college for ordained ministers. This new institution was ultimately settled in Finkenwalde, where the curriculum was expressly devised by him to bring about the reconstruction of the German Christian Church. Hitler’s regime would however not suffer for long active opposition coming from within the Lutheran Church. After the closing of the seminary and of the subsequent collective pastorates by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer was formally forbidden to teach, by both oral and written means. Prevented from moving around freely in Germany, he could no longer act as Church minister and teacher and found himself deprived of employment.

With the assistance of Hans von Dohnanyi, his brother-in-law, Bonhoeffer then joined a resistance organization and put his international ecumenical relations with both ecclesial and secular foreign authorities to use. In doing so, he was ready to sacrifice his theological reputation and life in order to save Germany from Nazism. He was arrested on April 5, 1943 and brought to Tegel prison in Berlin where he remained in custody for a year and a half, as a result of a Gestapo investigation related to two failed assassination attempts on Hitler’s life.712 As Eberhard Bethge explains,

Bonhoeffer’s period at Tegel can be divided into three sections. The first, from April to July 1943, was taken up with the interrogation by Roeder and ended with the charge being filed. The second, from August 1943 to April 1944, was marked by his continually renewed hopes that there would be a trial; dates were fixed and then cancelled. In the third, from April to September 1944, he accepted the strategy of “letting the case run out of steam.” In this period he concentrated once more on theology. After the discovery of the Zossen material, this period concluded with an escape plan and his eventual transfer to the Gestapo prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse.713

The following six months, the last of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life, also “can be divided into three stages. He spent the first four months in a prison cell on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, during which he was repeatedly interrogated. He lived the following seven weeks in a bunker in the

concentration camp at Buchenwald. After this he spent seven days as part of a prison transport traveling through southern Germany. The end came in the concentration camp in Flossenbürg.”

6.2.2. The Condition of Prisoner: A Revelatory Experience

When reflecting on the nature and significance of his life in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quickly led not to oppose, but to liken this experience to the Christian life of faith. “Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other – things that are really of no consequence – the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside.” The prisoners’ utter incapacity to free themselves reflects the human situation before God; just as only someone who already is free can liberate a prisoner, only God, perfectly free of sin and loving can liberate the human sinner. Human actions, intentions and desires cannot free anyone from sinfulness. The prisoners who against their will are deprived of their belongings and see their freedom reduced to minimal expression immediately understand that human beings do not really own anything. In a letter to his parents, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “In the inactivity of a long imprisonment one has above all a great need to do whatever is possible for the general good within the narrow limits that are imposed. You’ll be able to understand that. When one thinks how many people lose everything each day, one really has no claim on possessions of any kind.”

More fundamentally, to the person whose dignity and rights, desires and needs have been forcefully denied or repressed by other human beings, Christ’s proximate relatedness to persons in pain, destitution and who have fallen prey to guilt is of momentous significance.

From the Christian point of view there is no special problem about Christmas in a prison cell. For many people in this building it will probably be a more sincere and genuine occasion than in places where nothing but the name is kept. That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God from what they mean in the judgment of man, that God will approach where men turn away, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – these are things that a prisoner can understand better than other people; for him they really are glad tidings, and that

714 Ibid., 894.
715 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter of November 21, 1943 to Eberhard Bethge,” in Letters & Papers from Prison, ed. E. Bethge, tr. R. Fuller et al. (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 135. See the parallel text in “Letter of November 21 to Maria von Wedemeyer,” in Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer 1943-45, ed. R.-A. von Bismarck and U. Kabitz, tr. J. Brownjohn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 118: “A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the door’s being opened from outside, is a far from inappropriate metaphor for Advent.”
faith gives him part in the communion of saints, a Christian fellowship breaking the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance.\textsuperscript{717}

Christ comes to those who stand in absolute need of assistance; humankind receives from him what it cannot offer itself, a participation in the eternal. This new life in God reveals humanity’s fundamental spiritual poverty and reduces to relative insignificance the hardship and turmoil endured in this world. The more human beings come to assume their spiritual mendicancy, the more they understand the true nature of Christ’s gift to and sacrifice for them.

I think we’re going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words: “We’re beggars, it’s true.” The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ’s home on earth.\textsuperscript{718}

For Bonhoeffer, the absolute human dependency upon God is made plain in striking fashion during air raids. In a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge, he says: “the heavy air raids, especially the last one, when the windows of the sick-bay were blown out by the land mine, and bottles and medical supplies fell down from the cupboards and shelves, and I lay on the floor in the darkness with little hope of coming through the attack safely, led me back quite simply to prayer and the Bible. ... In more than one respect my time of imprisonment is being a very wholesome though drastic cure.”\textsuperscript{719}

6.2.3. An Encounter with Christ

The renewed awareness of his visceral dependence on God triggered in Bonhoeffer a radical longing for Christ and a profound willingness to obey his will in everything and at all times. Writing to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, he says:

At a time like the present, all that matters is whether or not one opts for Christ, not Christian “opinions.” ... I wish to be a Christian and a free person. ... If, during Holy Week, you had heard nothing, absolutely nothing, but the Gospel of Christ, you would probably have been guided towards certainty, joy and clarity, not burdened with doubts and problems. I’m not, of course, claiming that I could preach Christ without human adjuncts; but I try, and have always tried, to guide people to complete freedom under the Word and not to bind them to myself –

however often I may have failed in that endeavour. ... We want to obey and belong to Christ, no one else!  

Now life in prison undoubtedly showed Bonhoeffer that faithful discipleship to Christ is no easy task; Christian freedom rather finds expression in this world in and through great suffering, heavy sacrifices and even death. “Suffering is a way to freedom. In suffering, the deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our own hands into God’s hands. In this sense death is the crowning of human freedom. Whether the human deed is a matter of faith or not depends on whether we understand our suffering as an extension of our action and a completion of freedom.” True Christians, willing to live a genuinely human life, cannot flee before the hardship, setbacks, and from their standpoint invincible external forces. They must rather take it to be God’s will that they be subjected to these. They must face the ordeal that is their life as Christ obediently faced his, in the awareness that by so doing, Christ will accompany and empower them to accomplish his will. Christians are to be crucified in and with Christ, in and through the challenge of their worldly existence. “The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself, he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ.”

True Christian discipleship necessarily involves self-sacrifice and suffering, for Christians as witnesses of Christ cannot but suffer rejection, just as Christ did. Those who are not ready to suffer some form of rejection for Christ and on behalf of Christ (not in his stead, but because of his name) are not real disciples of Christ. “Just as Christ is only Christ as one who suffers and is rejected, so a disciple is a disciple only in suffering and being rejected, thereby participating in crucifixion. ... The cross is not random suffering, but necessary suffering. ... It is suffering that comes from being Christian.”

In fact, truly responsible human beings are ready to give away everything they have, are or enjoy to accomplish the will of God, to follow the divine summons. “Who stands fast?” asks Bonhoeffer. “Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who tries to

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make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.”

In the context of a world war, death must be confronted squarely and wilfully accepted so as to become the ultimate expression of human freedom, and not the last instance of the latter’s utter denial. “We still love life, but I do not think that death can take us by surprise now. After what we have been through during the war, we hardly dare admit that we should like death to come to us, not accidentally and suddenly through some trivial cause, but in the fullness of life and with everything at stake. It is we ourselves, and not outward circumstances, who make death what it can be, a death freely and voluntarily accepted.”

Human life draws all its meaning from Christ and is meant to be an imitation of his life, insofar as Christians are called to live in accordance with and from Christ’s Spirit. But deciphering what Christ and his Spirit wills one to do is an arduous task, one that must be accomplished anew every day and which, in some essential way, is never brought to final completion. Writing to Maria von Wedemeyer about his longer than expected wait for a trial, Bonhoeffer says: “This is turning into a wait whose outward purpose I fail to understand, and whose inward purpose has to be rediscovered daily.”

Oftentimes, if not every time, then, the significance of her particular situation in relation to the grand scheme of things eludes the individual, while evidence of an interior, spiritual transformation reveals intrinsic meaningfulness. This latter type of purpose, inner purpose, needs to be reassessed every day. Christians must therefore prayerfully study Jesus’ life in order to gain an interior sense of the presence of his Spirit in their own lives and follow the Spirit as the principle of all their actions and core of their personal identity and integrity.

The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus. ... It is certain that we can claim nothing for ourselves, and may yet pray for everything; it is certain that in all this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand. ... The truth is that if this earth was good enough for the man Jesus Christ, if such a man as Jesus lived, then, and only then, has life a meaning for us.

725 Ibid., in Letters & Papers from Prison, 16.
6.2.4. Sensing Divine Guidance

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, through his long imprisonment, progressively gained a sense of God’s providence being at work in his life, directing events. “I’m often surprised how little I grub among my past mistakes and think how different one thing or another would be today if I had acted differently in the past; it doesn’t worry me at all. Everything seems to have taken its natural course, and to be determined necessarily and straightforwardly by a higher providence.” Bonhoeffer’s certitude that his life is being directed along a definite path by God’s providence is accompanied with a strong sense of God’s infinite mercy being expressed toward him. Bonhoeffer feels and knows that his sins have been forgiven in and through Christ. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, he writes: “I am so sure of God’s guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I’m travelling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified.” True Christians overcome their own sufferings, limitations and problems by entrusting God with the whole of their life. Letting go and being simply themselves, they receive everything from Christ and allow Christ to act in and through themselves. This identification with God, in Christ, in turn brings about a new form of life within the believers, so that the latter begin to live uniquely in and from Christ and their sufferings really are in some way transmuted into Christ’s. This participation in the very sufferings of Christ infuses greater, absolute and universal purpose into the believers’ actions.

One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a convened sinner, or a churchman, a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian. ... I’m glad to have been able to learn this, and I know I’ve been able to do so only along the road that I’ve travelled. So I’m grateful for the past and present, and content with them.

The sufferings of Christ in this world today take a most peculiar form, that of the rejection of the divine from all spheres of existence, life and knowledge.

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. 731

Christians are called to live through this rejection of God in faithfulness to God. Assuming the godlessness of the world, they are to be faithful to God, even when they have been forsaken by him.

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. 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. 732

Christians are to do away with the modern understanding of an omnipotent, transcendent God who orchestrates without getting involved the whole of universal history. The deistic notions of a transcendent watchmaker and of the world as gigantic clockwork are to be overcome once and for all. God is not to be reintroduced within human epistemology and science to supply for human limitations and insufficiencies. There is no “God of the gaps.”

6.2.5. Ultimate Surrender: Following in Christ’s Footsteps

Access to God is to be obtained essentially, primarily and even exclusively through the obedient, vulnerable and weak Christ. Freed from the burden of his own self, empowered by the life of Christ and the clear sense that God was guiding his life in determinate and meaningful fashion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer undertook to live in imitation of Christ, that is, to share in Christ’s sufferings, and this, through dedicating his life to helping others (just as Christ himself did). Aware that he was being accompanied by Christ, Bonhoeffer knew he had nothing to fear, and a deep sense of calm and peace emanated from him. Payne Best, a British secret agent who was imprisoned in Buchenwald’s bunker for political prisoners with Bonhoeffer, testifies of this. “Bonhoeffer was all humility and sweetness; he always seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. ... He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him. ... In fact my feeling was far stronger than these words imply. He was, without

732 Ibid.
exception, the finest and most lovable man I have ever met.”

Bonhoeffer remained faithful to this attitude to the very end, his close, prayerful intimacy with Christ enabling him to fully submit to God’s will, giving his life to and for God in complete freedom and peace. Dr. Fischer-Hüllstrung, in office at Flossenbürg concentration camp at the time, witnessed his execution.

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this unusually lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

6.2.6. Alfred Delp

In the early 1940s, Fr. Alfred Delp joined the ranks of what came to be called the Kreisau Circle, a group of intellectuals from various fields, whose purpose was “to prepare for the day that National Socialism fell apart, so that it could reconstruct a just society in its place,” as a “social scientist who might advise them on labour issues affecting German workers and help to design a re-Christianized environment for workers in a post-Nazi Germany.” The Kreisau circle, by means of periodic meetings, worked towards the development of a postwar German constitution, combining socialist and free market principles informed and set in a Christian moral, ontological and religious framework. It is by reason of his involvement in the Kreisau circle that, in the aftermath of the failed attempt on Hitler’s life, in which he had played no part, Fr. Delp was arrested on July 28, 1944. His imprisonment in Berlin, as Alan C. Mitchell explains, can be divided into three stages.

First, on August 8, 1944, he was placed in a Gestapo prison on Lehrter Street. It was a harsh and hard place, and doubtless he was beaten there, as the blood stains on one of the shirts collected with his laundry would indicate. ... Second, on September 27, he was moved to a prison in the Tegel section of Berlin. The
conditions were somewhat better there, and his friends could receive more news about him, since the Lutheran chaplain, Harald Polechau, was a member of the Kreisau Circle. He actually saw to it that Delp had hosts and wine with which to offer Mass. Delp remained there through his trial. Third, on January 31, 1945, he was transferred to the execution site in the prison at Berlin-Plötzensee. ... On February 2, 1945, the feast of the Purification of Mary, one of the two days on which a Jesuit could pronounce his final vows, around 10 am, Delp made an offering more final than the one he made on the previous December 8.

### 6.2.7. Making Sense of Imprisoned Life

Fr. Delp came to think of his personal situation as reflective of the human condition in general. The prisoner’s absolute powerlessness and dependence on her exterior environment reveals the radical character of human finitude; human beings are not the source of their own freedom. As Fr. Delp observes,

> The person who has had a taste of prison life knows what it means to be shut up in a narrow cell, his wrists fettered, his mind occupied with a thousand depressing thoughts as he visualizes the flag of freedom drooping forgotten in some obscure corner. Again and again his hopes rise only to fall back into despair when the steps of the warder approach or the key grates harshly in the lock. Then dreams fade into reality and it all seems hopeless. Again and again you come back to the same point – you have no key, and even if you had there is no keyhole on the inside of a prison door. And the window is barred and it is so high up you can’t even look out. Unless someone from the outside comes to set you free there can be no end to your misery – all the will power in the world makes no difference.  

Human freedom must come from God, the only possible source. Human beings must allow God to free them, for God only liberates those who freely accept his saving grace.

> We have become incapable of living fully because we have not found divine freedom. I know perfectly well that only God can unlock the handcuffs and open that door and that his creative power could make me free again in the eyes of the world. Humanity’s condition in general is just like mine. What we need is a new awareness of the gospel, the good tidings so that we may really hear and understand. We need an open, receptive mind – God will not force any person to accept salvation.

Human freedom is of such a kind that it finds its source and goal in another, antecedent form of freedom, the divine, to which, as a consequence, it must at all times conform itself. “Left to ourselves with only our strength to rely on, we shall never find freedom. ... With God the only way to complete freedom is complete surrender – there is no alternative.”

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But what form does God’s offer of liberating grace concretely take? Where does one have to look in order to find and see God’s grace at work and offered? Life in prison provides flesh to Alfred Delp’s faith in Jesus Christ. “When I pace my cell, up and down, three paces one way and three the other, my hands manacled, an unknown fate in front of me, then the tidings of our Lord’s coming to redeem the world and deliver it have quite a different and much more vivid meaning.”

Who is Jesus? Where can his action and presence be felt in a prison cell, when one is subjected to the whims of totalitarian rulers? In the so intensely desired liberation from unjust custody, in the immediate, unimpeded personal relationship to God, and in the complete obedience to God’s will, no matter what happens.

Jesus ... The name stands for all the things I desire when I pray, believe and hope; for inner and outer redemption; for relaxation of all the selfish tensions and the barriers to voluntary partnership and surrender without reserve: and for a speedy release from these horrible fetters. The whole situation is so palpably unjust; things I have neither done nor even known about are keeping me here in prison. The name Jesus stands also for all that I intended to do in the world, and still hope to do among humankind. To save, to stand by ready to give immediate help, to have goodwill toward all people, and to serve them, I still owe much to so many. ... The Name stands for passionate faith, submission, selfless effort and service.

But why, why would God allow for his servants to be subjected to such unfair, undeserved treatment? Why would God, in such difficult times, not enable his ministers to help other people in dire need of assistance?

Fr. Delp suspects that in his case, God willed him to learn that in this life, human beings stand in absolute need of God alone, of no one or nothing else.

Humans ... always tend to fall in love with their own estimate of themselves. We all proceed from one failure to another and after every collapse we come out with less substance and more wounds – all of us. When we are tired and tempted to give up, instead of blaming fate and circumstances we should ask ourselves whether we are living sufficiently close to God, whether we have called on him earnestly enough. ... Everything points to the fact that God has chosen this way to teach me this lesson. All that I was so sure of in my self-satisfied judgment and so-called wisdom has been shattered by the experiences and the disillusionment I have gone through. God alone suffices.

The prolonged experience of unjustified, uncalled for imprisonment at the hands of the Nazi regime, forced upon Alfred Delp a profound reassessment of who he was and had become, before himself, the world and God. This re-evaluation of himself through undeserved seclusion,

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741 Ibid., 17.
742 Ibid., 10-11.
743 Ibid., 116-17.
torture and prosecution progressively led him to acknowledge his own shortcomings, as a human being, first of all, but also and more fundamentally as an ordained Christian religious, someone who wilfully vowed to follow Christ in everything throughout his life. Hence, it is through the experience of physical imprisonment that Fr. Delp was led to experience anew, in full acuteness, how spiritually imprisoned he still remained, despite all his efforts and pretention to the contrary.

An honest examination of conscience reveals much vanity, arrogance and self-esteem; and in the past also a certain amount of dishonesty. That was brought home to me when they called me a liar while I was being beaten up. They accused me of lying when they found I mentioned no names except those I knew they knew already. I prayed hard, asking God why he permitted me to be so brutally handled and then I saw that there was in my nature a tendency to pretend and deceive.\footnote{744} Freedom is first and foremost inner and spiritual; exteriorly enforced confinement, suffering and limitations do not necessarily deprive someone of this more basic form of freedom. “During these long weeks of confinement I have learned by personal experience that a person is truly lost, is the victim of circumstances and oppression only when he is incapable of a great inner sense of depth and freedom.”\footnote{745}

The complete shattering, by this extreme experience of the denial of his human dignity and freedom, of all the conceptions he entertained about himself, the revelation that they were dissimulating an underlying subjection to sin in turn induced in Alfred Delp the desire for a more proximate relationship with the God to whom he had chosen to devote his whole life. A closer relationship to God means greater conformity to his will, to him which, in turn, calls for a correlative transformation of the person. “As far as I am concerned I find I have to approach him in a new and quite personal way. I must remove all the barriers that still stand between him and me, I must break down all the hidden reserve that keeps me from him.”\footnote{746} This transformative process, however, is one that shows to be extremely difficult to undergo. The repetitive, monotonous routine of prison life brings home its complete lack of both purpose and ending (in time). “At stated hours the key grates in the lock and my wrists are put back into handcuffs; at stated hours they are taken off – that goes on day after day, monotonously, without variation. Where does the breathing again which God makes possible come in? And the waiting and waiting for relief – how long? And to what end?”\footnote{747}
6.2.8. Finding Freedom and Peace in Christ Rediscovered

To measure up with the spiritual challenge of successfully resisting and overcoming the absurdity of undeserved imprisonment and punishment, humans must benefit from the constant presence and assistance of Christ himself. Provided with hosts, Fr. Delp always kept a consecrated host close to his heart. “Each day I have to steel myself for the hours of daylight and each night for the hours of darkness. In between I often kneel or sit before my silent Host and talk over with him the circumstances in which I am. Without this constant contact with him I should have despaired long ago.” Conformity to God in Christ demands from the individual an ability to act despite her obvious incapacity to fathom the true significance of the events in which she is involved, which in most if not all cases is not supplied for by God. The individual is to entrust with God, in complete faith and trust, in a manner akin to Christ’s, the legitimacy and purposefulness of her actions in order to be able to resolutely perform them. “To come back to my own predicament; in two more days my case will come up for trial. Just two days in which I can rely only upon God for there is no other help I can turn to. How I have prayed for a Christmas star, for light on this problem. But God has left it unanswered; he is asking me to make the ‘step to freedom’ – the decisive stride which will carry me from myself to lose myself completely in him.”

Beyond complete faith and trust, true conformity with God’s will, the recovery and enjoyment of spiritual freedom supposes personal sacrifice on the part of the believer, again in accordance with Christ’s paradigmatic ministry. “We are able to compare the most distressing conditions to a fertile seed; it becomes a call to sacrifice, the only thing that can restore humanity’s capacity to love.” This capacity to act in ignorance and purely out of the desire to conform oneself to God’s will, in direct imitation of Christ who in all things obeyed his Father’s will, even to the point of giving his life for the salvation of humankind, is most strikingly displayed by Fr. Delp once the death sentence has been pronounced and all that remained for him to do was to wait for his execution to take place. In a letter to Luise Oestreicher, he writes: “I’m doing well. God has never before left me so much in the dark. But I’m going to remain steadfast. Either he wants the sacrifice or he wants to test my trust right up to the breaking point. I intend to keep on trying. Either he is sowing me as a seed or he is directing me toward some great work.

748 Ibid., 51.
749 Ibid., 77.
750 Ibid., 129.
The normal measure of things doesn’t count anymore, not after January 11 [the end of his trial]. ... Despite everything, I have a positive feeling that doesn’t originate from myself.”

Rational evaluation and anticipation are bypassed, supplanted by a higher principle for decision making, a profound feeling of being guided through those great challenges by a divine hand, by Christ himself. Fr. Delp now fully grasps that his discipleship to Christ, if he remains true to it to the end, will claim his life and that the previous months spent in prison were meant to prepare him to this ultimate self-sacrifice. In a letter to Franz von Tattenbach, Fr. Delp writes: “Now I really have to write you a farewell letter. I see no other possibility anymore. The Lord wants the sacrifice. All these hard weeks have had as their purpose a training in inner freedom. Up to now he has kept me from breaking down and going into shock. He’ll also get me through the final hours. He often carries me as if I’m a sleeping child.” Freedom culminates in the willing obedience to God’s will, especially when the greatest sacrifices are asked from the individual in faithfulness to God. In Christ’s presence, and with Christ’s immediate assistance, it is possible to be and feel absolutely free precisely when all exterior expressions of positive freedom have been taken away.

6.2.9. A Final Blessing

Condemned to death, locked up in a prison cell, not knowing why God is asking him to sacrifice all he could be and do for him, Fr. Delp nevertheless feels at peace with himself and with God. In another letter to Luise Oestreicher, he writes: “Right now my interior position is rather strange. Although I know that if things follow their normal course I’m going to die tonight, I’m not feeling bad at all. Perhaps God is being gracious and sparing me the fear of death up to the end. Or am I supposed to keep on believing that a miracle is going to happen?” Fr. Delp so intensely feels the presence of God alongside himself that he even likens his prison cell to a cloister; having first had to undergo Christlike sufferings and challenges, he now can enjoy God’s immediate presence and grace, providing him with all the inner freedom and peace to persevere to the end. “It’s exhausting,” he writes to Marianne Hapig and Marianne Pünder,

751 In Mary Frances Coady, With Bound Hands, 193.
752 In ibid., 166.
753 See Alfred Delp, Prison Writings, 155 and 160: “Condemned to death. The thought refuses to penetrate; it almost needs force to drive it home. The thing that makes this kind of death so singular is that one feels so vibrantly alive with the will to live unbroken and every nerve tingling with life. ... To be quite honest I don’t want to die, particularly now that I feel I could do more important work and deliver a new message about values I have only just discovered and understood. But it has turned out otherwise. God keep me in his providence and give me strength to meet what is before me.”
754 In Mary Frances Coady, With Bound Hands, 167.
“the way I’m living like Peter here. For a long time the poor guy keeps looking at the water, and then he practically drowns. The time I’ve spent in this place is a story in itself. There are a lot of wounds, but also a lot of miracles. I’ve seldom been in more of a cloister, myself with God.”

So that empowered by God, following Christ and with him, Fr. Delp does not end his life cursing Germany and the Germans for the unfair treatment he has been subjected to, but blessing them and praying for their renewal and transformation. “And so to conclude I will do what I so often did with my fettered hands and what I will gladly do again and again as long as I have a breath left – I will give my blessing. I will bless this land and the people; I will bless the Church and pray that her fountains may flow again fresher and more freely; I will bless all those who have believed in me and trusted me, all those I have wronged and all those who have been good to me – often too good.”

6.2.10. God Present and at Work in Auschwitz

The testimonies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, despite significant differences in their respective circumstances and even motivations, do show obvious and profound commonalities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in contradistinction to Alfred Delp, willingly chose to join in a resistance organization. To him, Germany and the German people had to be saved from Hitler and his regime; it simply was not possible to wait for the downfall of Nazism to happen without doing anything. Alfred Delp did not openly and positively work against Hitler’s regime, but he did participate in the elaboration of concrete social and political constitutions and policies to ease and make possible the reconstruction of Germany after Hitler’s defeat. Both Bonhoeffer and Delp clearly distinguished between Nazism and Germany, they both actively worked for the latter’s survival and emancipation from the former, but they did not agree on what was to be done first. Because Bonhoeffer really took active part in the resistance whose work culminated in the July 20, 1944 failed attempt on Hitler’s life, he, from the Nazis’ standpoint, was justly imprisoned. A significant portion of his time in Tegel prison was spent building up false testimonies to prevent the authorities from discovering the truth about the conspiracy and to protect other, still active, members of the resistance. Bonhoeffer knew all along the dangers he was facing and was ready to give his life for the cause, though certainly not

755 In *ibid.*, 155.
757 See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 670: “Ecumenical conferences and synods had to advocate peace at all costs before the war broke out in full fury in May 1940. Bonhoeffer, however, had already taken his stand on the one condition for peace that could not be discussed in any church body inside Germany – the removal of Hitler.”
Delp, however, because of his connections with the Kreisau circle, was unfairly suspected of having played a role in the conspiracy. From his standpoint, there were no objective grounds on which he could be condemned; he therefore really worked at building as strong a case as possible for his defence, expecting a fair trial. This fair trial never came, instead he was led to a courtroom where all dices had been piped and his fate decided beforehand, on the grounds of pure hatred for Christianity, and more particularly the Jesuit order. One might therefore say that for Alfred Delp the unveiling of the truth about Nazism was much more shocking than it had been for Bonhoeffer, for in Delp’s case it occurred much later, when the time to try to oppose the regime had already passed.

In both cases, though, the denial of their human dignity and rights, the subjection to interrogations, physical and psychological torture, isolation and confinement in a prison cell have led to a profound reflection on the meaning of human existence, on what really is essential to an accomplished human life. The primordial poverty, precariousness, vulnerability and weakness of human existence are, by these two prisoners, experienced in full daylight. They are led to grasp the full extent of human nature’s moral and spiritual impotency, human beings’ absolute need of liberation from their prison of internal division, proneness to fear, evil and vice. Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp came to understand that the task of deciphering the ultimate objective purpose of one’s life, how one’s actions and existence are to find a place within the collective history of humankind, does not lie in human hands. The extreme shrinking of their freedom’s positive sphere of action and influence brings Bonhoeffer and Delp to a sincere reassessment of their relationship to God. To them, human freedom now appears to exist not apart from, but as defined within divine freedom. Entrusted by divine calling with a vocation of their own, Bonhoeffer and Delp both grasp that they are meant by God to inscribe their own life stories within Christ’s. To live a genuinely human life, their own life, they must follow Christ’s lead, and with his assistance, undergo suffering and turmoil, sacrifice themselves in a context

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758 See ibid., 799: “Bonhoeffer’s period in Tegel was filled by his stubborn but successful efforts to conceal the true facts. His family and friends helped him weave an intricate net of camouflage. Although the threads sometimes became tangled, the net held until after the catastrophe of July 20, 1944, when gravely incriminating material was found in an outpost of the Military Intelligence Office.”

759 See Alfred Delp, “Letter of January 11, 1945 to Marianne Hapig and Marianne Pünder,” in With Bound Hands, 169-70: “That was no court of law, but rather an orgy of hate. ... The incriminating points in the initial charge didn’t stand. The way the trial was carried out has provided my life with its true life-and-death purpose. The grounds for the charge that came up at the trial boiled down to the following four incriminations (everything else is rubbish; it’s important that there was no connection to July 20, etc.): 1. Thinking about a future for Germany after a possible defeat. 2. The incompatibility between Nazism and Christianity. 3. The Society of Jesus is a threat and any Jesuit is a degenerate. 4. Catholic teaching on justitia socialis as the basis for a future socialism.”
and circumstances not of their choosing. Accompanied and empowered by Christ himself, they both relinquish, hand over their whole lives to God. Freed from themselves, and only living from and through a higher principle, Christ’s grace and Spirit, they are made interiorly and spiritually so free that they can find absolute meaning in the very denegation of their most fundamental dignity and rights.

Their sufferings are no longer only and simply theirs, they also are Christ’s, not only in the sense that Christ now suffers with them, but also in the further sense that their sufferings, insofar as their now live in, from and for Christ, are in fact Christ’s sufferings in and for this world, right now. Freed from themselves, living in close intimacy with Christ and for him, such a peace indwells them that they are now able to faithfully follow in the way of Christ and sacrifice themselves to live with and for others, to bring them assistance and relief, out of pure compassion. The true nature of God has been revealed to them: God is not an omnipotent tyrant forcefully imposing his ways upon humankind and creation; God rather is merciful, infinitely loving, assisting and preserving human dignity and freedom to the point of never imposing Godself. God does not reveal Godself in full glory, but in and through the infinite poverty and weakness of human nature. Christ has shown that the way to God passes through human poverty, precariousness, vulnerability and weakness. Suffering, in its most profound expressions, has been found in Christ to be a way to spiritual freedom. Human beings are not to make anything of themselves, they are to allow God to work in and through them, thereby transfiguring everything they are and do in so profound a fashion that no matter how desperate, how difficult, how impossible, how useless their actions and efforts seem to be, they nevertheless always embody and manifest the divine purpose, that is, absolute meaning and significance. And this, even in the midst of utter darkness.

6.3. Kenosis: Theologizing in the Dark

To be able to apply and transpose in more universal fashion what we have just seen embodied and fleshed out in the particular lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp – a profound and powerful theology of Christian spirituality and discipleship – we must now articulate it systematically, using more general categories. We must propose a theological framework that will both distil and preserve in Bonhoeffer’s and Delp’s personal spiritual journeys the core human element, defining, found and expressed in the existence of each and every human person undergoing affliction (though each time in a unique form). This core element and meaning, we propose to retrieve with the help of the kenotic method and theology
developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Serguei Bulgakov. Respectful of Bonhoeffer’s and Delp’s experience, this theology finds in poverty, vulnerability and weakness a locus for the manifestation of the divine in this world, for the commission of personal vocations and for the empowerment of the human by the divine. Let us now present the major elements of our kenotic theological interface.

6.3.1. Self-Emptying at the Core of Divinity

Any version of the Incarnation – the doctrine that somehow or another (meaning, however conceived) the infinite God became (meaning, was transformed into) a finite human being – requires by definition a correlative doctrine of kenosis (self-emptying) in order to be coherent. For that is what such a doctrine of infinite-becoming-finite entails in its very assertion. After all, the infinite can only become finite by emptying itself of its infinity, otherwise it will not have become, been turned into, the finite.760

Edward Oakes here expresses a conviction shared by both Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergei Bulgakov: to gain profound insight into the mysterious nature of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the theologian must invoke the category of kenosis. God, infinite, omnipotent, almighty and omniscient cannot reveal Godself to finite creatures without doing so through finite, creaturely means; God must conceal his own divinity in order to reveal Godself. “What the Son is and does is human, and is thus comprehensible. We can understand, from a psychological point of view, how a person can be so taken up with a religious mission that he thinks of nothing else, stakes everything on it and, ultimately, is prepared to be crucified for the sake of his idea. If we could not ‘comprehend’ the human side, the incomprehensible side would not strike us with such force; our contemplation of the divine would lack a starting point.”761 To Balthasar’s and Bulgakov’s eyes, the primary access to any understanding of kenosis lies in the person of Christ himself. Being both perfectly human and divine, Christ reveals God in and through his paradigmatic humanity; fully incarnating that which human beings ought to become and be, i.e. that which human beings cannot on their own accomplish, Christ by the same token discloses his more than human origin and nature.

To shed light on both the divine and the human, one therefore need only look at the concrete person of Christ, his life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection. “Eternal love is not only present in this man but also, in him, manifests and interprets its very nature and renders it

visible. For although the deeds and sufferings of this man exhibit nothing inhuman or superhuman but remain within the framework of what is human, they only make sense if they are seen and expounded as expressing the nature of divine love.”

Who is and what does Jesus do that through him the divine immediately is conveyed and made present? More than the bearer and channel of God’s judging word, that is, a prophet (of whom many an example is found in the Old Testament from Samuel to Ezra), Jesus is God’s Word in person. “Whereas in the case of the prophet, the fulfilment of the Word that is uttered through him lies with God and remains independent of the person of the prophet himself, the claim that Jesus makes, to be the present Word of God in judgment, refuses to permit such a distancing: the future of God, into which Jesus leads the poor and the sinners, must finally lie in him himself.”

If Jesus indeed is God’s Word bringing both judgment and salvation to humankind, then he would naturally be expected to wield infinite power and lordship over human beings and creation as a whole, as is expected from God. The problem is that Jesus enjoys no such personal dominion, for in and of himself, Jesus is and has nothing; Jesus only conveys the divine by means of what he himself receives, enjoying none of it himself, giving and offering it all to others. “[Jesus] paradoxically combine[s] the claim to be more than a prophet with the complete attitude of poverty. ... The paradox of Jesus becomes visible where he makes his absolute claim in equally absolute poverty and in the vulnerability which belongs to poverty, in the renunciation of all earthly power and every earthly possession. ... Jesus is the bringer of salvation, equipped only to pass on what he has to others; for himself, he has nothing.”

Jesus reveals the divine more by concealing it under the guise of a most humble and ordinary humanity than by directly unveiling its transcendent character. Jesus existed and lived his humanity like any other human being. “Christ lived like all other men. He had need of food, rest, and sleep. He moved about; he had sinless movements of the soul (emotions); he was subject to joy, sadness, indignation, and so on.” Jesus’ intimate and unique relationship to God, enabling him always to reside and remain in unity with the divine, did not provide him with the knowledge of all things natural and supernatural. “His divine gifts were in no wise directed at freeing him from his human properties, and his divinity inspired him not to know the things of the natural world supernaturally, but to know and do the will of the Father, to abide in union with
him." In and through Jesus God appears as and becomes a very proximate, concrete and at the same time unfathomable, ungraspable mystery. “God’s incognito in Jesus was simultaneously his appearing in Jesus’ mission and task, and this unity of disclosure and concealment was absolutely unique, without any point of comparison in this world. Jesus’ words were truly the words of omnipotence, of the definitive demand for decision, of the bestowal of grace and promise – concealed beneath a quite unremarkable human situation.”

6.3.2. God is Poor and Weak

Jesus is the absolute expression of poverty: having relinquished everything he is and has, he only lives, in pure obedience, by and through the will of and the gifts he obtains from God. Jesus even died on a cross, in the most complete expression of absolute powerlessness and subjection, the extreme opposite of a God of power and might. It is precisely in and through this uttermost humility and abasement that the effective authority granted to Christ by God the Father shows. “The fundamental character of this Word itself became visible in the triad of claim, poverty and self-abandonment, since the authority that comes from God was to take effect strictly in the sphere of powerlessness, and more radically still in the handing-over of the entire existence, including its death, into the disposition of God who was to give it form.” Because Jesus Christ identifies in his person with God’s Word, God’s Word must appear, be revealed in and through Christ’s humanity. “Only now does the full paradox become visible. For if God’s Word has become flesh, then everything that is to be disclosed – despite every seeming impossibility – must become present in this ‘flesh,’ in this finite and transitory existence.”

Who is Jesus Christ, who is God and who is the human being that absolute power expresses itself in absolute weakness? Balthasar admits that these extremes are by nature impossible to reconcile. “The distinguishing marks of Jesus’ existence, ‘authority’ and ‘poverty,’ are prima facie irreconcilable: as the one with authority, he acts and speaks with a power in which God makes himself present, and as the one who is poor, he is wholly lacking in power and means of defence – at most, he can evade the powers of the world; and he trains those who are

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766 Ibid., 253.
768 See ibid., 130 where Balthasar characterizes Israel’s sense of her own poverty before God in the following terms: “Israel was educated into an attitude that covered all of existence – into that poverty, which, being absolutely robbed and deprived of rights through God’s judgment, can hope for any right and any good thing only from God.”
769 Ibid., 202.
770 Ibid., 143. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter, tr. A. Nichols (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 33: “The paradox must be allowed to stand: in the undiminished humanity of Jesus, the whole power and glory of God are made present to us.”
his in the same poverty that looks to God.”\textsuperscript{771} The divine \textit{qua} divine cannot possibly disclose itself positively in and through a human creature without thereby infinitely overpowering and annihilating the latter. “The idea that a mortal being (‘flesh’) could give itself utterance as immortal ‘word’ is a contradiction that would seem necessarily to burst open and destroy human existence.”\textsuperscript{772} How can the human and divine natures coexist within the person of Christ?

Only in the actualization of one nature – the human – by means of its complete subjection to the other – the divine – is this ontological contradiction overcome. Since Christ’s humanity finds its being and natural fulfilment solely in the accomplishment of God’s word and will, it therefore reveals God, though as human, it is not God (in this regard the mystery remains complete).

If the divine and eternal word wished to give itself adequate expression in mortal flesh – however mysterious the manner of this might be – this could not happen through man himself, unless he were to place his entire existence in the flesh, mortal and futile, at the disposal of the divine Word in such a self-exposition, by handing himself over like an alphabet or a keyboard, for the act of formulation in words, handing over himself as a whole; birth and death, speaking and silence, waking and sleeping, success and failure, and everything else that belongs to the substance of human existence.\textsuperscript{773}

Christ’s life, ministry, death and his resurrection all reveal Christ’s perfect human subjection, surrender and obedience to God’s word and will. Jesus completely hands himself over to God in order to be formed by him according to his will. “Jesus translates his claim and commission into poverty (or into obedience) in such a way that he lets his entire formless and therefore wordless existence (as ‘flesh’) be yielded up in an ultimate gesture, so that it may become something that God’s hand can form in its entirety, including his mother’s womb and his burial, into the ‘Word of God.’”\textsuperscript{774}

Jesus’ abandonment of himself is so absolute that he cannot oppose the Father’s will. “Jesus is the one who no longer has any control over himself, but accepts those who come to him as men drawn by the Father and given to him by the Father; in his self-abandonment, he cannot repel anything that the Father gives him.”\textsuperscript{775} Bulgakov’s words convey with equal intensity the radical character of Jesus’ self-surrender to the Father:

\textsuperscript{772} \textit{Ibid.}, 143.
\textsuperscript{773} \textit{Ibid.}, 143.
\textsuperscript{774} \textit{Ibid.}, 147.
\textsuperscript{775} \textit{Ibid.}, 151.
His [the Son incarnate] entire personal life is exhausted by obedience to the Father’s commands, by fulfilment of the Father’s will through the accomplishment of the works of the ministry by the Holy Spirit. His proper hypostatic act with respect to himself, his personal self-definition, is entirely exhausted by this self-emptying or self-abolition. ... The Son is the hypostatic obedience to the commands of the Father, accomplished by virtue of the Holy Spirit reposing upon him. Outside of and apart from this, the Son does not have himself.\textsuperscript{776}

Jesus’ kenotic mode of existence characterizes the entirety of his life, progressively taking more and more explicit and radical expressions and forms, in this sense; it is not only instantaneous (happening at his conception by the holy virgin), but also continuing and experienced not only by external witnesses, but also by himself. Jesus gained the awareness and knowledge of his own divine nature and personhood. “His divinity was revealed and apprehended only in inseparable connection with his humanity. ... The path of the divine-humanity in his life on earth is a continuous kenosis, not only an external, but also an inner kenosis.”\textsuperscript{777}

\textbf{6.3.3. Inspired Freedom}

Jesus’ complete self-surrender and obedience to the Father does not reduce him to the status of a mere slave who, possessing no will and no freedom of his own, blindly obeys his master. “The obedience with which the Son performs the Father’s will is not the obedience of a ‘serf’ who carries out to the letter the orders of a feudal lord – the Son is far too free for that. But he is not ‘free’ in the sense of the human arbitrariness which acts upon its own estimation of things. The freedom he displays does not exist anywhere else in the world: it quite evidently comes from God himself; it is the freedom which reigns between Father and Son.”\textsuperscript{778} As Jesus grew in his awareness of his divine vocation and existence, he progressively gained the possibility and was given the power necessary to dedicate his life more profoundly and radically to God and to the fulfilment of his will. Again in the words of Bulgakov, “the God-man’s entire path of life, the entire experience of his earthly life, from the beginning of his ministry to Golgotha, corresponds to this consciousness of self as the affirmation of the will of the divine sonhood and presents him with growing possibilities for the self-renunciation that constitutes the very essence of the divine love for the world, as well as of the divine sonhood.”\textsuperscript{779}

Jesus more exactly enjoys the inner presence, within his heart and soul, of God’s Holy Spirit, providing him with interior spiritual and moral guidance, a divine guidance never effected

\textsuperscript{776} Sergeǐ Bulgakov, \textit{The Lamb of God}, 225.
\textsuperscript{777} Ibid., 237.
\textsuperscript{778} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Prayer}, 188.
\textsuperscript{779} Sergeǐ Bulgakov, \textit{The Lamb of God}, 265.
through negation and overpowering of Jesus’ human will, so that Jesus’ humanity finds its full and free expression and fulfilment, at all times, in the accomplishment of the divine will.

The innermost being of the Son is “indwelt” in such a way that his own personal will is not interfered with, forced or overpowered; on the contrary, this indwelling enables him to realize his own most intimate self. But he does this by being open to the Spirit, by listening and following wherever it blows, and by handing over, entrusting to the Spirit all that he has and is. It is only because there is the Spirit that the Son, as a genuine, limited man, even a weak and a failing man, can do his work. ... Docile to the Spirit he obeys the Father, for the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father: the Spirit brings the Father’s will to the Son in a spiritual manner, makes a home for it in him, infuses it into him. But, in obeying, the Son also obeys his own will.780

Responding to the stirrings of and following the Holy Spirit wherever the latter leads him, Jesus finds freedom in fulfilling the Father’s will. Jesus is ready to give his own, pure and untainted life for the salvation of all. Jesus showed himself willing to endure all the pain, suffering and forsakenness deserved, because of sin, by humankind as a whole, on behalf of humankind, and this, purely out of self-giving, gratuitous love.

Jesus is this sinless one who offers his own soul, i.e. his entire existence (“his blood”) as a complete and spotless sacrifice. But why should this be efficacious for all the rest? ... The only help is to be had from the New Testament’s idea of the divine love that out of love takes upon itself the sins of the world; and this love must have a double character, as the love of God the Father, who allows God the Son to go into the absolute obedience of poverty and self-abandonment where he can be nothing else than the total object that receives the divine “wrath,” and as the love of God the Son, who identifies himself out of love with us sinners, and thereby fulfils the will of the Father in free obedience.781

The path of the cross was not coercively imposed on Jesus from without, he willingly chose to take it. Actively and responsibly, he made his the cross and embodied, suffered it in a way proper and unique to him. Sergeǐ Bulgakov explains that “the truth about the cross consists not only in the fact that it is necessary to receive it and to carry it, but also in the fact that it is necessary to take up one’s own cross, to choose it. There is an indissoluble connection between its passive carrying and its active taking.”782

6.3.4. The Death of God

The death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion brings his failure to accomplish positive work in this world to a climax: Jesus is to fulfill the Father’s will through complete personal defeat. “As

long as he worked in life, his work remained a failure, and the harder and more lovingly he tried, the more clearly he was rejected. But through his death on the Cross, he became the most formative figure in world history. Why is that? ... Because all his earthly work took place from the outset in full self-surrender to his heavenly Father, and this self-surrender found its climax and thus its full effect in the Cross.”

How can Jesus’ free self-sacrifice in utter failure bring salvation to others? How was Jesus’ death infused with redeeming value? He loved his Father and he followed him to the end, even after the Father had abandoned him to the darkness of his Passion and death. Embodying pure unfailing love and trust, Jesus took upon himself absolute estrangement, loneliness and forsakenness without giving up on God, following him beyond all despair and doubt. By doing so, Jesus brought humankind back to God. “What is the mission? It is that by his loving obedience to the very end, he should reconcile to God the world estranged from God, which is possible only by his taking all this estrangement upon himself and bearing it – as an eclipse of God – through to the end, and even beyond its end, since his loving obedience to the Father is deeper and more final than any rebellion of sin can ever be.”

To measure the depth of Jesus’ love and trust in God, of his self-donation in innocence to God, we must take a closer look at his experience of forsakenness. While he was carrying his cross to Golgotha, Jesus found himself completely alone, deprived of immediate contact with his Father (the unique font from which he drew meaning, mission and power). He could no longer fathom the purpose his life and upcoming death were serving. Surrounded with darkness, Jesus chose to remain faithful to his Father, come what may.

In the abandonment by God, any glimpse of meaning is taken away, leaving only question and outcry. The way leads into hopelessness. The death that is died here is the hardest one conceivable (in reality, in-conceivable). The light that shines into the uncomprehending darkness does not understand itself any more in that darkness; but the fact that it continues to shine is due to its irrevocable obedience to the paternal sun. It abandons itself into the Father’s hands, which have become imperceptible.

Jesus’ absolute solitude as he hung dying on the cross and his unbreakable faith in and love for God are powerfully conveyed by Bulgakov:

He [Jesus] is surrounded by the darkness of death, and the consciousness of his divine sonhood abandons him. In the name of creation, the God-man cries out to God – to God with whom he is one, to God who never forsakes him – that he has

forsaken him. Like all men, he too remains alone in death. This cry of the dying God-man bares the entire bottomless depth of the kenosis, the divine self-humiliation that is equalled only by the depths of God’s love. As if to confirm that this is precisely the Son of God who in his divine-humanity is passing through the gates of death, his dying cry is replaced by the invocation to the Father that is the end of the kenosis: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46), followed by his closing words, on the same subject: “it is finished” (John 19:30).  

Jesus gave his life and entered hell, like all human beings, as a dead man. Balthasar argues that death “is a situation which signifies in the first place the abandonment of all spontaneous activity and so a passivity, a state in which, perhaps, the vital activity now brought to an end is mysteriously summed up. Jesus was really dead. ... In that same way that, upon earth, he was in solidarity with the living, so, in the tomb, he is in solidarity with the dead.” Balthasar’s assessment concurs with Balthasar’s: Jesus entered the realm of death by giving his spirit, thereby becoming pure passivity in the hands of the Father. “The Son had brought his humiliation to the extreme of self-devastation, to death, for in death, the personality with its freedom no longer exists, but only receptive passivity remains. Christ commended himself into the hands of the Father when he gave up his spirit, and it is in his hands that he reposes in the grave.” Christ alone, however, freely assumed the human condition and entered the realm of death without any trace of guilt and sin burdening him. He alone, therefore, undeservedly endured the fate shared by all for the sake (salvation) of all. “Jesus was the only one who suffered the complete poena damni for all, just as he expiated alone all sin on the Cross ... his abandonment to death by the Father was a unique abandonment that was determined upon within the Trinity.” Balthasar has Christ deliver a poignant testimony about his experience of forsakenness and death:

My Cross is salvation, my Death is victory, my Darkness is light. At that time, when I hung in torment and dread rushed into my soul because of the forsakenness, rejectedness, uselessness of my suffering, and all was gloomy, and only the seething rage of that mass of teeth hissed up mockingly at me, while heaven kept silence, shut tight as the mouth of a scoffer (but through the open gates of my hands and feet my blood bubbled out in spurts, and with each throb my Heart became more desolate, strength poured out from me in streams and there remained only faintness, death’s fatigue, infinite failure), and at last I neared that mysterious and final spot on the very edge of being, and then – the fall into the void, the capsizing into the bottomless abyss, the vertigo, the finale, the un-

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becoming: that colossal death which only I have died. Through my death this has been spared you, and no one will ever experience what it really means to die: This was my victory.

Rejected and abandoned by all, Jesus remains, in absolute obedience and self-surrendering, entirely faithful to God’s will. He takes upon himself, on behalf of and for all human beings, the yoke of sin and forsakenness. In and through this very act, his divine nature is fully revealed. In and through his radically selfless behaviour, Jesus by revealing the Father’s divinity also discloses his own, for only God can obediently suffer total forsakenness and abandonment to the end, only God, who is Love, can be so absolutely rejected.

It is precisely now that the Word who has been reduced to silence receives his absolute transparency to the Father, who expresses himself in him in a way without precedent. ... Only God himself can go right to the end of the abandonment by God. Only he has the freedom to do this. The Father shows that this is so, when he raises the Son and elevates him to be the Kyrios over all; but one who receives the dignity that belongs to God must already have possessed this, and only renounced the enjoyment of it. ... Only one who has known the genuine intimacy of love, can be genuinely abandoned (not merely lonely).

So extreme was Jesus’ suffering, that he endured his passion also in his divinity. For in the unity of his person his human nature is so intimately united to his divine one that the latter could not remain indifferent and unaffected by what he was suffering in his humanity. As Bulgakov explains,

A real perichoresis occurs also in the passion on the cross. The human nature makes the divine nature a coparticipant in its destiny and in its passion. ... To be sure, it is not possible to say that the divine nature in Christ could suffer together with the flesh, as flesh. ... Even though the flesh is, of course, foreign to it, the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ spiritually co-suffers in relation to the fleshly passion of the hypostatic Word, for the nature cannot fail to suffer if its hypostasis suffers.

Jesus’ loving and gracious self-sacrifice is therefore from the start a Trinitarian love event, act and history; guided by and in the Spirit, the Son, offering himself, accomplishes the Father’s will.

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791 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 54: “It is in the measure that Jesus’ death is a function of absolute love – ‘he died for all’ – that this death has, first and foremost, the validity and the efficacious power of a principle.”

792 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, VII, 211 and 216. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 52: “And so it is really God who assumes what is radically contrary to the divine, what is eternally reprobated by God, in the form of the supreme obedience of the Son towards the Father, and, thereby, discloses himself in the very act of his self-concealment.”

What entered earthly visibility was the Father’s divine Image, his “Word,” like himself, a Person: his Son. The Father expresses himself in everything that the Son is and does. The Son’s entire love represents the love of the Father. ... But he does this by being open to the Spirit, by listening and following wherever it blows, and by handing over, entrusting to the Spirit all that he has and is. It is only because there is the Spirit that the Son, as a genuine, limited man, even a weak and a failing man, can do his work.  

God the Father willed to give his only Son, and the Son willed to surrender himself entirely even unto death on the cross and sojourn in hell, so that true human nature and true divinity could be revealed and united in the most perfect way. It is precisely because God is triune that such expression of absolute self-giving love is made possible. God in the Father graciously gives himself entirely to his Son, who in return entirely entrusts himself to the Father. To do so, the Son humbles himself to the point of assuming human nature, suffering death and utter forsakenness, bearing the weight of all human sinning (giving back in some sense the form of God to the Father). While doing this, he remains united by a Love – the Holy Spirit – that is so absolute that it embraces all the distance separating forsaken humanity from the absolutely transcendent and ineffable God (his Father). Only if the absolutely forsaken Son taking upon himself the yoke of all sin and death is thus preserved in Love by the Father, can the miracle of human salvation be effected and God revealed to human creatures. “The whole idea can be contained only within the Trinitarian context, so that the entire act of judgment remains contained within the love of the Father who gives up and the love of the Son who places himself at his disposal: within the brackets of this love lies the whole momentum of the curse of the sin of the world, which crashes against the one who bears it.”  

In fact, the Trinity as a whole suffers the passion of Christ out of absolute and pure merciful love for creation, for the salvation of humankind.  

God himself takes upon himself the sin of the world that has risen out of precreaturely nonbeing, redeeming it with the corresponding suffering of the Godman. And the entire holy Trinity, because of its inseparability, suffers with the Son of God from this sin: the Father suffers as the just Judge who judges his Son and, in his Son, himself as the Creator of the world; the Son suffers as the one who is judged and bears the condemnation; and the Holy Spirit suffers as God’s love, offering sacrifice and suffering, as the sacrifice of love for the sake of love – of God’s love for the world.

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796 Sergeǐ Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 363-64.
6.3.5. Multiple Kenoses

Jesus’ obedience, in the order of knowledge and manifestation, constitutes the foremost expression of kenosis. “The poverty that has no means of exercising control over oneself is one with Jesus’ obedience in total self-abandonment. That is what the hymn at Phil 2:7 calls kenosis. In this, the one who has abandoned himself can be utterly and completely determined by the will of the Father, who loads on him the burden of the reality that is ‘the sin of the world,’ or the reality that is ‘the wrath of God,’ made concrete in everything that arouses this ‘wrath.’”797 At the time of his death, abandoned by all, even his Father, Jesus willingly abandons himself to utter isolation, taking upon himself to bear the sin of the world and bringing his own life, ministry and existence to a climactic kenotic moment. Wandering alone in the dark, Jesus did not lose faith and thus accomplished his mission.

First and foremost, Jesus is the one abandoned by God, and then by all men, acting as instruments within God’s act; it is only the later theological reflection that emphasizes Jesus’ own self-abandonment (a supplement that is correct). ... Inasmuch as this curse [the sin of the world] leads to death, it is nothing transient, but definitive; no faith or hope can ward off the lethal momentum of the blow ... the experience of such an abandonment can be only an experience in timelessness and definitiveness.798

This mode of existence in pure obedience, self-surrender and abandonment, where all being and actions are drawn and obtained from God the Father alone is so proper and essential to Jesus that it not only expresses who he personally is, but also and simultaneously who God is. Based on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, God’s very essence and mode of existence, argues Balthasar, could indeed be kenotic ones. “If the mystery of the divine love is once disclosed in Jesus Christ, then we may argue that God could do what he did in reality do, and that his self-abasement and self-emptying were no contradiction of his own essence, but corresponded precisely to this essence.”799 If God’s own being, considered in itself and absolutely, is kenotically determined, then all actions and operations of God outside Godself (i.e. *ad extra*, e.g., creation and incarnation) will by necessity also take on kenotic determinations and forms.

Jesus’ kenotic existence stems from a fundamental attitude of voluntary self-abasement and obedience, the assumption of a radical poverty before God enabling him to become transparent to the Father’s will so as to live and exist only for the accomplishment of the latter. Now if Jesus must be fully divine, because only God is capable of self-sacrificing love of this

798 Ibid., 225.
799 Ibid., 215.
kind.\textsuperscript{800} then Jesus’ kenosis finds its origination in the divine life and his humiliation and self-abasement take infinite proportions. Jesus \textit{qua} divine (the Son of God or Word) must have pre-existed (from the standpoint of both timely creation and God) Jesus \textit{qua} human (the incarnation), so that kenosis for him first consists in the assumption of a human nature, i.e. in the self-abasement the divinity subjects itself to in order to become human. “To become man is for him [the Logos], in a most hidden yet very real sense, already humiliation – yes, indeed, as many would say, a deeper humiliation than the going to the Cross itself.”\textsuperscript{801}

God the Son becomes human: a first kenosis. “The \textit{vacuitatis dispensatio}, which does not change the Son of God (\textit{non demutatus}), signifies, within his innermost being, an act of self-concealing (\textit{intra se latens}), of ‘self-emptying at the inmost centre of his powers’ (\textit{intra suam ipse vacuefactus potestatem}) – without, then, the loss of that power in its freedom and divinity (\textit{cum virtutis potestas etiam in evacuandi se potestate permaneat}).”\textsuperscript{802} The concealment of the Son’s divinity operates at least at three levels: in relation to God’s nature (essentially mysterious),\textsuperscript{803} in relation to Jesus’ mission (be obedient to the Father) and in relation to his humanity (intrinsic limitations of the human nature). “There are some things that must be clear to Jesus as the divine revealer of the Father himself, which he must conceal because only so can he show the essential hiddenness of God; there are other things known to him that he conceals, because, although he is ‘Lord and Master,’ he must display the form of a slave; and finally there are some which he must do without knowing, because otherwise the form of a slave and ‘being like man’ would not be genuine.”\textsuperscript{804}

Jesus Christ sacrifices himself for the sake of all, dying on the cross: second kenosis. “In the uttermost form of a slave, on the Cross, the Son’s glory breaks through, inasmuch as it is then that he goes to the (divine) extreme in his loving, and in the revelation of that love.”\textsuperscript{805} Since the Son’s complete offer of his assumed human life and nature constitutes the greatest revelation of the divine to and in creation, the relational nature of the triune God itself, the life of the three divine persons must also be kenotically informed. “The ultimate presupposition of the Kenosis is

\textsuperscript{800} See Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, 112: “Christ must be God if he is so to place himself at the disposal of the event of love which flows from the Father and would reconcile the world with itself that in him the entire darkness of all that is counter to God can be judged and overcome.”

\textsuperscript{801} \textit{Ibid.}, 23. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord}, VII, 212: “The subject of the kenosis that is described there, is not the Son who has already become man, but the pre-existent Son.”

\textsuperscript{802} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, 27.

\textsuperscript{803} See \textit{ibid.}, 207: “God never reveals himself except in his own essential mystery.”

\textsuperscript{804} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord}, VII, 325.

\textsuperscript{805} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, 29.
the ‘selflessness’ of the Persons (when considered as pure relationships) in the inner-Trinitarian life of love.”

True love is self-giving love. “The nature of love consists in giving all one possesses without withholding anything for oneself. The one who loves then receives everything for himself or herself only through such a renunciation of self in the beloved.” In turn, kenosis simply corresponds to the embodiment, the actualisation and manifestation of authentic self-sacrifice out of pure love. God’s inner being essentially consisting in self-giving love, the divine life and love therefore are at root kenotic. “Kenosis is ... a voluntary self-limitation by virtue of divine love.”

And such divine life and love finds expression in and through the Father’s eternal self-gift to the Son in the Holy Spirit. “The poverty of the Son, who sought only the glory of the Father and let himself be robbed of everything in utter obedience, was the most exact expression of the absolute fullness, which does not consist of ‘having,’ but of ‘being = giving.’ It is in giving that one is and has.” The eternal Son receives everything he is from the Father, his perfect obedience translates his complete, free and loving acknowledgement of the Father’s self-gift.

The Son’s form of existence, which makes him the Son from all eternity, is the uninterrupted reception of everything that he is, of his very self, from the Father. It is indeed this receiving of himself which gives him his “I,” his own inner dimension, his spontaneity, that sonship with which he can answer the Father in a reciprocal giving. ... In the selfsame act in which he receives himself (and hence his divine understanding) he receives, too, the entire will of the Father concerning God and the world, and assents to it as his own.

The life and being of the triune God therefore radically depend on the Father’s primordial self-donation.

It is from that supra-temporal yet ever actual event [the divine processions] that, as Christians, we must approach the mystery of the divine “essence.” That essence is forever “given” in the self-gift of the Father, “rendered” in the thanksgiving of the Son and “represented” in its character as absolute love by the Holy Spirit ... We shall never know how to express the abyss-like depths of the Father’s self-giving, that Father who, in an eternal “super-Kenosis,” makes himself “destitute”

806 Ibid., 35. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, VII, 213-14 where dependence on Bulgakov is acknowledged: “It is therefore preferable to be guided by some of Bulgakov’s fundamental ideas (while avoiding his sophiological excesses), and to take the ‘selflessness’ of the divine persons, as of pure relations in the love within the Godhead, as the basis of everything.”
808 Sergel Bulgakov, The Comforter, 352.
of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son.\textsuperscript{811}

Elsewhere, Balthasar’s insists again on the same fundamental insight: “The utter self-surrender of the Father-Origin truly generates the coeternal Son and the encounter and union of both truly cause the one Spirit, the hypostasis of all that is meant by ‘gift,’ to proceed from both.”\textsuperscript{812} Bulgakov again concurs with Balthasar in understanding the life of the Trinity, and more particularly the person of the Son, as the foundation of the incarnation. “The holy Trinity is essential love, and its different hypostases are the image of this love. The Father loves by a self-renouncing and self-emptying love. ... The Father humbles himself and in his paternal love, extending his own life beyond himself and revealing it in the other hypostases.”\textsuperscript{813} “Sonhood is hypostatic kenosis in the Holy Trinity, and the Son of God is the kenotic hypostasis, the eternal Lamb. And this eternal kenosis of sonhood is the general foundation for the kenosis of the Son that is the incarnation.”\textsuperscript{814}

The kenosis within God, the mutual giving, involving both offer and reception of being and love in love (i.e. the Holy Spirit) taking place between Father and Son is the ground and foundation of all other forms of kenosis. From the standpoint of created reality, that is, within time and history, before the incarnation and the crucifixion another form of kenosis was called for and required, namely, the divine creative act itself, for creatures are nothing in and of themselves, their nature and existence being graciously provided and granted by God. In order for created reality to exist, God must allow for this other to be defined and provide it with its very substance and sustenance. By the act of creation, God shows his willingness to bind Godself with beings intrinsically dependent on him. As Sergeǐ Bulgakov explains,

The creation of heaven and earth, as an act of God’s love flowing beyond the limits of the proper divine life into the world, is, in relation to Divinity itself, a voluntary self-diminution, a metaphysical kenosis: Alongside his absolute being, God establishes a relative being with which he enters into an interrelation, being God and Creator for this being. The creative “let there be,” which is the command

\textsuperscript{811} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, viii. Gerard F. O’Hanlon comments: “Balthasar’s position ... is to affirm the existence of an event of self-giving in God which is due to the nature of God as inner-Trinitarian love. ... This event is supra-temporal but real and reveals the divine ‘essence’ as one of gift – the self-giving of the Father ‘returned’ in the free act of the Son and ‘represented’ in its character of absolute love by the Holy Spirit. So the deep self-giving of the Father may already be called a ‘supra-kenosis’; and in it are constituted simultaneously the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (\textit{The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar} [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 18-20).


\textsuperscript{813} Sergeǐ Bulgakov, \textit{The Comforter}, 378.

\textsuperscript{814} Sergeǐ Bulgakov, \textit{Lamb of God}, 177.
of God’s omnipotence, at the same time expresses the sacrifice of Divine love, of God’s love for the world, the love of the absolute for the relative, in virtue of which the absolute becomes the absolute-relative.\textsuperscript{815}

God being eternally faithful to his creation and fully assuming his gift of freedom to the human being, the creative act is intrinsically oriented toward the incarnation culminating in the crucifixion (the offer of salvation in love through Jesus Christ has always defined history by being its \textit{telos} and goal). “The selflessness [within the Godhead], is the basis of a first form of kenosis, that lies in creation (especially in the creation of man who is free), for the creator here gives up a part of his freedom to the creature, in the act of creating; but this he can dare to do only in virtue of his foreseeing and taking into account the second and truest kenosis, that of the Cross, in which he makes good the uttermost consequences of creation’s freedom, and goes beyond them.”\textsuperscript{816} In similar fashion, Bulgakov argues that God created the world with a view to Jesus Christ who, as fount of salvation and perfect fulfilment, is the true goal of creation and history.

The incarnation was accomplished in all its significance as it was pre-eternally established in God’s counsel, but it was accomplished for the sake of fallen humanity. As a result of the fall, the incarnation was, first of all, the means to salvation and redemption. It preserved the totality of its significance beyond the limits of redemption, however, for the incarnation is not exhausted by redemption. ... God as a person enters into personal communion with man. God wants to communicate his divine life to the world and to make his abode in the world; he wants to become man in order to make man god. ... There is no limit to God’s love, and it cannot fail to reach its culmination in the fullness of God’s self-renunciation for the world, that is, in the incarnation.\textsuperscript{817}

The Father’s readiness to hand over his only Son, the Son’s willingness to sacrifice himself for the salvation of humankind even unto death and descent into hell, and the Holy Spirit’s capacity to unite Father and Son even when the latter suffers complete abandonment and forsakenness from the former reveal God’s absolute ability to gather, bring back to Godself the entirety of his creation, despite and beyond sin. “The Righteous One died for the unrighteous; even for those who were lost and without hope, his atoning death has brought salvation.”\textsuperscript{818} The Father’s love for his Son, in and through the Holy Spirit, reaches even into the most complete sinful rejection of God, that is, the very bottom of hell.

\textsuperscript{815} \textit{Ibid.}, 128.
\textsuperscript{816} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord}, VII, 214.
\textsuperscript{817} Sergeï Bulgakov, \textit{Lamb of God}, 170-71.
\textsuperscript{818} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, 160.
If the Father must be considered as the Creator of human freedom – with all its foreseeable consequences – then judgment belongs primordially to him, and thereby Hell also; and when he sends the Son into the world to save it instead of judging it, and, to equip him for this function, gives “all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), then he must also introduce the Son made man into “Hell” (as the supreme entailment of human liberty). But the Son cannot really be introduced into Hell save as a dead man, on Holy Saturday.819

The Father gives himself entirely to the Son, who receives everything from the Father and freely offers himself to the Father, to accomplish the latter’s will (which is also his) and the Holy Spirit dedicates himself to the mission and revelation of the Son (and in him, of the Father). Insofar as the Holy Spirit is sent to assist and reveal Christ, he also undergoes a kenosis and assumes a kenotic mode of existence.

The third hypostasis is the hypostatic revelation not concerning itself. ... Hypostatic love is submerged in love and shows itself, testifying not about itself but about another. ... The Spirit himself does not have anything that he can call mine, so that it is as if he does not exist, although it is precisely in this non-existence that the mode of his existence is manifested – in his inseparability and inconfusibility with the Son. ... The Spirit is the transparency of the revelation, while the Son is that which is in this transparency, its content.820

6.3.6. Addressing a Few Objections

To define God (and more particularly the Son) as receiving his being from someone else and in a real sense as not being anything of his own might seem to imply the existence in God of vulnerability, weakness and passivity which, at least apparently, all go squarely against God’s omnipotence and omniscience. As Gerard O’Hanlon clearly demonstrates, from Balthasar’s standpoint, there is real change occurring in God, first of all in and through Christ’s divinity.

From his discussion in Mysterium Paschale of the text in Philippians 2:5-11, in which he arrives at the necessity of positing a real kenosis in God, and from his repeated emphasis on the ontological, personal identity of the Logos as the subject who unites the two distinct natures in Christ, he will refuse to limit the change and suffering which Christ experiences to his human nature alone. This is the advance on Chalcedon and its traditional interpretation which Balthasar proposes. The tendency to consider the human nature of Christ as an instrumentum conjunctum which does not affect the divine person he sees as Nestorian in character.821

As a matter of fact, the incarnation assumes the entire Trinity’s alterability. “The incarnation has as its presupposition what may be called an event in God, and so it reveals to us that God is not rigidly immutable. Moreover the incarnation itself does affect God; its reality is present and

819 Ibid., 175.
820 Sergei Bulgakov, The Comforter, 188-89.
effective within the divine event. In both of these senses it may be said that the incarnation does change God.”822

Balthasar’s affirmation of the existence of some self-emptying, self-surrendering change within God is based on the more fundamental claim that Jesus’ human nature reveals his divinity and the life of the Trinity. Again in O’Hanlon’s words,

Balthasar asks whether God is open to being touched by dialogue with creatures. The key to his attempt to answer this question is not simply to state that the man Jesus is capable of being affected thus – and to see this as sufficient in considering the implications for God himself – but rather, grasping the nettle very firmly, to presuppose that in this, as in all matters, the humanity of Jesus reveals what God is like and on the basis of this to consider further what this capacity for dialogue in God might mean.823

Christ’s humanity, argues Mark A. McIntosh, is itself accessed through the great saints and mystics’ accounts of their most immediate encounters with it. “In his doctrine of the Incarnation von Balthasar has sought to show us something of what the saints and mystics have encountered in their intimacy with Christ, above all awareness of the real struggle of his very human life and the intensity of his openness to others.”824 Confirmation of McIntosh’s claims is found in Balthasar’s own remarks: “Above all the source, ever flowing, ever fresh, of the theology of the Passion lies in the great holy figures of Church history.”825

Kenotically determined Trinitarian theology inevitably presupposes the use of a definite form of anthropomorphism as the necessary foundation for an analogy between the creaturely and the divine. “Balthasar claims that while the use of the concept of obedience to describe the Son’s relationship to the Father in the Trinity is an anthropomorphism, nonetheless, since all speech about God is in some sense anthropomorphic and since this particular concept has a basis in scriptural texts such as Philippians 2:7, it does point to a reality which one may not simply think away.”826 Balthasar argues that Scripture supports kenotic interpretation and theology. The essential task is not to find proof-texts to support, in an after-the-fact fashion, a pre-formulated theology, but rather to be theologically measured by and faithfully express the global meaning and spirit of Scripture (more particularly the New Testament) as a whole when interpreting it. From this standpoint, argues Balthasar, Jesus’ entire life, from beginning to end, takes on a

822 Ibid., 24.
823 Ibid., 10. [emphasis, ours]
825 Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, 38.
kenotic form. First of all, the entire Bible is oriented toward the crucifixion (and subsequent resurrection). “The New Testament is wholly oriented towards the Cross and Resurrection, just as it proceeds from them also. In this perspective, the Old Testament can be considered a first approach to the Triduum, itself at once the mid-point and the end of the ways of God.”827 And the crucifixion and resurrection in their intrinsic relation, and through them the incarnation (Jesus Christ’s entire life), can only be interpreted kenotically: “The death and the dying away into silence, of the Logos so become the centre of what he has to say of himself that we have to understand precisely his non-speaking as his final revelation, his utmost word: and this because, in the humility of his obedient self-lowering to the death of the Cross he is identical with the exalted Lord.”828

Balthasar clearly does not admit that God be subject to natural, creaturely change and becoming.829 Again in O’Hanlon’s transparent words: “God does not change, or become, or suffer in a created, temporal sense. ... Change in us is a characteristic of creaturehood and so is rooted in deficiency and imperfection: he will refuse to say that God is mutable.”830 God, therefore, absolutely speaking, is for Balthasar absolutely eternal, perfect and immutable at least in the sense that he does not need to suffer change in order to reach fulfilment (there is for God no fulfilment to obtain in the first place), and this is true even of the incarnation. “In fact God remains eternal and united throughout whatever change is due to the incarnation.”831 What kind of change could then be said to affect God’s being if the latter suffers no lack or deficiency of any kind? To help them get an inkling of the true nature of such change, Balthasar asks his readers to retrieve their experience of (spiritual) love. Human love is not only characterized as need and desire, but also and more radically by a free, spontaneous response and mutual sharing. This latter aspect, argues Balthasar, can in a legitimate sense be attributed to God as a kind of change affecting him over and beyond mutability.

Within a Trinitarian ontology of being this love was understood to possess a receptivity and increase analogous to what are present in human inter-personal love. ... In God the dynamic nature of love was not due to any ontological lack,

828 Ibid., 79.
829 While he is arguing from the standpoint of the existential, inner subjective life of Christ and of the Triune God and not from that of objective ontology (i.e. metaphysics), Balthasar does not deny the existence or the validity of this latter perspective. In fact, his viewpoint and methodological approach draws from and finds justification in Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of God as pure spiritual act, a mode of being and a form of life to be conceived as enjoying perfect supernatural dynamism (and not as being static).
831 Ibid., 24.
but was a little like those aspects of responsiveness and “ever-more” which are intrinsic to the perfection of human love. ... One [can] with this understanding of love, at least point to a mutability in God which is a perfection of immutability, and to an intense richness of life in which all the different modalities of the ever-greater Trinitarian love are contained. Overabundant and overflowing spiritual love is capable of supernatural dynamism and mobility. God, being perfect, fully actualized and purely spiritual is infinitely able to move Godself and the entities he created in and out of the love that he is.

Noteworthy also is the fact that strict obedience involving effective submission and subordination only affects Christ as incarnate, i.e. as endowed with a human nature, Christ as divine (the eternal Son) only being said analogically obedient. Analogical obedience does not necessarily entail multiplication of wills or subordinationism within God, because eternally sharing one will with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Son always has willed to assume a human nature and suffer unto death for humankind. In John Saward’s words, “with the divine will that he has received from the Father, the Son from eternity is willing to assume human nature and to suffer for sinful mankind on the Cross. This is analogical obedience. Obedience in the full sense as implying service and submission, duty and command, comes into operation with the Incarnation, when the Son assumes a complete human nature, including a human will.”

All traces of subordination within the Godhead are dissipated when account is taken of the further fact that if the existence and being of the whole Trinity stems from the original, primordial self-giving of the Father, to whom must therefore be ascribed a certain antecedence (though not an ontological superiority), a fully assumed kenotic interpretation of the Trinity will also imply the necessity for the Father to receive his own being from the other two persons, for a gift supposes actual reception from the recipient. In other words, because Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equally divine, because mutuality and reciprocity between the divine persons are perfect, giving being does not come without receiving it from someone else and receiving being implies giving it to someone else. As O’Hanlon explains,

It is because of the self-giving of love that the Father generates the Son, that Father and Son are source of the Holy Spirit. This means that the Son and Holy Spirit in particular receive their being: and yet because they are both God it also means, very significantly, that within this reality of love to receive is just as divine as to give. Furthermore, since the giving of the Father is incomplete unless received by the Son, receptivity is part of the active giving of the Father:

832 Ibid., 132.
fatherhood in God is given with the divine nature only because this nature is intrinsically interpersonal through being distinguished by opposed relations, so that there is a real sense in which the Father receives from the Son, despite the predominantly active being of the Father as origin within God.  

6.3.7. Situated in the Infinite

Christ, being both perfect human being and God, gives its freedom back to humankind, reasserts and guarantees God’s creative will for the latter; Jesus provides human beings with a renewed mission.

Jesus’ message has therefore authority over all commissions given to men in relation to the Creation too – the establishment of a just order upon earth that is worthy of man, the struggle against injustice and inhumanity – and it is he who will utter the definitive word to bring in the harvest of the endeavours of the world, which will be laid at his feet. Jesus’ authority does not relieve mankind of the exertion required of it, but rather permits this exertion to assume full concreteness. ... He has only removed the obstacles that prevented us from taking on our creaturely responsibility without excuses, and he has opened up for us the eschatological space that lets us dare to do the one thing necessary “at his word.”

In fact, Christ enables all those faithful to him to share in his own burden and cross; Christians are to carry their own crosses, bringing about the transformation of this world in and through Christ.

God as man, and God only as man, in such a way that, as nowhere else, man is valued. Yet not God together with just any man, but God, the absolutely unique, in that absolutely unique man who is unique because he is God, and who, for this reason and no other, can communicate a share in his Cross to his fellow human beings, with whom he is more profoundly solidary than any man can ever be with any other man, and can do that in death itself, where each man is absolutely alone.

For such a mission to actually be accomplished, however, the Christian must first and foremost, with Christ’s immediate and necessary assistance, make room for Christ within herself, surrender herself entirely over to him, in complete obedience to his will as instilled within her heart by the Holy Spirit. In other words, a lifelong kenosis must occur within the very person of the Christian believer, who, subjected to Christ’s gracious transformative and redeeming action, must progressively acquire and develop a certain ‘kenotic’ disposition and become Christ’s committed disciple.

The decisive factor on the part of the recipient is faith, that is, the readiness to follow where the Word wills and indicates. To receive into me the One who was sacrificed for me means to grant him space in, and power of disposition over, my whole existence, both spiritual and physical, and thereby to follow him – at a distance, since it is he who decides while I let him act, but also in unity, since, through my letting him act, he will decide in me only in accordance with the meaning of his own disposibilité.  

To understand better how human beings are to relate to God’s gracious and redeeming activity in Christ, let us now consider a little more closely the mode following which human freedom ought to relate to and with divine freedom. In Balthasar’s mind, there cannot be a human (or more broadly finite or creaturely) freedom that is not grounded in and defined by divine (absolute or infinite) freedom, for human freedom necessarily presupposes itself and the suitable situation, context and order (orientation and meaning) within which it operates as given. “Finite freedom can only be made possible by infinite freedom; consequently it can only fulfill itself, as finite freedom, within infinite freedom. In its finitude it has a ‘whence’ and a ‘whither’; by its very nature it is set on a path and pointed in a direction. Infinite freedom provides it with a law and instruction, not imposed externally but inscribed internally.” First of all, the human subject or individual, with a healthy complexion, will naturally come to experience her own existence and free agency as something that is not of her own making or doing, as something she continuously receives as a pure gift. “The man endowed with consciousness and freedom, if the light of being is not totally obscured in him, will experience the very fact that he exists as a good, as something that is given to him without any merit or contribution on his part.”

More profoundly still, the human subject (appropriately disposed) will experience the human existence she is being graciously offered never in generic fashion, but always as a personal identity. “What is given to me is not just any subjectivity, interchangeable with any other, but a subjectivity which, in order that it can communicate itself, is itself incommunicable. Since I have been chosen to be a unique person, it follows inevitably that I must address infinite freedom as ‘Thou,’ however excessive such language may seem.” It rather is a unique and irreplaceable identity, personhood and destiny by nature inscribed within a personal relationship with its Creator from which it draws all its intrinsic dignity. “The finite can only dare to call it [its Ground of Being] ‘Thou’ if, in doing so, it is answering to a ‘thou’ that comes addressed to

837 Ibid., 99.
839 Ibid., 285-86.
840 Ibid., 290.
itself from the inner nature of the Absolute – from the divine Trinity. The two things affect each other: I only appreciate fully that God is my ‘highest good’ when I learn (in the Son) that I am a ‘good’ to him, affirmed by him; this is what guarantees my being and my freedom.”

God is the constituting principle of human freedom, personhood and dignity. Through the creative personal invitation made to the creature founded on the kenotic, self-giving and emptying nature of the triune God the Creator-creature, God-human relationships find their absolute basis in the relationships shared by the divine persons themselves. It is because Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another as persons, that they can and do call the free human creature into being as a person always already inscribed within an intimate relationship with them. “This day I have created you, says eternal freedom to finite freedom. The fact that no human ‘I’ can awaken to itself unless it is called ‘thou’ by some other ‘I’ is only the prelude, within the parameters of the world, to what is meant here. For in and through the human ‘I’ there is manifested an Absolute ‘I,’ who has from eternity generated an equally Absolute ‘Thou’ and, in the Holy Spirit, is One God with him.”

Once finite freedom has understood and embraced its constitutional, ontological dependence upon infinite freedom in terms of existence, situation and agency, the further truth and evidence that sharing in infinite freedom, as expressed and lived in God’s triune existence, is the goal it ought to pursue will dawn upon it. Finite freedom can only find its proper fulfilment and actualization in infinite freedom. “Finite freedom, genuinely set free and equipped with its own sphere of freedom, cannot set off in just any direction but must pursue the path of self-realization, that is, toward absolute freedom.” This fulfilment and actualization, alongside everything else, are not to be produced by the activity and operation of finite freedom itself, but rather to be received and acknowledged as pure gifts from God. For, while finite freedom finds itself utterly dependent on infinite freedom, infinite freedom cannot be bound by anything else. “Finite freedom can only fulfill itself within the realm of infinite freedom. If this realm is free, it follows that finite freedom has no claim on it. If and when this realm is open to finite freedom, it is pure grace.” The whole purpose of human life, therefore, is to nurture the ability to give due praise to God, to be able to welcome as grace that which fulfills the individual and to allow God to effect his elevating and perfecting work inside the human heart and soul. It is at this moment,
when finite freedom receives all that it is, becomes and does from God, in complete acceptation of what is being given, that it most fulfills and incarnates itself. “In the mystery of the Trinity, the creature can affirm itself as an act of thanksgiving to God. Receiving itself, freely identifying with itself – and here the gift of God separates itself from God as the fruit separates itself from the tree – it really performs the perfect act of thanksgiving, accepting precisely what God wishes to give.”

What form will this life in and for God (infinite freedom) concretely take for particular human beings (finite freedom)? Since God defines each human individual as a unique person with whom he wishes to intimately relate, each human being will receive from God a unique personal calling, mission or vocation. “But if God wills the finite as such, it follows that he also has a particular will for each finite subject.”

For this will to take effect, and before that, to be perceptible to the individual, the latter must first make room for God and his grace and allow for them to bring about a self-transcendent transformation. Finite freedom is not to make use of infinite freedom, but rather the opposite, because only divine freedom can operate on another freedom while respecting and bringing it to fulfilment and not negating it. “Finite freedom can only fulfill itself in the realm of infinite freedom, and not by using infinite freedom for its own finite aims, but by opening itself up to the self-disclosure of infinite freedom. In Christian terms, it must allow the love of God to work upon it, loving it in return for its own sake.”

If it is to receive a vocation from God, finite freedom must literally undo itself, getting rid of all its preconceived finite ideas and ideals, structures and principles of behaviour, hopes, dreams and wishes, for infinite ones to take over and replace them. “Finite freedom must become unmade, must come to have no path of its own, must attain calm composure or indifference: this is the categorical precondition if it is to receive a vocation and destiny from the hands of infinite Will.”

This process of self-emptying, self-abandonment operated by finite freedom will enable God to settle in the individual’s heart and soul, to effect his own will from within, turning the individual into one of his disciples to be sent into the world on a particular mission. “If the individual is unmade, indifferent, calmly receptive to the whole of God’s will, he does not sink into the ‘pathless’ abyss of Godhead: the Father’s infinite will fashions him in and according to

845 Ibid., 288.
846 Ibid., 302.
847 Ibid., 303.
848 Ibid., 304.
his Son; thus he is given a path, which, as ‘being in Christ’ or ‘Christ’s being in him,’ is totally specific.”

6.3.8. A Kenotic Way of Life

Having been freed from the burden of their own salvation, in and through Christ’s work, who freely offered himself and lived uniquely to do his Father’s will, who did not wish to anticipate but always waited upon the Father to provide him with all the grace he needed, who did not evade suffering and self-sacrifice when they were demanded from him, who asked, in prayer, for the Father to give him all he needed and accepted all that was given to him as coming from his Father, all human beings can now devote themselves to the task of following Christ. Christ’s being, life and ministry are in essence kenotic and incarnate the paradigm all Christians are to imitate and follow. “As we observe how the incarnate Son relates to the Father, we see the archetype within the godhead, and, within it, we see what the creature is meant to be according to the Father’s eternal vision of it; of itself, of its own creaturely nature, it cannot fulfill this vision: to do this, the Son must elevate the creature into his own relationship with the Father, a relationship which is divine, and to that extent inaccessible to the creature.”

Following Christ means for them to opt for a receptive, open, awaiting attitude and stance, where the individual receives from God, and only from God a particular call, command and vocation to be faithfully obeyed by the individual even if what is being requested of her goes against or entails the shattering of her present conceptions of the good life, values and interaction in and with this world. The human being is to receive everything she is from Christ, never to act independently from his grace, following the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, always being ready to leave everything behind and carry her cross, in order to do God’s will and accept to suffer and be rejected for Christ. Never taking any merits as her own, and not even being aware of the goodness of the deeds she accomplishes, the Christian simply ought to accomplish what is being asked of her and to offer all merits and praise to God. As Bulgakov concisely puts it, “the creature realizes its freedom not in willfulness but in the obedience of love and self-

849 Ibid., 305.
850 Jesus’ essential need for prayer is masterfully expressed by Sergei Bulgakov. See Lamb of God, 254-55: “For the God-man prayer is life and breath. He does not do anything without prayer. The Father who sent him into the world and whose will he is called to work in the world is his Father and God. Therefore, the divine nature, which is united in a state of humiliation with the human nature, not only does not hinder prayer, not only does not make it superfluous to him, but on the contrary, it inspires his human essence to unceasing prayer, for prayer is also divine inspiration.”
Like Christ, Christians are called to absolute self-denial, a life of utter poverty and dependence, a radical engagement where one’s existence as a whole no longer is planned ahead and everything measured by one’s own theories and conceptions of human existence and meaning, a life in which the world and all it contains, finite goods and realities, no longer claim the heart of the individual before God. “The momentum of the time of Jesus expresses itself as the momentum of the call to unconditional discipleship. ... If anyone wants to be involved with Jesus, or if Jesus takes the initiative to involve himself with anyone, this means for the disciple a choice of all or nothing. Discipleship is an indivisible adherence which demands the whole existence, and is marked with the brand of his ownership not only in one place, but in all places.”

This imitation, however, is not to be conceived of in a literal way, for no other human being is capable of Christ’s perfectly obedient deeds and life, even when graciously assisted by Christ himself. “Jesus alone possesses the possibility of making out of his whole existence including his death, with full authority and in accordance with his mission, something handed over for God and men, out of which God is able to form his final word to the world through the Holy Spirit.” In like manner to Christ opening himself entirely to the Father, the Christian believer is to completely open herself to Christ and surrender herself over to him. “This obedience of imitation has its goal in the ‘poverty’ of a complete readiness for Jesus and for the needs of the kingdom proclaimed by him, and indeed goes beyond human limits in the love of enemies and shares in the mercy of the Father.” This imitation of Christ will therefore be received by the individual as a personal vocation granted by God – in and through the Holy Spirit indwelling her – and intended to take a unique form which will demand from her to display genuine creativity and leadership. Christian humility does not equate with mere servility, for being the instrument of God, for human beings renewed in Christ entails being empowered to offer a genuine personal and unique contribution to the upbuilding of Christ’s body (the Church), so that “humility and prophetic audacity belong equally to spiritual life, to the concrete unity of the self-definition of the spirit, opening up to the divine life.”

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854 *Ibid.*, 160. The Church, as Balthasar notes, has been aware, from very early on, that a direct imitation of Christ is not accessible to human beings: “From the manner in which the Church has imaged herself in the story of the Passion her realization that there can be no immediate ‘imitation of Christ’ is evident” (*Mysterium Paschale*, 115-16).
All individuals are called by God to be integrated by Christ within Christ, as distinct members of his unique and fully integrated Body, each accomplishing a unique and necessary function. “The form of life offered us by God is only a mode of life in Christ, of discipleship of Christ, personal in each case.”\(^857\) The Church, as Bride and Body of Christ, therefore welcomes within herself each individual who is thereby constituted a member of Christ’s Body (through baptism and the other sacraments), but at the same time and as it were in return, the individual thus integrated also constitutes the Church precisely by allowing Christ’s will to be done in and through her discipleship.

On the one hand, we have the Church (with the Virgin Mary as her prototype), the totality of the Logos’ coming-to-be in the world, which precedes the “idea” of her individual members and incorporates them (both ideally and really, sacramentally) into herself and into Christ. And, on the other hand, we have the individual, who, born of God (or conceived by Christ) in the gift of baptism, must give evidence of this birth and conception in a life lived according to Christ’s pattern, so that he himself may become a fruitful “mother of Christ.”\(^858\)

God the Son, sent by God the Father, through the action of God the Holy Spirit, is made to inform and indwell each Christian believer and the Church, constituting them as one in him. “From the perspective of the Word of God, what we see is the Word allowing himself to take shape in the totality of his Body (the Church) and in her individual member (the believer).”\(^859\) In and through this personal and collective kenosis, i.e. the surrendering of their selves in complete obedience to their Lord, Christian believers gain the very presence of Christ within themselves, the sharing of an intimacy with Christ’s being, person, redeeming work and mission such as to deserve being called “sons and daughters of God.” “This is the mystery of being ‘born of God’ (John 1:13): the creature is adopted into the process whereby the Son comes forth from the Father; thus, in the Holy Spirit, we become ‘sons and heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him’ (Rom 8:17).”\(^860\)

Evidently, this integration into Christ’s own Body, this becoming like Christ, this sharing in Christ’s mission and sufferings, only possible because effected by Christ (in and through the Holy Spirit) from within the human being, undergone by Christian believers is a developmental process where the individual grows into greater intimacy, friendship with and love of God. This heightened proximity and closeness to/with God never negate finite freedom and agency, but


\(^{858}\) *Ibid.*, 309.

\(^{859}\) *Ibid.*, 309.

\(^{860}\) *Ibid.*, 308.
rather empower them for creative, spontaneous and personal behaviour and action. “The Trinitarian God, and he alone, never changes into mere ‘fate’ but accompanies his creature in such a vital manner that, in doing so, he can also attract and call him to a more intimate fellowship, encourage him to bolder action, entice him to play a unique role.”\textsuperscript{861} By radically opting for God, by entirely surrendering herself over to God, the human person also chooses and gains herself, is allowed and enabled in God to become herself, is made herself by God, provided with a situation, an identity, a call and a mission in and from God. Human freedom can then act as the instrument and mediation of divine freedom revealed in its kenosis (self-emptying, empowering latency).

Infinite freedom, because it is by nature infinite, simply cannot fail to be present wherever finite freedom is. It operates through the latter yet in a latent manner which allows finite freedom to realize itself as genuine decision (for or against its being-in-God). If it decides correctly, it simultaneously chooses both itself (which can only be realized in God) and God; it grasps that God’s immanence in it, in grace, is nothing alien, no more than God himself can ever be a stranger to it; everything that is relative and created comes to itself in the Absolute.\textsuperscript{862}

Mary paradigmatically embodies such freedom accomplished in self-denial and openness to God in Christ. In Sergeĭ Bulgakov’s beautiful words,

Her growth in the Spirit progressed from her birth and her presentation in the temple to the Annunciation; and then from the Annunciation – through Golgotha and the Pentecost – to her Dormition and her Assumption, which attests to the fullness of spiritual receptivity and spirituality that she had attained in her glorification and deification. Without being God or the God-man, Mary communes with the divine life in the holy Trinity in her perfect spirituality. \textit{She follows, like her Son, the path of kenotic diminution} and maternally participates in his salvific passion. To this is added her apostolic ministry after the Ascension: \textit{her silent and self-sacrificing work} for all of Christianity.\textsuperscript{863}

It is only because God has deigned to reveal Godself in the absolute humility of Christ that the divine has been made accessible and a new life possible for all who believe. God, by assuming the human nature, by entering creation redeems his creatures, accomplishes once and for all what humans never could have realized: he wipes away all sins (original and actual), he deifies the human being and nature (elevates and empowers them to partake in the divine life) and at the same time defines a path, a way of life for all human beings to a faithful life in communion with God. In Christ the infinite majesty and glory of God is manifested in the most

\textsuperscript{861} Ibid., 296.
\textsuperscript{862} Ibid., 316.
\textsuperscript{863} Sergeĭ Bulgakov, \textit{The Comforter}, 247. [Emphasis, ours]
humble, poorest, weakest and most obedient human being ever to have walked this earth. “Jesus’ existence in and for his mission is an unconditional existence in poverty, chastity and obedience, insofar as these three modes of life guarantee exclusive freedom for mission. ... He [Jesus] knows that he has identified himself in complete inner freedom with a task that has been given him and must be carried out at all costs; in other words, it calls for total obedience. Obedience, however, means that he is not in charge of himself; he has handed himself over to Another.”

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s (supported by Sergeï Bulgakov’s) kenotic reading of God’s triunity and salvation history in the light of Christ’s self-humbling incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection, has shown to be manifold and multifaceted. Jesus’ complete and perfect surrender of his life, being and self to the Father, for the accomplishment of the latter’s will, up to the giving up of his sinless existence on the cross fully reveals his divine nature in and through the latter’s concealment. Christ’s existence solely for and in the Father naturally invites the theologian to conceive of the existence of an analogous form of obedience and self-denial and surrendering within and among the divine persons themselves as the concrete expression and definition of the love mutually shared by the Trinity. The Father giving to the Son who gives back to him, in and through the Spirit (as absolute gift and love) – the kenosis within God – defines the possibility for further self-giving acts from God: creation of the world, incarnation, crucifixion, integration and formation of Christian believers into the Body of Christ. Always aware that she cannot become exactly like Christ, the Christian believer is called to empty herself of everything finite, open and surrender herself to Christ so that he might indwell her and progressively conform her to himself, in so doing providing her with a unique identity and mission. Conformation to Christ does not equal assimilation to him, but rather adoption by God which, under the Lordship of Christ, provides being, existence, identity and mission to the believer, called to share in Christ’s redeeming work and sufferings (without any replacement or substitution for Christ’s sufficient work being involved). Following Balthasar and Bulgakov, the Christian is summoned to lose her life in order to find it, i.e. to graciously receive it from God, from whom and in whom alone, she ought to exist, live and love.

6.4. At the Foot of the Cross: Suffering and Death as Abode and Mediation for God

In this chapter, we have presented a kenotic model which articulates and understands the Christian mystery of human redemption in and through the person of the vulnerable and suffering Jesus Christ. Following Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergeï Bulgakov, in the humanity

of Jesus – God incarnate – we have found a direct access to and mediation for the divine (existing in his own nature and as his person). Revealing the life and transformative power of the Triune God in and through the weakness of his perfectly obedient humanity, Jesus always acts under the guidance of the divine Love – the Holy Spirit – present and at work within him. Jesus hears his Father’s command, which he accomplishes each time in a personal and innovative manner. Assuming his spiritual poverty, Jesus allows himself to be (in)formed – that is, to be progressively taught and moulded – by the Holy Spirit into a perfect instrument for the Father’s will, an instrument whose vocation it is to accomplish the will of God in this world. Jesus indefectibly follows the Father, even when he can no longer be heard and seen, in the dark of abandonment, suffering and death. Jesus transformed the humiliation, forsakenness, death and defeat he endured on the cross into the most powerful locus for the manifestation of absolute, undefeated and indefeasible love, of God who redeems the whole of humankind by giving his only Son. As we have seen exemplified in the lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, Christians are called by Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, to follow in his footsteps, to take on and bear crosses of their own. Letting go of all human accomplishments, claims, desires and pretentions, they empty themselves in order to be filled by the Holy Spirit with Christ who empowers them to share in his redemptive suffering and sacrifice mercifully accomplished for the world. Finding freedom in obedience, Christ’s disciples only seek to do his will, dedicating and ultimately giving their lives for him. And this Christ empowers his disciples to do especially in times of affliction, when human dignity and integrity are being crushed, when human beings have been reduced to barely surviving, spiritually isolated, tortured creatures burdened with the heaviest yoke of guilt and shame. It is when they have reached the bottom of humankind’s spiritual abyss, when their whole being and existence are covered with darkness, when they perceive themselves as most estranged from themselves and their absolute fulfilment that they meet with God. It is at this point, when despair and hopelessness have become all-pervasive, when God in Christ has allowed and empowered them to have a share in his suffering for humankind and creation that Christ’s disciples finally meet with him and are granted to become the beacons and bearers of light he had eternally intended them to be. In and through their humiliation and suffering (for others), their human poverty and weakness, God in Christ is again made incarnate and seen healing and bringing solace to afflicted humankind.
Chapter Seven

Western Christianity Meets Auschwitz:
Looking for Jesus Christ in Extermination Camps

We must now tackle the task of putting the kenotic theological model just proposed to the test in its systematic and contextual aspects as well as in its concrete application. We therefore need, first, to determine whether this kenotic model is faithful to the gist and spirit of the traditional western doctrine of grace as analyzed and articulated in Part II. We also need, in a second step, to determine whether this kenotic model provides new insights and perspectives for the study of the very particular relation to both God and situation which extermination camp survivors entertain and in which they find themselves. In other words, we must establish whether the suggested model enables us to use the resources of the western theological tradition to offer a positive account of the action and presence of God in Auschwitz through the transposition it operates of the traditional categories and concepts into ones directly correlating with the experience of the survivors as described and presented in Part I. The fulfilment of these two tasks will form the content of the present and final chapter of this dissertation.

7.1. Kenotic Grace?

7.1.1. The Tenets of Grace

To determine whether the proposed kenotic model and interface is faithful to the tradition, it is necessary first to recall the essential elements of the western doctrine and theology of grace recovered by means of the genetic analysis presented in part II. We have seen that humanity, out of self-reliance and pride, has in the persons of the first human beings lost a special supernatural assistance from and intimacy with God, caused the disruption of the created order and fully subjected itself to sinfulness (which is nothing else than the intentional pursuit of inordinate desires). By its own fault, that is, due to the mishandling of its freedom, humanity (all of it) is now – in each individual – undeniably and irremediably wounded, estranged from God, in whom alone it can find positive foundation for its existence and freedom as well as supernatural fulfilment and happiness. God created human beings for a supernatural purpose. As embodied spirits, they unite in their person the material world to the spiritual supernatural realm, opening the material to the spiritual. God willed them to share in an immediate personal
relationship with him. In and through them, creation is consequently ordered and ordained to God. In the human subject, creation experiences itself as a radical desire for the positively limitless, absolute and eternal, that is, as a desire for God who is experienced as the unfathomable mystery laying outside and defining the open and dynamic ultimate horizon of human knowledge. This experience of God – initiated, sustained and fulfilled by God – determines and defines human nature as the locus and free recipient of God’s self-communication. By virtue of their nature, all human beings are therefore supernaturally determined and called to enter in a free relationship with God.

As a result of the fall, the current human condition is characteristically that of creatures who are lost; of finite beings strictly unable on their own to get in touch with their true self and who must concurrently take responsibility for a permanently tainted moral and spiritual existence and predicament they have inherited from and bequeath to others. Assistance can only be obtained, received from without. Only God can pull humanity out of the pit of sinfulness and spiritual estrangement. Only God can forgive an offense that has been perpetrated against him. Only God can build bridges spanning over the infinite distance separating humankind from him. Out of pure love and mercy, God has indeed, in the person of his only-begotten Son made incarnate, provided a perfect mediator reuniting in his humanity the whole of creation to God. In and through the free offer of his life to God the Father, Jesus accomplished a perfect and unsurpassable sacrifice. In him all things are united and fulfilled: a stainless humanity obediently offers itself to God in response and in order to fulfill God’s will to reconcile humankind to Godself. Without the mediation of Christ, there can be no salvation; human beings must find in the risen Christ the unique and indispensable font of their salvation, that is, their true being and existence in God and for God. All merits, in regards to human salvation, belong to Christ. Christ as us, Christ in us, Christ for us, earns our salvation. God is entirely free to offer the saving grace of Christ to whomever he wills, for nobody deserves it.

In and through Christ, God effects the reorientation and reordering of the human will, heart and soul (the whole person) toward Godself. This reorientation and reordering are accomplished by means of the New Law which essentially consists of supernatural grace. Indwelled by the Holy Spirit, human beings receive from him the healing and elevating grace of Christ in the form of a supernatural habitual (permanent and stable) determination of their very soul (the principle of being and existence of living entities), providing them with a new heart able to love God before and beyond anything else and setting them on a spiritual journey toward
complete communion with God in love (which is the very essence of God) and whose successful completion will accomplish the return of the entire creation to God. Having been healed from all their sins (original and actual) by Christ and following him, human beings are called to become instruments of the Holy Spirit who indwells them, inspiring and moving them to accomplish his divine will. They are intended by God to live and exercise their freedom within the realm of divine grace and as divine grace, making use of the gifts received from Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Each individual receiving a particular call from God, her vocation takes a very concrete and unique form. Humans are intended to give up on their ideas, conceptions, worldly endeavours and expectations and, forgetting any form of self-accomplishment, to bear witness to God’s grace enacting through Christ their transformation.

Human beings are to be and behave like Christ. Christ had nothing, kept nothing and was nothing apart from what he received from his Father. Christ is obedient and submissive in the same measure than he is free; his actions flow from and follow the divine command in spontaneous fashion and this, to him, is the sure sign of his freedom in God. The Christian breathes and lives from divine inspiration and would never desire to stop doing so, for that would lead her directly to her (spiritual) death. Grace precedes (defines, situates, provides with all the necessary prerequisites to action), accompanies (empowers, moves and supports) and follows (ensures the existence, production and lasting continuation of effects) any given act of finite freedom. Human beings are not their own: indwelled by the Holy Spirit, they must follow his stirrings and like Christ, undergo suffering. The claim God makes on human freedom is total, human responsibility before God is complete. Christian life inevitably takes the form of a constant challenge and struggle. True Christian faith necessarily involves self-sacrifice. Christians are to love God above all and their neighbours as themselves, including their enemies. Christians must resist and respond to evil and sin only with love. Through self-transcendence, they are to convey the divine and to unify humanity and creation by fostering lasting bonds of spiritual love.

Redeeming grace has moreover been made fully, historically and universally available and explicit in Christ. Each human being is now confronted with the obligation of taking a stance for or against God. But this choice, in favour or in opposition to Christ and his offer of redeeming grace does not have to take the form of a here-and-now (instantaneous) decision or to involve complete and immediate self-awareness (on the part of the deciding moral agent). The exercise of human freedom takes the form of a lifelong journey of self-discovery where the
individual progressively learns the truth about herself and gains the ability to live from it. Human freedom is a task and a vocation calling the individual to integrate and gather all the dimensions of her being and existence into the unity of explicit and responsible self-awareness. Human freedom ultimately identifies with the individual’s free disposal of herself before God. As a Christian, she must find her own way in life. Humans must compose with the obscurity and unfathomable character of their existence and place their trust wholly in God (whose being and will are themselves mysterious and unfathomable) no matter what is being asked of them. Freed in Christ and threading in his footsteps, Christians tackle the challenge of creaturely existence to its full extent, with all its limitations. Once – in grace – they have been enabled to assume the truth that they are not their own, human beings can also offer that which they have received – themselves – to and for others.

7.1.2. Kenotic Embodiment and Response

The kenotic approach and perspective offered in the previous chapter do not oppose, but rather presuppose and reflect the insights, guidelines and principles developed, expressed and defended by western Christianity on the central issue of grace. With the tradition (more particularly Augustine and Aquinas), it clearly asserts that all salvation is to be obtained from Christ, the unique mediator in and through whom God’s self-revelation to humanity finds perfect expression and creation’s response and return to God are accomplished in free obedience. Alongside Rahner, it insists that in Jesus Christ, God is fully revealed, appearing as and becoming a very proximate, concrete and at the same time unfathomable, ungraspable mystery. God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ does not negate the divine transcendence. In Jesus Christ, God’s transcendence becomes immanent as transcendence, it is never reduced to a content or object fully circumscribed and exhausted in and by immanence and therefore fully graspable by the human intellect and reason. With the tradition, it argues that Jesus reveals God through his absolute poverty, humility and subjection to God the Father. Jesus abandons himself to the Father, dedicates himself entirely to the task of accomplishing the Father’s will. Jesus becomes and actualizes himself in being a perfect instrument for the divine, being at all times actively receptive to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit indwelling him and progressively gaining a more extensive understanding of his personal mission and relationship to God. Jesus finds freedom in the spontaneous accomplishment of the Father’s will and freely makes his existence and life available to the Father. Jesus’ availability, self-donation, obedience and humility are such that Jesus has no need of positive achievements of his own: he can and does fulfill his mission
through his own personal defeat. In suffering absolute estrangement, loneliness and forsakenness, Jesus asserts his pure and unfailing trust in, his love for God and brings humanity back to God (as in Aquinas).

Again in complete agreement with the tradition, the kenotic approach and perspective claims that true love is agape, gratuitous self-giving outpouring love and mercy. The reality of kenosis corresponds to the embodiment, the actualisation and manifestation of such pure self-sacrificing love. It is precisely when – rejected and abandoned by all, even by God – Jesus chooses to remain faithful to God and gives his life to him that he reveals his own divinity. Only infinite self-giving, outpouring love – that is, God – can suffer such abandonment, rejection and forsakenness out of love and in faithfulness to love. Jesus’ personal sacrifice reveals the true essence and life of the triune God. It is because God is triune that such expression of absolute self-giving love is made possible. Only when God in the Father graciously gives himself entirely to his Son, who in return entirely entrusts himself to the Father, and to do so humbles himself to the point of assuming human nature, suffering death and utter forsakenness, bearing the weight of all human sinning, and this while being united by a Love – the Holy Spirit – that is so absolute that it embraces all the distance separating the absolutely transcendent and ineffable God from the absolutely forsaken Son, can the miracle of human salvation be effected and God revealed to human creatures.

Following the lead of Luther, Calvin and Barth, the kenotic approach and method defends that ultimate actualization and fulfilment, happiness and joy are expressed and found not in self-possession, but in self-donation. Being, existence and happiness do not culminate and reside in holding on to what falls under one’s control and mastery, to what has been received and is now preserved, stored and protected from external influence, but in free self-offer and dedication. Such are the being and existence of the absolute foundation and ground of all things: God. The free creature – called and empowered by God to evolve and live within divine freedom – ought to adopt a mode of existence that is similar (analogically akin) to God’s, a mode allowing her to partake in the divine life itself (without her being and existence being lost in or confused with God’s, in accordance with Aquinas’ and Rahner’s teachings). With Karl Rahner, the kenotic approach and perspective points at the triune God’s profound desire to disclose, give and offer Godself in absolute freedom both within and as the divine life itself and without, by setting into existence other beings empowered and entrusted with the personal mission and vocation to answer this divine gift by means of their own self-donation and dedication to God.
With Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Trent, Barth and Rahner, it adamantly emphasizes that human freedom and salvation can only come and be obtained from God as undeserved and unearned supernaturally granted supernatural transformation and life. Finite freedom can only find its proper fulfilment and actualization in infinite freedom. These fulfilment and actualization, alongside everything else, are not produced by the activity and operation of finite freedom itself, but rather received and acknowledged as pure gifts from God. The whole purpose of human life, therefore, is to nurture the ability to give due praise to God, to be able to welcome as grace that which fulfills the individual and to allow God to effect his elevating and perfecting work inside the human heart and soul. It is at this moment, when finite freedom receives all that it is, becomes and does from God, in complete acceptance of what is being given, that it most fulfills and incarnates itself. Alongside Aquinas, Barth and Rahner, the kenotic approach and perspective conceives of human agency and freedom always as set into existence, situated (contextualized), oriented, set in motion (prepared), assisted (accompanied) and followed by God and his grace. Human nature has been created to dwell and flourish in the element (environment and milieu) of grace as God willed that the human creature find her happiness not in natural aims and goods, but in him. And this, divine (infinite) freedom does by operating on creaturely (finite) freedom in a way that respects and brings the latter to fulfilment. Without negating them, divine freedom and grace work both from within human agency and will and from without determine the creaturely situation in which creaturely freedom exists and is exercised. Siding with Augustine, Aquinas, Barth and Rahner, the kenotic approach and perspective asserts that creaturely, human freedom does not primarily consist in autonomous self-assertion and sustenance, but in the immediate, intimate encounter and relationship with God from which all being, existence and vocation are obtained.

The kenotic way of life directly correlates with the traditional understanding of Christian discipleship. The individual empties herself – taking away all self-affirmation, ambition, ideals pretence – opens herself to and welcomes the Spirit of God who becomes the primary agent (cause or principle) of her actions. Supernaturally empowered and granted with a supernatural vocation, the human person devotes herself to the task of following Christ. With Barth, it argues that following Christ means opting for a receptive, open, awaiting attitude and stance, receiving from God, and only from God a particular call, command and vocation she faithfully obeys even when it directly goes against or provokes the shattering of her own conceptions of the good life, values and interaction in and with this world. The disciple follows the Holy Spirit wherever he
blows without interposing any control or management of her own (in the form of anticipation, planning or programming of her actions and of the future). She lets herself be guided and trustfully waits for the Spirit to stir her anew in each concrete instance and situation. Like Luther and Calvin’s theology, the kenotic way of life supposes that the disciple dutifully accomplish what is asked of her without ever considering her actions and their fruits (results and consequences) as hers, but always as God’s and only God’s. Never taking any merits as her own, and not even being aware of the goodness of the deeds she accomplishes, the Christian simply ought to accomplish what is being asked of her and to offer all merits and praise to God. Human freedom can then act as the instrument and mediation of divine freedom. The Christian is summoned to lose her life in order to find it, i.e. to graciously receive it from God, from whom and in whom alone, she ought to exist, live and love.

The external expressions and forms these new supernatural being, condition and mode of existence may take are many. Some of these may in fact remain almost entirely implicit to the eyes of all possible witnesses (including the person subject to the transformation herself). In the context of affliction, the kenotic mode becomes the paradigmatic and almost normal (appropriate and suitable) way to embody Christian discipleship and faithfulness. In the midst of extreme isolation, suffering, persecution and destruction, when access to transcendence, meaning and purposefulness is completely denied, when the inner spiritual life of the self has been reduced to shambles and only purely biological functions and needs can be accomplished and met, and this, through relentless struggle (with others and the surrounding environment), when all traces of self-confidence, self-esteem and personal identity have vanished and become tainted and corrupted by forced involvement in one’s own destruction, God can only be found on, mediated by and perceived through the Cross. Through their immediate experience of strictly undeserved destructive suffering, the afflicted gain direct access into the mystery of the human condition and through the latter, into the mystery of Christ, that is, of the redeeming God (Jesus Christ crucified). The afflicted embody and experience in most extreme fashion the human condition as it always has been characterized and described by western Christian tradition (from Augustine to Rahner): human beings are, from a spiritual standpoint (that is, in relation to God), absolutely deprived, they are poor mendicants who do not own anything, have of their own nothing to give, standing in desperate need of assistance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s and Alfred Delp’s experiences of long imprisonment by and execution at the hand of the Nazi regime show that affliction can become a way to freedom, a
way to God passing through Christ, where the disciple is called to undergo crucifixion in and with Christ from and for the world. They both experienced a resurrection of sorts in Christ who empowers them to undergo their own crucifixion for him, that is, he provides them with the spiritual (supernatural) life they need to freely offer their lives as an expression of their undeniable faithfulness to him. Faithfully bearing their own crosses, the afflicted go on empowered by Christ to live and die without him (in the dark, not in the light of joyful revelation). They do not and cannot understand why they must take this path, go through the crucible of extreme unfathomable, meaningless suffering, passing not from glory to glory (as Gregory of Nyssa’s famous saying has it), but from failure to failure, from collapse to collapse until they reach the point where they finally are called, in Christlike manner, to surrender all they have left – their bare, naked lives – in faithfulness to God. As their surrounding and inner worlds lay in ruins, it is through their battered and shattered bodies and souls that the afflicted convey and fulfill the will of God, not their own (or rather their own insofar as it identifies with God’s by clinging unto the latter), just as Christ fulfilled the will of his Father when, agonizing on the cross and having lost sight of the immediate presence of his Father, he gave his spirit as the ultimate expression of love for humanity and God. All of this, they accomplish out of and within the saving power of God who, having already saved them in Jesus Christ, turns them into beacons of his grace and abodes for his action and presence in history, in and through the radical negativity (irreducible obscurity) of their existence. Through the afflicted, God thus irradiates the spiritual night of the world (a human contraption, in accordance with the tradition) with a dark light of his own making having the power to transmute destructive suffering and spiritual desolation and isolation into prisms diffusing his infinite love and mercy. Let us now try to perceive this dark light where of all places it should be abiding, the country of the afflicted itself, namely, Auschwitz.

7.2. Jesus in Auschwitz

7.2.1. Conditions for an Encounter

In order to be able to decipher the presence and action of God in Auschwitz, it is necessary first to take a closer look at the living conditions in the camps in order to determine the nature of what could and could not appear or become manifest there as well as the modalities according to which what did appear manifested itself. By correlating the results of this analysis with the kenotic interface and perspective developed in the previous chapter, we will then be equipped with the tools required to produce a by no means exhaustive, but hopefully faithful and
suggestive characterization (description and articulation) of the presence and action of the divine in Auschwitz. By subjecting all prisoners to insufferable coercion, brutality and living conditions through the authority they exercised and imposed by force from without, the Nazis profoundly altered the form and content of the prisoners’ existence and therefore, also drastically modified the relationship these same prisoners entertained with the transcendent. What this alteration of human life did in fact accomplish and entail is the polarization (separation of opposites in tension), absolutization (elevation to the status of extreme) and fixation (elimination of intrinsic dynamism) of a series of aptitudes, conditions, elements, feelings and powers – either intrinsic to or required by human existence and life – which normally coexist and are experienced in dialectical dynamism and tension (this always renewed and surmounted conflict forming the very fabric of human life). Hence, in Auschwitz, what in the context of “normal” life is experienced as mixed, multifaceted and in a constant state of flux instead appeared to the individual in all its intensity, its sharp distinction from everything else and its permanence (that is, its immobility). Since the camps were intended by the Nazis to bring about a systematic denegation of the inmates’ humanity and dignity, the aptitudes, conditions, elements, feelings and powers characteristic of the human condition that were allowed to become explicit and actualized were either negative in essence or remained in a state of pure latency and virtuality (when positive in nature).

In Auschwitz, time (from the standpoint of the prisoners) had by principle been drained of its human element or content and could only be defined as an external, impersonal and quantitative measure, having nothing to do with human life. Time in the camps flowed at a perfectly even, slow pace, following its own measure; each given instant, like the ticks of a metronome, leading to a subsequent one. Time took the appearance of empty eternity (or sempiternity): the never-ending repetition of the same, the same succeeding the same, leading nowhere and at the same time providing no occasion (opportunity or reason) for genuine rest, fulfilment and contentment. But time could not simply identify with pure impersonal fate, it also had to appear – to the eyes of the inmates – entirely arbitrary and unpredictable, unfathomable. To successfully prevent the prisoners from acquiring a genuine stable sense of personal identity, time in Auschwitz consequently had to be grounded in human agency and freedom, because only

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865 The word “Nazi” here not only refers to actual members of the Waffen-SS in charge of the administration of the labour and extermination camps, but also includes the inmate hierarchy insofar as the latter needed and did assimilate themselves to the mode of life and behaviour of the members of the Waffen-SS, from whom they obtained the authority they were exercising over other prisoners and to whom they always had to respond.
human freedom – a spiritually grounded principle of action – has the possibility to produce both a given effect and its opposite, and thus the ability to introduce sheer arbitrariness into the course of historical events. The Nazis therefore had to assert the positive existence of their human freedom in order to generate a sense of time appropriate to the annihilation of the freedom found in each prisoner.

In similar and complementary fashion, the prisoners’ sense of location and space was also subjected to far-reaching alterations and redefinition. Reduced to its most simple expression, the human existence of the camp inmates simply had no room for affectivity and emotions, for memory and anticipation, for speech and thought, for conscience and morality, for civility and community and for leisure and play, which all presuppose the enjoyment of freedom, fulfilment and safety that did not exist in Auschwitz. Auschwitz therefore is the realm of strict immanence, a place where there are no windows and doors opening and leading to the beyond, outside, before and after. Auschwitz is all there is, the self-sufficient and exhaustive reality, and it imposed itself as such to all those who were forced to live there. The famished and impoverished selves of the inmates, turned into automata or robots mechanically moving about in search of fuel (for that is what food had been reduced to) are driven by purely selfish biological motives (as are living beings in Darwin’s theory of natural selection). The personal identity of the inmates has been reduced to a purely virtual (latent) mode of existence. The strictly biological struggle for existence follows or complies with no moral law or rational, intelligent and intelligible principle: the amoral, the immoral and the mad are precisely those who have a better chance at survival, who are better adapted to the conditions and life of the camps because they do not need to discern the best course of action before they act and are not bound by any rules (moral or other). They simply follow the all-abiding and arbitrary will of the camp leaders which, through universal and univocal application, operates the homogenization of all detainees by reducing them all to the lowest common denominator of human existence. In the nakedness of their ruined personal identity and existence, in their complete humiliation, poverty, vulnerability and weakness, the prisoners share a common fate and destiny.

Despite their acute awareness of having forcefully been subjected to living conditions under which they could not avoid transgressing fundamental moral laws and principles (human conscience and dignity, religious laws, etc.), most survivors feel shame and guilt in relation to their experience of the camps and, beyond the latter, in relation to their human nature and condition (as they embodied and lived it during and after the camps). These intense feelings of
shame and guilt do not simply follow – as direct consequences – from their personal actions and behaviour in the camp; they do not find a sufficient and exhaustive account in the personal wrongdoings of the survivors during their internment. This shame and guilt are grounded in the survivors’ keen sense that there is no meaning or purpose to their personal survival; no suitable reasons can be provided to explain why they are among the few who survived instead of the millions who were not spared. In Auschwitz, all human life had the same value – that is, none – so that in principle the camps should not have produced or left any survivors. Beyond the sheer contingency of their survival, a sense of being intrinsically spoiled and corrupted at the very heart of their freedom also justifies the feelings of shame and guilt to which the survivors are prone. The survivors admit that they could not avoid being complicit both with their own dehumanization and that of other inmates. Even worse, the survivors foreshadow the ghastly truth that, because of the prevailing conditions, their survival (which was biologically desired by every prisoner) depended on the death of other human beings (this being most explicit in the case of members of the Sonderkommando who, while not themselves being killers (strictly speaking), were literally living by and from the death of others).

At a deeper level, the survivors of labour and extermination camps fathom that for this to be even possible, there has to be something profoundly wrong with the human nature itself, with the human heart and soul, with human freedom. The impossibility to avoid being contaminated, sickened and corrupted by the spiritual decrepitude and depravation proper to camp atmosphere and life demonstrates the pre-existence, in each and every human being (for all detainees were perfectly ordinary and representative samples of humankind), of such evil at least in the form of an existential and ontological potentiality of their freedom. This potentiality is not something that camp life implanted in them from without, it was already there when they passed through the entrance gates. Recalling the words of Semprun:

What’s essential is the experience of Evil. Of course, you can experience that anywhere. ... It’s the experience of radical Evil. ... Evil is not what is inhuman, of course. ... Or else it’s what is inhuman in man. ... The inhumanity of man, considered as vital possibility, as personal intention. ... As freedom. ... So it’s ridiculous to oppose Evil, to distance oneself from it, through a simple reference to what is human, to mankind. ... Evil is one of the possible designs of the freedom essential to the humanity of man – the freedom from which spring both the humanity and inhumanity of man.866

The Nazis did not deny the existence of such a potentiality within their own personal freedom, they simply transferred all their burden of guilt and responsibility onto the prisoners whom they accused of illegitimately pretending to be human. By condemning, in purely a priori a fashion, a significant portion of humanity to suffer infinite punishment and retribution for their unjustified and unjustifiable pretention to human dignity – that is, to expiate their human condition – the Nazis cleared themselves of all blame and found justification for their inhuman conduct and practices in the fact that it was in their power to do it. Freed from the burden of their own responsibility, which had been transferred to the camp inmates, the Nazis’ freedom and power did not have any external measure and limit. The more the Nazis succeeded at denying the inmates’ dignity, freedom and humanity, the more they needed to exercise domination over the inmate population, because the less could the latter display and embody genuine alterity. So it is precisely as their humanity is being extinguished by Nazi freedom, that the prisoners are most needed, to bear the burden of their own extermination. In Auschwitz could therefore be observed the extreme separation, polarization and fixation of two distinct moments or figures of human freedom: agency and responsibility. While the Nazis enjoyed unlimited (unbound, unconditioned) capacity of action and carried no burden of responsibility, the prisoners assumed infinite responsibility and enjoyed no capacity for action.

To convey the same reality differently, we can say that the prisoners-survivors felt the responsibility of being human most acutely in radically inhuman conditions and situations. They then sensed that being human entails being faced with a supernatural challenge and requires bearing a superhuman burden of responsibility. It is precisely when they had been reduced to the level of the subhuman that the intrinsically superhuman demands of human existence and life were most clearly unveiled to them. They then knew that the demands of and requirements for human morality and fulfilment were absolute and their ability to respond to these inherently inadequate and insufficient. Passing through the crucible of Auschwitz, the prisoners-survivors found themselves essentially convoked before an absolute, inserted within a relationship with the absolute they could not deny, for this relationship is constitutive of and undergirds their very being and existence.

This impossible request – that is, the request of the impossible – defines the modalities of the prisoners’ relationship to God in Auschwitz. God appeared in and through the negation of his presence and action, through his silence and the impossibility for the creature to understand how such a reality as Auschwitz could enter in the divine design and providence. The prisoners knew
that God exists, because life in Auschwitz was the transposition here on earth of existence in hell. In Auschwitz, humanity lost itself, was essentially lost; there could not be any positive reference to the transcendent, any positive situation (insertion) within the transcendent. But eternal damnation supposes the existence of the eternal itself. By means of quiet or openly expressed resistance and revolt, the prisoners called God before the tribunal of their undeserved suffering. In lament, they elevated their prayers to him, in a desperate attempt to decipher his will and cling unto him in and despite Auschwitz. Their cry for help only was echoed by the absolute muteness of Auschwitz’ self-enclosure. They had completed their journey through the day of faith and were forced to enter into the latter’s night, where relentless awaiting patience and trust hold primacy.

7.2.2. Auschwitz, Human and Divine

In such a context, how could God possibly manifest Godself and powerfully, positively transform the lives of the prisoners? Can the kenotic interface presented in the previous chapter help us decipher how it could have been possible for the divine presence and action to actually be found and to have influenced human existence in Auschwitz? The careful consideration of the conduct and life of the exceptional prisoners singled out in part I will entitle us to offer a positive answer to this second question and elements of a solution to the first one. The proposed kenotic interface finds in Christ the paradigmatic expression and incarnation of the divine in and through, by means of that which God is not, that is, the human nature. The kenotic approach and perspective also finds in Jesus Christ the affirmation and accomplishment of a divine existence and mission (that is, a mission invested with infinite significance) in and through complete humility, obedience, self-denial and self-surrender. In and with Jesus Christ, God is shown to be powerful in weakness and vulnerability, to effect the redemption of humanity and creation, to bring salvation through, in the midst of suffering and death. Jesus Christ also demonstrated that true freedom and love are embodied and exist in and as subservience and dedication to fulfilling the will of someone else (his Father), on behalf of (humanity) and for someone else (both humanity and his Father in distinct ways). In and through the person of Jesus Christ, the being and life of the triune God are revealed as absolute self-giving, outpouring love going to the extreme limits of abandonment and forsakenness in faithfulness to Godself to reinsert human freedom and existence within the divine being and life and enable humanity to partake in the divine being and life themselves, that is, as absolute mystery.
Jesus Christ’s and the triune God’s kenotic mode of being and of revealing Godself is such that through it, the divine essence and existence are revealed by means of that which seems (to human understanding) to be ontologically opposite to them, are made manifest in their fullness by means of their very negation (absence or privation), and this, precisely when and where the conditions and locus of manifestation do not allow for a manifestation of the divine being and essence in their positivity. Not only can God reveal Godself by means of that which is intrinsically, ontologically inadequate (any creaturely being, attribute or quality), he can also reveal Godself through the negation of creaturely positivity. God can reveal Godself in the very negativity of the negation of creaturely positivity. That is what Jesus Christ paradigmatically accomplished and embodied. On the cross (as the culminating point including the whole of his earthly life and ministry before the resurrection), suffering absolute forsakenness, agony and ultimately death, Jesus historically expressed and accomplished his (incarnate) divinity. In him, with him and through him, human death becomes and brings supernatural (divine) life, human suffering is revealed as a pathway to eternal (divine) life, finite (human) passivity is made the sacrament of infinite (divine) redeeming activity and power.

Jesus Christ empowers his disciples to follow his example, to take their own cross, suffer their own passion and be crucified in him for the glory of God, that is, to manifest God’s presence and channel God’s healing and elevating action in this world, acting as beacons of divine grace to and for others in need, and this, out of pure self-giving love. Granting them with supernatural personal vocation and discipleship, he leads them to reveal the positive by means of the negative, the fullness of being and existence by means of borrowed, received being and existence, offer salvation in the midst of and by means of destruction and perdition, to bring light in the midst of darkness using nothing but darkness. The lives and testimonies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp have shown this to be the case, for these two ordained Christian ministers found and enjoyed freedom in a prison cell and with their hands manacled. They found peace and solace while they were being subject to isolation, interrogations, torture and the destruction of air raids. They were granted with the supernatural assistance and power they needed to offer spiritual comfort to others, to become and produce inspiring testimonies of Christ’s redeeming presence and action in the human heart and soul, and to accept in freedom all the limitations of their imprisoned life and situation, thereby transforming these into a pure offering to God. They were even empowered by God in Christ to turn their humanly planned execution into their ultimate oblation; giving their life in and to Christ, in order precisely to
always and forever bear witness to him, even and especially in death, the definitive and final act of human existence and freedom.

And Jesus Christ accomplished this feat even in the extreme desolation of Auschwitz, choosing to appear and provide there supernatural relief, liberation and empowerment through the most humble and unlikely vessels. At first, it would seem highly inappropriate, impious and even blasphemous for anybody and especially a Christian theologian to claim that God was present and active in Auschwitz, and that he was in the person of particular inmates. The kenotic theological interface presented and articulated in the previous chapter helps us perceive correspondences and draw analogies between the actions, existence and person of particular camp inmates and those of Jesus Christ himself, who in and through the persons of his faithful followers, provides human beings with supernatural assistance, healing and empowerment. But is not the very mention of Christ and of his passion in relation to Auschwitz an insult to the suffering and tragedy of the camp inmates? Does not such a mention constitute or imply a Christianization of an essentially and radically Jewish experience and event which only perpetuates the negation of the dignity and integrity of the Jewish identity perpetrated at Auschwitz? Let us recall a passage from Robert Antelme formulating this difficulty in most striking fashion:

Good Friday. About seven o’clock, back from the factory, a few guys have got together and sat down on the edges of two adjacent beds. Some are believers; some are not. But it’s Good Friday. A man had accepted torture and death. A brother. They talked about him. One guy had managed to get hold of an old bible at Buchenwald. He reads a passage from the Gospel. The story of a man, just a man, the cross for a man, the story of one single man. He is able to speak, and the women who love him are there. He isn’t wearing some costume, he’s handsome, in any case he has healthy flesh on his bones, he doesn’t have lice, he is able to say new things; and, while he’s mocked, at least it’s because people are inclined to look upon him as if he were somebody. A story. A passion. Away in the distance, a cross. A faint cross, very far away. A beautiful story. K. died, and we didn’t recognize him. Guys died saying, “The bastards, the shits ...” The little gypsies at Buchenwald, suffocated like rats. M.-L. A. – dead, the hair cut off her head, a skeleton. All the ashes upon the soil of Auschwitz. The guy’s voice subsides. A faint, slender story, a beautiful, derisory story. Another guy – he’s a non-believer – speaks of this man’s freedom. He had accepted, he says. ... The fine story of a superman, a story buried beneath the tons of ashes from Auschwitz. He was allowed to have a story. He spoke of love, and he was loved. The hair that wiped his feet. The nard. The disciple he loved. The wiped face. ... Here the dead aren’t given to their mothers, the mothers are killed along with them, their bread is eaten, and gold is yanked from their mouths to get more bread. They make soap from their bodies; or they make their skin into lampshades for the SS bitches. No
nail-marks on these lampshades; just artistic tattoos. “Father, why hast thou ...?”  
Screams of suffocating children. Silence of ashes spread across a plain.  

As this magnificently crafted passage attests, are not the life and story of Jesus Christ, in Auschwitz, moreover covered, completely buried under the weight of tons of ashes, those produced with the prisoners’ corpses? Are they not denied, by the very ordeal to which millions of prisoners were and still are subjected, any legitimacy and right to be mentioned and considered relevant? How could Christ’s life, story and person be of any help in Auschwitz? How could a Christian theology of Auschwitz and of the action of grace in Auschwitz ever be respectful of its inherently mysterious character, of its radical rejection of all possible explanations and justifications?

The present investigation certainly does not intend to explain away Auschwitz’ inexplicability. It rather attempts to defend and protect it against all forms of banalization and inscription in, reduction to an object fully accessible to and manageable by human rationality. It is only by holding on to the irreducibly unfathomable, unjustifiable character of the experience of Auschwitz that theologians can remain faithful to it. It is only by means of the careful consideration of this inextinguishable resistance to positive meaning that a relationship to the source of all meaning, God, can be deciphered and articulated. And conversely Auschwitz, as experience and reality, becomes entirely unintelligible and loses its mysterious character if its intrinsic relationship to God is denied, neglected or omitted. Fundamental to Auschwitz is the fact that it cannot exist and be explained or spoken both with and without God. In the already quoted words of Elie Wiesel:

For us, contemporary Jews, one and one are six million. Six million times one is God. For just as one cannot conceive of such slaughter with God, it is inconceivable without Him. This is perhaps the final absurdity of the event: all roads lead to it; but all explanations fail. The agony of the believer equals the bewilderment of the non-believer. If God is an answer, it must be the wrong answer. There is no answer. If with the holocaust God has chosen to question man, man is left to answer with a quest having God as object.

Auschwitz is problematic precisely because there is God and because humanity is constituted in its essence as and by a relationship to God. The question is not whether or not Auschwitz is theological, whether or not Auschwitz can be considered from a theological perspective and standpoint, for Auschwitz intrinsically is a theological experience and reality. The question rather is how can a study of Auschwitz be faithful to this experience and reality when and as it

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attempts to describe and examine it theologically. It is precisely to be faithful to Auschwitz, to gain access to Auschwitz as such and to gain insight into the being, action and revelation of the God of Auschwitz that a kenotic approach and perspective are needed and required. Kenotic theology finds in darkness the locus for and the reality of divine manifestation and revelation themselves.

The reconsideration of paradigmatic cases and examples presented in the second chapter of part I will enable us to provide concreteness to these claims, to flesh them out. Jorge Semprun recalls how it was given to him to perceive the figure of the crucified Christ in the person of a dying prisoner whom he and a friend discovered and saved from certain death in a barrack full of corpses, because the prisoner was continually reciting the prayer for the dead upon himself and the other (already dead) prisoners in the building.

To avoid risking an epidemic, the American military authorities had decided to collect and identify the corpses and then bury them in common graves. Which was why Albert and I were making one final sweep through the Little Camp that day, hoping to find some last survivors too enfeebled to have rejoined, on their own, the communal life of Buchenwald since its liberation. Albert’s face went livid. He strained to hear, and suddenly became frantic, squeezing my arm painfully. “Yiddish!” he shouted. “It’s speaking Yiddish!” So, death spoke Yiddish. Albert was more able than I was to glean this information from the guttural (and to me, meaningless) sounds of that ghostly singing. ... We take a few steps down the center aisle, and stop. We listen hard, trying to determine where the voice is coming from. Albert is panting. “It’s the prayer for the dead,” he whispers. ... Albert rushes over to the bunk where the voice is rattling faintly. Two minutes later, we have extracted from a heap of corpses the dying man through whose mouth death is singing to us. Reciting its prayer to us, actually. We carry the man out in front of the hut, into the April sunshine. We lay him down on a pile of rags that Albert has collected. The man doesn’t open his eyes, but he hasn’t stopped singing, in a rough, barely audible voice. I have never seen a human face that more closely resembled that of the crucified Christ. Not the stern but serene countenance of a Roman Jesus, but the tormented face of a Spanish Gothic Jesus. Of course, Christ on the Cross does not usually intone the Jewish prayer for the dead, but this is a minor detail. There is nothing from a theological point of view, I presume, to prevent Christ from chanting the Kaddish.\footnote{Jorge Semprun, \textit{Literature or Life}, 29-31. [Emphasis, ours]}

This beautiful and profound passage provides Christian theology with an authentic and legitimate point of entry into Auschwitz. The human is here observed as becoming translucent, transparent to the divine. The quintessence and perfection of the revelation and embodiment of the divine by the human, as human and through the human (which in no way entails the reduction of the divine
to the human) for us Christians is found in and identifies with the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ can be perceived present and at work wherever humankind compellingly conveys the divine. No Christianization of Auschwitz is here being accomplished and imposed from without. Using the fundamental Christian belief that in and through the Jewish humanity of Jesus Christ, God fully reveals Godself in history and to humankind, we perceive God at work in and through the Jewish humanity of Auschwitz inmates. The core of Christian belief and life is therefore found embodied in and expressed by the prisoners’ Jewish identity and is in this sense not conceived as distinct from the latter. The experience and event of Auschwitz is Christian because it is Jewish (not the other way around).

From the standpoint of Christians, only in Jesus Christ and empowered by Jesus Christ can and do creatures manifest the divine and channel his redeeming grace. The key point is that in Auschwitz, it is the redeeming presence and action of the crucified Christ which are revealed, and they are revealed in a highly (strictly and suitably) Jewish manner. The God who speaks in Auschwitz, who speaks to Auschwitz is the agonizing Jesus nailed to the cross, whose heart, soul and spirit are deeply tormented. And what is God in Auschwitz, what is the God of Auschwitz saying? He, a Jew, is singing and praying, he is praying to God (his Father) for the dead, for the dead living of Auschwitz with whom he identifies himself (i.e., for and with all those who have crossed the border dividing life from death without hope of a return). Even in the heart of darkness, he remains faithful to God, he praises God and asks for his grace and mercy. His prayer, sung in the low tones and pitches characteristic to and profoundly respectful of the solemnity of death (embodied millions of times), pierces through and reaches out even into the realm of the living (the newly liberated Buchenwald), being offered as an ultimate testimony and witness to the absolute. This is the God who speaks in Auschwitz, and as Semprun himself testifies, who also is heard. For Semprun saw in the person of this dying prisoner from Hungary the very figure – the “incarnation” – of the crucified Christ in Auschwitz. But in Auschwitz the crucified Jesus Christ does not make himself heard by affecting others merely or simply in passive fashion. His prayer and voice also incite, compel and empower those who are called to hear it to actively respond to it, drawing them into action. Semprun and his friend Albert, sent by the authorities of the liberated camp to look for survivors, hear the prayer of the agonizing prisoner and free him, saving his life and bringing him back to the community of the living. In the person of this particular prisoner, Semprun and his friend were empowered by Christ to save
Christ himself. Hence, in Auschwitz Christ can be seen saving himself (which is proper to grace). A fundamental passage from the Gospel of Matthew makes this truth plain (25:34-40):

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

In this passage, Christ is heard saying that all human beings, and especially the less powerful and most vulnerable, are part of his family and insofar as an action is perpetrated for or against any of them, it also is for or against him. Semprun is allowed to perceive the crucified Christ in the prisoner and empowered to help him as he is helping him. The God who speaks in and to Auschwitz is the God who needs assistance and grants others with the power to help him. This God can therefore appear, be manifested wherever there is need for assistance, especially an acute need for supernatural assistance.

But in Auschwitz, the ability to save Christ, that is to follow in his example and footsteps to the point that he entrusts his disciples with the mission to share in his sufferings for humanity and the world, to make himself and his saving grace present and active in the world are granted as the disciples undergo a passion of their own. The testimony of Jacques Lusseyran plainly attests that he, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, had to experience a fundamental spiritual transformation before he could be made the bearer of Christ’s saving presence and action to others. This transformation was itself rendered possible through the sustained experience of intense suffering which led him to meet with death face to face. Through this deeply challenging period of his internment, Lusseyran suffered from multiple serious diseases and spent months in the camp’s infirmary and was led to reconnect with his interiority, to recover his lost sense of inner peace and serenity. Freed from despair and fear, he then began to lead an authentically “human” existence in Buchenwald. As Lusseyran himself puts it, “sickness had rescued me from fear, it had even rescued me from death. Let me say to you simply that without it I never would have survived. From the first moments of sickness I had gone off into

870 All English translations of passages from Scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
another world, quite consciously. I was not delirious. ... I still had the look of tranquility, more so than ever. That was the miracle." Lusseyran ascribes everything, the renewal of his life and strength to God. As he enjoyed them again, in Buchenwald, he could not question his personal helplessness, weakness and inability. Like Bonhoeffer and Delp, Lusseyran is acutely aware of his being assisted by God and this fact fills him with hope and trust necessary not simply to survive, but to enjoy happiness, even in Buchenwald. His only desire was to always respect and follow the lead and will of the divine grace indwelling him.

The Lord took pity on the poor mortal who was so helpless before him. It is true I was quite unable to help myself. All of us are incapable of helping ourselves. Now I knew it, and knew that it was true of the SS among the first. ... There was one thing left which I could do: not refuse God’s help, the breath he was blowing upon me. That was the one battle I had to fight, hard and wonderful all at once: not to let anybody be taken by the fear. For fear kills, and joy maintains life. ... On May 8, I left the hospital on my two feet. I was nothing but skin and bones, but I had recovered. The fact was I was so happy that now Buchenwald seemed to me a place which if not welcome was at least possible. If they didn’t give me any bread to eat, I would feed on hope.

God had freed Lusseyran and turned him into a vessel, a channel for his grace able to help others cope with their own personal ordeal. He would provide them with spiritual advice, comfort and guidance, offered by means of his prophetic voice, itself expressing his supernaturally granted inner happiness, maturity and peace. He would now devote his life to bringing relief to others, never caring for his own preservation. And other inmates would be led to perceive God (Christ) at work in this young blind student, to respect the sanctity (holiness) of his person and mission, and would come to him for assistance. His gift to provide others with spiritual healing in Buchenwald would show able to operate beyond the barrier of language successfully soothing others, independently from where he and they came and whether they were religiously committed or not. In Jacques Lusseyran, the crucified Christ and his grace are revealed and made available to all through the most humble appearance and features of a blind and weak Frenchman who himself needed physical assistance to be able to spiritually assist others.

I was carried by a hand. I was covered by a wing. ... I hardly needed to look out for myself, and such concern would have seemed to me ridiculous. I knew it was dangerous and it was forbidden. I was free now to help the others; not always, not much, but in my own way I could help. I could try to show other people how to go about holding on to life. I could turn toward them the flow of light and joy which had grown so abundant in me. From that time on they stopped stealing my bread.
or my soup. It never happened again. Often my comrades would wake me up in
the night and take me to comfort someone, sometimes a long way off in another
block. Almost everyone forgot I was a student. I became “the blind Frenchman.”
For many, I was just “the man who didn’t die.” Hundreds of people confided in
me. The men were determined to talk to me. They spoke to me in French, in
Russian, in German, in Polish. I did the best I could to understand them all. That
is how I lived, how I survived. The rest I cannot describe.873

The life and testimony of Etty Hillesum embody in magnificent fashion this relentless
quest for God which, not finding him anywhere in Auschwitz, undertakes (always in and from
the power of divine grace) to make him present there as, in and through itself. Undergoing
structural redefinition and reorientation, Etty’s faith leads her to stop looking for God outside of
humanity, outside of Auschwitz, and has her search the human heart and the abysmal darkness of
Auschwitz looking for him instead. In Auschwitz, some prisoners are made custodians and
stewards of God’s action and presence. If it were not for them, Auschwitz would be bereft of
God. Humanity is therefore called, even and especially in Auschwitz, in the midst of the spiritual
desert, to become a living oasis and tabernacle for God.

Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with
burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. ... I shall
try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for
it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot
help us, that we must help you to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage
these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of
you, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to
be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do
I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend
your dwelling place inside us to the last. ... No one is in their clutches [the Nazis’]
who is in your arms. ... You are sure to go through lean times with me now and
then, when my faith weakens a little, but believe me, I shall always labour for you
and remain faithful to you, and I shall never drive you from my presence.874

The Christological aspect or element of this redefined, deepened and more mature faith in God
shows in the actions Etty is then led to take. In a manner analogous to Jesus Christ giving his
whole self and life for the good and sake of humankind on the cross, breaking his body so that all
could share in it for their spiritual nourishment (as is daily remembered and re-enacted in the
Eucharistic liturgy), she forgets herself and breaks her own body, freely offering it for the
nourishment of others. Like Bonhoeffer and Delp, she makes herself fully available to and for
others, guided from within by a divinely induced desire (movement) to heal, soothe and liberate.

873 Ibid., 282-83.
Etty responds to Christ’s summons to share in his Eucharistic redeeming sacrifice and help other prisoners cope with Auschwitz. Becoming in Christ a beacon of his divine light and love there, Etty is summoned to be and act as a sacrament of God (Jesus Christ) in the midst of utter absurdity and darkness. “When I suffer for the vulnerable, is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer? I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long. ... We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”

The true miracle here lies in the fact that some inmates still had the energy and power – were granted with the energy and power – to dedicate and devote their lives to the well-being of others and of God, who in Auschwitz, was most in need.

Other prisoners were empowered by God in and through the crucified Christ to reveal God by means of their unbreakable, indestructible human dignity and purity of heart which in Auschwitz shone as and through their shattered, ruined bodies, clear expressions of sheer holiness. Robert Antelme remembers Jacques who purposefully refused to comply with the ways of Auschwitz. Jacques did not want to survive at all costs and did not yield an inch of his moral and spiritual dignity and integrity and this even when, as a direct consequence of his free decision, he was suffering complete destruction in his body.

Jacques is what in religion they call a saint. ... Were we to go and find an SS and show Jacques to him, to him we could say: “Have a look, you have turned him into this rotten, yellowish creature. You have succeeded in making him what you think he is by nature: waste, offal. Well, we can tell you this, which by all rights would flatten you for good if ‘error’ could kill: you have enabled him to make of himself the strongest, the most complete of men, the surest of his powers, of the resources of his conscience, of the scope of his actions. ... With Jacques, you never won. You wanted him to steal. He didn’t steal. You wanted him to kiss the kapos’ asses in order to eat. He wouldn’t do it. You wanted him to laugh in order to look good when a Meister was beating some guy up. He didn’t laugh. Most of all you wanted him to doubt whether any cause was worth his rotting away like this. He didn’t doubt. You get your rocks off looking at this wasted wreck that stands before you; but you’re the one who’s been had, fucked all the way up and down. ... For it to be shown that we are in the right we no more count on our bodies’ liberation than on their resurrection. It’s now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs.”

By enduring, suffering in his body the entire process of dehumanization taking place in the camps without falling prey to inner corruption and destruction, inmates like Jacques express their humanity to the full extent of its dignity and greatness and this, precisely when their body has

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been broken down, torn apart and ruined. More than that, other prisoners are led to perceive in Jacques what the agnostic Antelme can only characterize as holiness. The nature and purpose of holiness lies in conveying the transcendent, in making the transcendent present in the realm of immanence. In other words, what occurs in and through Jacques’ complete preservation of his dignity in and through the destruction of his physical integrity is the revelation (full disclosure) of humanity (the human nature and person) as openness and relationship to God. And this is accomplished in the most humble vessel: the person of a man who in his previous “normal” existence seemed in no way destined to display and embody such greatness and holiness. If anything, his “normal” life and situation rather seemed to have been intended to conceal his self-sacrificial grandeur. “Jacques is what in religion they call a saint. Nobody back home ever dreamed he could be a saint. They’re not waiting for a saint to return, they’re waiting for Jacques – the son, the fiancé. They’re innocent. If he gets back, they’ll respect him, respect him for what he’s suffered, for what all of us have suffered. They’ll try to recuperate him, to make a husband out of him.” Jacques’ holiness does not presuppose an extraordinary humanity traceable to his former existence (before the camps), only a complete normal humanity. To be able never to lose sight of his personal dignity, of his absolute value precisely in Auschwitz even as he finds himself completely powerless to prevent his physical integrity from being taken away, Jacques must have possessed (have been granted with) an access to the absolute, he must have enjoyed a personal relationship to the absolute empowering him to be and act as he is and does (this does not mean that he had to be an explicit believer, having in mind Rahner’s theology of implicit faith).

Individuals like Jacques provided other inmates with solace, a model to emulate as well as with good reasons to keep believing in and hoping for humankind. Elie Wiesel mentions the even more explicit case of Rabbi Eliahu, a most remarkable religious leader.

The door of the shed opened. An old man appeared. His mustache was covered with ice, his lips were blue. It was Rabbi Eliahu, who had headed a small congregation in Poland. A very kind man, beloved by everyone in the camp, even by the Kapos and the Blockälteste. Despite the ordeals and deprivations, his face continued to radiate his innocence. He was the only rabbi whom nobody ever failed to address as “Rabbi” in Buna. He looked like one of those prophets of old, always in the midst of his people when they needed to be consoled. And, strangely, his words never provoked anyone. They did bring peace.
Rabbi Eliahu displayed such integrity, such purity of heart, such wholeness in his devotion to God that goodness emanated from him, overflowing and spilling over, breaking into the hearts of other human beings who were forced to acknowledge its existence and pay respect to the work effected by God in and through this man. Summoned by such holiness, the other inmates were called to offer no less than a religious response: “Rabbi.” In the manifestation of a goodness passing human history – that is, of supernatural goodness – lies the justification for the use of the word “prophet,” for prophets are messengers conveying the divine word and will (in)to this world. Divine light and truth can provide comfort to the distressed human heart in times of greatest turmoil, by conferring an absolutely unshakeable foundation to the human existence, empowering the latter to survive and overcome all challenges and obstacles and this, even as this human existence can only be expressed in and take the form of a ruined body and physicality.

Some prisoners succeeded not only at preserving their human dignity and integrity, but even at imposing their moral and spiritual superiority to civilians and officers of the Waffen-SS. Emil Künder – a German communist party leader who spent more than a decade of his life in concentration camps – was able to befriend the German civil and military personnel supervising the work of his team of prisoners. Künder’s extraordinary preservation and expression of human dignity both in and for himself and others directly resulted from his free and full acceptation of his condition. Fully assuming the fact that he is a concentration camp inmate, Emil turned the work he was forced to accomplish, the very work which was intended to cause his destruction, into a trustworthy ally helping him to survive and never lose sight of his true human dignity, identity and integrity. David Rousset explains:

> Je compris que c’était précisément cette singulière faculté d’adaptation qui lui avait permis de survivre des années à cet enfer : cette décision prise un jour de vivre dans l’univers concentrationnaire, de briser toutes les rêveries malsaines du passé (sans oublier jamais cependant qu’une lutte continuait dans le monde et qu’elle devait avoir ses échos dans les camps), de s’intéresser enfin aux métiers successifs qu’on lui imposait, et qui devaient à la longue le ruiner physiquement et moralement, pour s’en faire au contraire des alliés. Ce qui avait dû être autrefois délibéré, clairvoyante défense de sa vie, était devenu aujourd’hui réflexe instinctif : d’où une si solide santé.  

Responsibly assuming his personal predicament, not only was Künder able to survive, but also to wield sufficient influence over his surroundings to be able to help others reclaim, retake possession of their own freedom and responsibility. Again proving that genuine freedom can only emerge, be produced and generated by, out of freedom.

Nous étions les premiers à profiter de cette autorité naturelle d’Emil. Il s’imposait aux Meister, aux militaires, comme Kapo : on le laissait organiser, surveiller et diriger notre travail. Il discutait avec les Meister des tâches de la journée, et systématiquement rognait sur leurs prétentions. Il se faisait pour son équipe un avocat habile et écouté. Le plus grand service qu’il nous rendit, c’était de nous imposer aux autres comme des hommes. Ce souci ne l’abandonnait jamais. Les civils et les militaires nous considéraient comme des déchets de bêtes. Nous n’avions à leurs yeux plus rien d’humain. ... La première tâche d’Emil, lorsque nous avions de nouveaux Posten, d’autres Meister, consistait précisément à ruiner cette opinion que nous n’étions socialement rien. Il savait que nul raisonnement ne prévautrait, mais que seul le rappel de titres sociaux reconnus, appréciés dans la hiérarchie ordinaire, pourrait être efficace. Ainsi il nous présentait: - *Der Professor in Paris*. – Arcady, major dans l’armée soviétique. – Nicolaï, *Oberleutnant* et vétérinaire. – Yury, lieutenant. – Robert, boulanger. ... Contraindre nos gardes à nous reclasser socialement, c’était pour Emil le moyen décisif d’obtenir le climat nécessaire pour un compromis dans le travail.880

Hermann Langbein worked for two years as assistant of SS garrison physician Dr. Eduard Wirths in charge of the medical supervision of Auschwitz I, Birkenau, and Buna-Monowitz. The sheer courage, moral integrity and steadfastness Langbein had to display to overcome the immediate threat to his own life and create bonds of friendship with a highly ranked SS officer, to maintain such good relations for years, and to make use of his political influence only to help thousands of other inmates while never losing sight of his own personal identity simply are outstanding. Langbein himself relates:

By strictly adhering to two principles, I endeavoured to make sure that I remained the active partner. As a matter of principle I never used my chances to secure something for myself; in that way I kept from being corrupted, and this impressed Wirths. I discussed every important step with Ernst Burger and later with the leadership of the resistance movement, and this protected me from becoming a privileged tool in the machinery of extermination. A conversation I had with Wirths in the early weeks bears witness to that. In my *Bericht*, I wrote: “Wirths goes up to the desk again and sits down. He gives me a quizzical look: – Langbein, can I rely on you? – Herr Doktor, I shall help you to the best of my ability with anything that is useful for the inmates of this camp. You won’t demand anything else of me. I’d like to leave the camp some day, but in such a way that I don’t have to lose respect for myself.”881

Voluntarily setting himself purely altruistic goals and doing everything in his power to fulfill them, Langbein showed through his exceptional behaviour that even in the midst of the darkness of Auschwitz, human dignity – through self-denial and sacrifice for the common good of the

880 Ibid., 442-43.
inmates – could shine brightly, overpowering destruction and tyranny to the point of erecting itself as moral judge of the behaviour of the jailors themselves. Again in Langbein’s words,

The next time I come to his room alone, he broaches the same subject. – I told Lolling about you, and he told me that it is possible to take inmates who do especially good work into the SS and continue to work in the camp as SS men. – Herr Doktor, if I have to be in a KZ, then only in the uniform I’m wearing now. I do not know if Wirths would have tolerated this answer just a few months ago. Now he just looks at me, and his facial expression is no longer friendly. – But it would be better for you. – Can I do something like that, Herr Doktor? You know the orders an SS man in Auschwitz must carry out. The inmates here are my comrades, even if I no longer wear their uniform tomorrow. He looks through the window into the camp with its motley swarm of striped garments. It is the noonday break. – Your views do you honour. His voice sounds a bit disappointed. He senses that my answer is a judgment.

Like Jacques and Rabbi Eliahu, Emil Künder and Hermann Langbein succeeded in protecting and nurturing their personal identity and integrity in such fashion that the latter radiated outward, having a positive impact on their surroundings. As an inmate, Emil Künder could display more humanity, more freedom and more wisdom in Auschwitz than free and skilled civilians, thereby setting himself as their standard and leading them to acknowledge the members of his inmate working team as persons legitimately belonging to the human community. Hermann Langbein displayed such competence and integrity in his relationship and work with Dr. Wirths that he gained the latter’s trust more than fellow SS officers had managed to do it, that he could explicitly express his views on how he perceived his own function and why he could not join the Waffen-SS. Langbein even surpassed Dr. Wirths, forcing the latter to acknowledge his moral inferiority, an advantage he always used with the benefit of all Auschwitz inmates in view.

Such powerful embodiments of human dignity and integrity cannot be explained merely and only by especially favourable conditions and sets of attributes or skills. Emil Künder and Hermann Langbein gained all their positive influence and power over others by means of a radical acceptance of their condition of inmate, in all its absurdity, hopelessness and limitations. This condition they then transmuted into an instrument and an abode for the expression and manifestation of their fully preserved and active humanity by whose means they then worked at improving their surrounding environment and living conditions for the good of as many inmates as possible. Such feats, especially when they are accomplished in a context such as that prevailing in Auschwitz, are to the eyes of the Christian believer and theologian only made

882 Ibid., 160-61.
possible in and through the enjoyment of an immediate relationship to the absolute, to the transcendent, to God. In a context of systematic denial and destruction of human dignity, identity and integrity Emil Künder and Hermann Langbein – like Jacques Lusseryan, Etty Hillesum, Jacques and Rabbi Eliahu – appear to have been specially assisted by God, to have received his grace to make Christ present in Auschwitz, to bring light into darkness, human dignity and respect in a spiritual desert, ethics and morality into a brutal world. We find further confirmation and proof of these assertions in the newly liberated prisoners’ acute and universal awareness of their personal sanctity. The fullness of their dignity and freedom was then made to appear and made manifest through their ruined bodies which demanded the respect that is due to that which possesses infinite value. But finite beings, more exactly creatures, can only be endowed with infinite value if their being and existence are directly grounded in, opened to and find their ultimate fulfilment in the absolute, in the transcendent itself, for they are or have nothing of their own (remember Thomas Aquinas). Recalling the words of Robert Antelme:

It’s calm in the entryway, where the block leader is sitting at his table, calmly eating. We are out of breath from yelling like angry children to whom nobody is paying attention; yelling that we’re free, free to stay where it’s warm, free to eat indoors. We don’t understand, but they don’t understand either. We cannot stand having anyone lay a hand on us anymore, we feel our persons to be sacred. Free – that means having recovered all our rights, that means being able to say no to everything, or yes to everything, but as it suits us. That means having all at once recovered a power that no one has the right to place curbs upon. But I still have lice and I’m hideous, the other guys too. The picture we present to others makes us appear no different from the day before yesterday. That’s what we’re shouting about: we don’t want to be treated the way we were the day before yesterday; there isn’t any more wreck underneath this wreckage. So ... All right, there are five hundred of us in this block, and there’s got to be a compromise. We have to consent to a minimum of discipline; but the officials now have got to make a greater effort than ever to spare every last one of us any needless suffering – every last one of us, because now the well being of each of us has got to be considered.\textsuperscript{883}

Yet again, we are led to conclude that in Auschwitz, and especially there, the human personal identity, if it was forced, in the persons of the prisoners, to assume expressions, figures and modes of existence which were radically distinct from and opposed to those usually encountered in normal existence and situations, remained in essence the same, that is, it was still embodied and lived as immediate openness and relationship to God. Using theological terms, we

\textsuperscript{883} Robert Antelme, \textit{The Human Race}, 291.
can say that even in Auschwitz, humanity was still defined as prayer. What Filip Müller (member of the Sonderkommando) had to say about praying in Auschwitz must be heard again:

Fischl was our foreman, a thick-set, brawny man. When he had finished his prayers he looked more peaceable. There were tears in his eyes. A little later he said quietly: “Man differs from animals in that he believes in God.” That day his last words before he settled down to sleep, spoken in Yiddish, were: “It’s prayer which makes you a human being. Good night to you, fellow Jews!” ... While he was praying he gave us a signal when it was time for us to rise. Every time he nodded his head after a certain passage, we responded by saying “Amen.” To me it seemed sheer madness to pray in Auschwitz, and absurd to believe in God in this place. In any other situation and in any other place I should not have taken Fischl seriously. But here, on the borderline between life and death, we obediently followed his example, possibly because we had nothing else left or because we felt strengthened by his faith.  

Müller’s testimony has Fischl himself provide the reason explaining why prayer remains meaningful especially in Auschwitz (of all places). The human being is a praying animal. Belief in a transcendent God – the free personal and reverent orientation toward and relationship with the divine – is what sets human beings apart from all other animals. Fischl’s point is that it is precisely when they are forcefully trapped in a place intended to deprive them of their human nature and personal identity that the prisoners must keep on praying. In order not to be completely overtaken and drawn into the dehumanizing machinery perpetually at work in Auschwitz, the prisoners must set their hearts and minds on God. But for this prayer to have been a truly nourishing, actualizing one, it must have been pronounced, spoken by God (in and through his Spirit empowering the human person to pray) and heard, responded to by God. Precisely because, as we have shown, humanity could still be embodied in Auschwitz, we believe that God was also present and found at work there, at least in those persons who were granted with the grace of meeting with the crucified Christ and of sharing in his own sufferings, which he endured, and they through him, for the sake and the good (salvation) of all. And through those persons, he made himself available to all each time in a uniquely embodied, personal way – for holiness always is expressed in inimitable, irreplaceable personal fashion –, offering a glimpse of (dark) light in utter darkness.

884 Filip Müller, Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers, tr. S. Flatauer (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1999), 27-29. [Emphasis, ours]
Conclusion

I die at peace, but not pacified, conquered and beaten but not enslaved, bitter but not disappointed, a believer but not a supplicant, a lover of God but not his blind Amen-sayer. I have followed him, even when he pushed me away. I have obeyed his commandments, even when he scourged me for it. I have loved him, I have been in love with him and remained so, even when he made me lower than the dust, tormented me to death, abandoned me to shame and mockery.  

Zvi Kolitz

The Valley of Death

Let us now gather the results of our investigation. The present investigation of the question of the formulation of a theology of grace fully taking account of the experience and reality of Auschwitz could only begin with our personal immersion into the experience and reality of Auschwitz itself, made accessible to and for us in and through the living persons and testimonies of the survivors. For in a world – the postmodern west – still breathing in air irreversibly contaminated by the toxic fumes coming from the tall chimneys of Nazism, the survivors are and act like prophets standing in and looking at a valley of dry bones, feeling that they themselves have been summoned to bring life into a realm which has become the stronghold of death. It is only through their living testimony and witness that we can recover the fundamental experience which defined our identity and set us in our current condition of a civilisation deprived of all sense of direction and orientation, locked in an empty atomistic self and carrying too heavy a burden of guilt. It is only by entering Auschwitz ourselves that we are able to perceive the true nature of our predicament and foreshadow ways to begin to take responsibility for it. It is also only by going back to Auschwitz, that is, by inscribing the experience and reality of Auschwitz within our own life narratives that we can hope to be able authentically to embody our humanity in the present day and age. The first fourteen verses of the thirty-seventh chapter of the book of Ezekiel thus read:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O, Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry

bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

While originally proclaimed and written to provide the exiled Israelite community (in Babylon) with renewed faith and hope in their return to the promised land, this passage not only reflects the situation of the Auschwitz survivors in the world after Auschwitz, it also faithfully conveys the substance of their condition while they lived there and also provides us with profound insight into how God could be found present and active in such a place. For this passage has the people of Israel say “our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Our research has shown that in Auschwitz the condition of the prisoners was that of persons living far away from themselves, their loved ones and home. Auschwitz imposed itself with such brute force to the prisoners that it became for them the only existing reality, the whole of reality, a self-sufficient perfectly immanent world. Time and space could no longer carry their hearts and minds away and beyond the electrified fences or through the entrance gates, for they had been shrunk to the immediate present and surroundings over which the inmate was forced to keep an ever-watchful eye, always expecting danger and the worse. Life in Auschwitz solely focused on self-preservation and survival. The intensity and omnipresence of the evil, persecution, suffering and immediate threat to their lives they experienced in the camps forever estranged the prisoners from the so-called normal world. Exiled in a reality they cannot trust, knowing that the world and its inhabitants can subject them to a force they cannot oppose, the

886 All English translations of scriptural passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
liberated survivors wander in the world alone, their hearts bereft of hope and permeated with angst. In Auschwitz, the inmates are taught that there is no limit to the evil human beings can inflict to human beings (in their own person or that of others).

This radical sense of homelessness is accompanied with the profound sentiment of being lost, both in the sense that human identity and existence have wandered far and wide, away from what they should be and do, from where they should be and go, but also and more importantly in the sense that they no longer have anywhere to go – for human existence in Auschwitz serves no purpose – and do not even have the possibility to go anywhere – being both powerless before their situation and shameful and guilty for what they have done and become. The widespread moral and spiritual corruption and devastation could not be successfully resisted and opposed; the inmates’ hearts and souls were necessarily contaminated by it in so grave a fashion that the stain and the wound caused by it could no longer, never be washed away. The only way the prisoners could have a better chance at survival (for that is all it was, a chance, no guarantee) passed through acquiescing to the destruction of at least one essential aspect of their persons. The vast majority (the quasi-totality) of the inmates chose – led by their indestructible and undeniable instinct to survive – to sacrifice part or the whole of their moral and spiritual integrity in order to enjoy better living conditions by getting involved (directly or indirectly) in criminal actions or joining in the camp hierarchy who, working for the SS, had to adopt their ways. The basic law of the camps, therefore, was that of the jungle, the struggle for existence which supposes that all individuals are isolated and, guided by a purely selfish desire to persist (in existence), do whatever is necessary to fulfill the latter, their behaviour not being bound by any moral or spiritual norms, principles or laws grounded in the absolute and transcendent. Everything had to and anything could be done in order to survive. Forced to live in such a context for years, the survivors feel compelled – by their recovered “free” selves, by members of their community and by the whole world – to provide an account for their survival, an account exonerating them from their burden of death, their own as well as that of all those who did not come back from the camps.

**Bearing Witness**

Before whom, to whom and of what shall the survivors bear witness? Before and to themselves, first of all. They cannot (no more than any of us can) deny what their experience of the human predicament in Auschwitz has led them to fathom about the human condition. They (like all of us) must acknowledge and responsibly assume the radical and intrinsic brokenness,
the resident evilness, the fundamental, ineradicable and immediate possibility for and actual existence of an evil that springs from within and cannot be healed, repaired and compensated for by human freedom and identity. They must assume responsibility for this absolute possibility and actuality (for Auschwitz embodies the factuality of this possibility having become actuality). This, they can only do absolutely, that is, by setting themselves before the absolute, by understanding themselves as persons immediately in relation with the absolute. The survivors must accept that their condition is that of finite, limited, free agents who are faced with the necessity, the responsibility to fulfill the infinite demands of their humanity in absolute need of assistance and healing. This truth, even their jailers were forced to acknowledge in and through their relentless and constantly renewed attempt at denying their humanity which always remained entirely undeniable even when it had been forced to assume a purely dormant, latent and virtual mode of existence. The Nazis could only eradicate the humanity of a given individual by killing her, proving beyond all doubt that to deny the humanity of any human person did not lay in their power. Robert Antelme states this most powerfully:

Yet there is no ambiguity: we’re still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men. The distance separating us from another species is still intact. It is not historical. It’s an SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species, and as this mutation is occurring too slowly, they kill. ... It’s because we’re men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It’s because they have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they’ll finally be crushed. ... And if, at that moment, we believe that, here, is certainly that which requires the most considerable effort to believe, that “The SS are only men like ourselves”; if, at the moment when the subjugation of some and the power of others have attained such limits as to seem frozen into some supernatural distinction; if, facing nature, or facing death, we can perceive no substantial difference between the SS and ourselves, then we have to say that there is only one human race. ... The worst of victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner’s power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can’t change him into something else.887

Like the dry bones in the valley of death, the personal identity and existence of the prisoners have taken the mode of an infinite cry, of a cry to the infinite, expressed in and through the muteness and silence of voiceless resistance and revolt, of a cry to which the infinite alone can respond. The evil experienced at Auschwitz directly invokes, questions God. From the perspective of the millions of Jewish victims, Auschwitz has everything to do with God’s concern for and involvement in human history and that is why Auschwitz is a mystery. The

problem Jewish survivors and their descendants are confronted with is therefore not that of God’s existence – never in doubt – but of God’s purpose and involvement (or non-involvement) in and with Auschwitz (as emphatic expression of both history and the human condition today).

Our research showed that there are good grounds for asserting that God did in fact get involved in and with Auschwitz, albeit in a highly peculiar, should we say “adapted” way. The problem the prisoners were confronted with was the necessity to face the infinite demands of their human condition in a context where humanity, God and his supernatural assistance were nowhere to be found or – more exactly – where humanity, God and his grace did not appear or were no longer made manifest. Being human in Auschwitz required the dual ability to extract oneself from it – that is, to be able to conceive of and embody human identity and life in the fullness of their integrity in a context designed to negate and annihilate them – and to limit the locus of consideration and expression of these human identity and life strictly to the reality of the camp, to prevent oneself from investing one’s hope in a life outside Auschwitz. Being human in Auschwitz entailed finding oneself relentlessly subjected to the extreme tension generated by the absolute need to transcend one’s own condition of prisoner in order precisely to be able to act humanly – with dignity and integrity – in such a place, and with only a ruined body (physical condition) as instrument and means to do so.

Being human in Auschwitz was a most demanding moral and spiritual challenge leading the person entirely to let go of her own life, freedom and happiness outside the camp – keeping them always present in the mode and as the result of a constantly renewed personal sacrifice – and dedicate herself solely to humanity as it existed and could be related to in the horrendous present. The intense feelings of guilt and shame described by the survivors testify that such duty and task were, in essence, superhuman; they lied beyond what strictly human capacities and powers could muster and do. The miracle is that in Auschwitz not only did some prisoners keep their dignity and integrity intact; they also dedicated themselves to bringing assistance, life and light to other inmates. They succeeded at imposing their humanity even to their jailors, their dignity and integrity overflowing, reaching out to other inmates, civilians and the authorities of the camps compelling the latter to acknowledge their sharing of a common human condition with the inmates. Some prisoners showed themselves able to re-humanize, to humanize Auschwitz anew, thereby opening it again to the transcendent, enabling it to become a place where God can live, dwell and act in a way that significantly affects the human condition.
A God for Auschwitz

Our kenotic transposition of the western doctrine of grace enabled us to decipher and perceive that made – or better, perhaps, remade – in the image and likeness of the crucified Christ, these prisoners were empowered in, by and from the latter’s resurrection to make Christ and his saving power abide even in Auschwitz. Let us hear the Apostle Paul’s fundamental exposition of the mystery of Christ found in Philippians 2:6-11:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus Christ expressed his divine nature, personhood and glory in and through infinite humility, by assuming to the full the human condition, thereby actualizing and fulfilling the latter by means of its sacrifice – that is, its complete and rightful ordinance to God – to and for God and all human beings. The crucified Christ perfectly embodies the divine who, as the Son of God having received the fullness of the Father’s divinity, freely lets go of all exercise of power as his, assumes sheer dependence and non-being (that is, the human condition) estranged both from itself and from God in the no man’s land of empty and pretentious self-sufficiency (auto-immanence). Guided and empowered in and by an indefectible love, a supernatural love – the Holy Spirit himself – Jesus entered and experienced the dark of human existence, remaining faithful to himself and to God to the end, an end he could only perceive and experience as complete human defeat, as the asymptotic expression of forsakenness.

This perfect ordination of the human person to God, accomplished in and through the experience of the complete occlusion of the divine itself and of the action of his grace, incarnates, consecrates and consummates exactly and precisely at this moment – in the unique mediator’s agony on the cross – the complete victory of God. It is in suffering, vulnerability, weakness and death, it is through humility, obedience and surrender that humanity can find salvation and fulfilment. Again following the teaching of the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 8:9): “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” God, in the person of Christ, offers assistance having fully shared in and successfully passed the test of the human
predicament. Speaking of Christ, the Letter to the Hebrews (2:17-18) teaches: “Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” Salvation is in Christ offered in and through obedience learned in suffering. Hebrews 5:8-10 reads: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Mekchizedek.”

Having suffered the absolute humiliation of the cross, a humiliation only he – the personal embodiment of the perfect union of the human and the divine – could faithfully undergo, Jesus Christ entitles others – the whole of humankind – to learn obedience in and through (his) suffering. Hebrews 12:2 enjoins us to look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Being rich, for human beings, therefore means being allowed and empowered to share in the sufferings, vulnerability, weakness and also the death of Christ both in the sense of receiving in and from them the supernatural assistance they need for their humanity to truly become incarnate and in the further sense of participating in the saving work of Christ for humankind here and now, in their own lives. By suffering their own passion and crucifixion, grounded (made possible) and situated (defined and oriented) in Christ’s, the disciples turn their whole persons into effective and efficient living prayers to God, prayers pronounced and answered by God in and through, by means of their humanity.

**Auschwitz: Fleshed Out and Inbreathed**

In Auschwitz, God made Godself present in and through those prisoners who, in the midst of utter destruction and persecution, sacrificed their own humanity in order precisely to express it, to make it shine, becoming beacons – models and paradigms – in whom others could find relief and solace, recover their own selves and perhaps even attempt to act as bearers of hope in their own turn. In and through these prisoners, in and through their humanity, the crucified Christ was made present and his salvation available to others. In Auschwitz, God was heard speaking the language of the camps, the so-called Lager language, to convey and provide, by means of words originally intended (by the Nazis) to negate both humanity and divinity, that which is most important to human identity: access to the transcendent, access to the living God.
God accomplished this most extraordinary feat by allowing (i.e. by empowering in and through his own saving action and person) at least some of the prisoners to bear authentic witness to their humanity in and through their systematically persecuted and ruined persons. The very action and being (existence) of these supernaturally gifted prisoners bear witness to him who accomplished in his person the perfect union of humanity and divinity, who expressed in and through his humanity, the fullness of his divinity, who saved and perfected humanity. God came into Auschwitz not to rationally explain and justify it, but – like a physician attending the victims of a plague epidemic – to provide healing and hope in the form of utmost humility, for “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.” Christ is such a priest who has personal acquaintance with and directly shares in the sufferings of those (humanity) entrusted to and under his care; he offers relief and solace, however, springing from and leading to (his) divine life itself.

And that is precisely how God also is shown to act in the passage from the Book of Ezekiel with whose quotation these concluding remarks began. God provides flesh and breath to a valley, a community of bones by means of a prophet who belongs, is part of this community. God brings the entire people of Israel back to life with the help of, through a person he previously raised from the dead. But prophets never speak on their own, they speak authoritatively to the people only because through them God’s word and will are expressed. So in Auschwitz God spoke to Jewish people experiencing hell on earth in and through the person of all the inmates granted in Jesus Christ with the power to preserve their humanity, in whole or in part, whereby God flesheed out and infused breath into the dry bones of his people.

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