Theology after Auschwitz. A Provisional Program

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Theology after Auschwitz

A Provisional Program

By Franz Mussner

I 'Theology after Auschwitz'[1]

Theology *after* Auschwitz cannot be identical with theology *before* Auschwitz. Theology after Auschwitz takes appalled cognizance of the terrible events of the *Shoah.* J. B. Metz states:[2] "After all, one does not say that for Christians there are no other experiences of God than those of Auschwitz. Certainly! But if for us there is no God in Auschwitz, then where else shall we find him?" For Metz, therefore, the question is "if we Christians are prepared to grasp and bear in mind the catastrophe of Auschwitz and to accept it seriously as a challenge, as we are frequently called upon to do – and, of course, not only in respect of our German history and our German awareness of history, but also in respect of our Christianity and our Christian view of God, i.e., our theology. Furthermore, Fr.-W. Marquardt writes:[3] "The existence of the Jewish witness to God is essential to Christian faith, if it is to proclaim the living God. And if after Auschwitz there is to be a task for theology at all, then it is to consider what we lack in God if we have lost Israel . . . An imperious cry of 'Auschwitz never again' poses a particular understanding of history. It does not permit a flight from history into what is essentially a misrepresentation of the historical facts of the faith, as is often represented in the name of Christ."

What follows now, divided into 'Exegesis after Auschwitz' and 'Systematology after Auschwitz,' is the presentation of a program (if by no means exhaustive) which deals with those topics that need to be discussed in a 'theology after Auschwitz.'

II Exegesis after Auschwitz

1. 'Theology after Auschwitz' needs to be developed not only as regards systematology but also as regards exegesis. This becomes ever more apparent to the teacher of the New Testament in the course of his lengthy study. He assuredly knows that *vis-à-vis* the demand for an 'Exegesis after Auschwitz' differing from that of before Auschwitz, there are considerable reservations.[4] I am by no means forgetting that exegesis – in the fine words of J. Jeremias – is a 'matter of obedience,' i.e., in relation to the biblical text. We

are now especially concerned with the New Testament. [5]

2. For the interpreter of the New Testament there long existed the tendency to place the profile of the Christian as portrayed in the New Testament in opposition to Judaism. In particular, an almost indispensable support in this was (and often still is) the multi-volume work of H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash* (Munich, 1922 onwards), which again and again tempts the commentator to fall into Christian self-righteousness, through the evolving of the concept of an enemy (Talmud Jew), through complete lack of understanding of the Halakhah and its casuistical rulings (accusations of ethical 'Formalism'); Judaism as religion of 'performance and deserts'[6] and through lack of understanding of Jewish self-perception. That led to the accusation of 'murderers of God.' At the same time, in the quest for rabbinical 'parallels' or 'counter-parallels,' there were frequent errors in methodology which were not taken into account chronologically. What in the Mishnah and Talmud is a matter for rabbinical teaching and ruling was postulated as 'typically Jewish' even for the time of Jesus. [7]
3. 'Exegesis after Auschwitz' requires a critical revision of the 'Pharisee image' of the Gospels,[8] of the generalized concept of 'the Jews' in St. John's Gospel[9] and attention to the hostility of the Pauline teaching of vindication,[10] to cite only the most important examples of where vent is given to theological antisemitism.
4. 'Exegesis after Auschwitz' needs constantly to make the Christian realize that God, despite their 'obduracy' in relation to Jesus and the Gospels, has not repudiated his people Israel. Rather, in the end, "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11:26).[11] The riddle of the 'obduracy' of Israel reveals that it is according to God's will that the Jews *post Christum* must submit as the lasting witness to the tangibility of the doctrine of salvation, as the lasting 'root' of the Church and its God-willed companion throughout history to the end of time, as the living witness to the unfathomable ways of God, as the ultimate and eschatological witness to the predominance of mercy.[12] Bertold Klappert writes,[13] "The fundamental dependence of the Christian church and theology on Judaism after Auschwitz is based on Judaism

as witness to the remembrance,

as witness to the Messianic expectation,

as witness of God and the experience of God in and after Auschwitz,

as witness of the one people of God and

as witness of the universal service to suffering humanity in the Messianic perspective of a righteous world society."

III Systematology after Auschwitz[14]

1. Anthropology

After Auschwitz it is difficult to find a place for a joyful and optimistic anthropology. The 'image of God' was in those oppressed and murdered in the concentration camps profaned as seldom

before. The potential for evil in mankind was revealed in a terrifying manner.[15] The monstrous 'SS potential' in humanity was made manifest. The 'Hitler' in all us (M. Picard) came to light.

2. Historical philosophy and historical theology

Auschwitz has shown conclusively that history is not simply a history of freedom, as understood by Hegel and Karl Marx,[16] but rather also a history of bondage. History is not predictable. Hegel and Marx were mistaken in believing that ultimately history follows a logical course. The course of history is not as envisaged by Communism. Its world-wide collapse, which we have witnessed, allows mankind to perceive this, if it wishes to do so. Hegel believed he could reduce to a formula the logic which, in his opinion, influenced the course of history and he tried to verify his accepted logic of history factually. In the course of this, the Jew stood in the way. Admittedly, he tried to classify Judaism in the process of the history of liberation as he saw it – as a step in the law which would be replaced by the step of freedom to which Christ has liberated us (Gal. 5:10). Nevertheless, he spoke of the 'dark mystery of Israel,' since he evidently felt that the very existence of the Jews destroyed the logic of history as he understood it. The special existence of the Jews rendered impossible the view of precise laws of logic in the progress of history. The 'logic' of God in the guidance of his people Israel is not rationally accessible to us; this was known to the Apostle Paul (cf. Rom. 11:33-35).[17]

3. The question of God

If the 'question of God' is connected with what has just been said, so it is intensified through Auschwitz with the question, 'How could God (the God of Israel) permit anything so terrible as the *Shoah*?' the God who is proclaimed in the Bible as the benevolent. "Our very belief in the benevolence of God is refuted by the victims of Auschwitz" (Fr.-W. Marquardt).[18] "Auschwitz is after the Crucifixion most akin to the sufferings of job" (B. Kappert).[19] Klappert, too, recounts[20] what has already been reported by Elie Wiesel, "The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth before the assembled camp. The men died quickly, the death throes of the youth lasted half-an-hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" demanded someone behind me. When, after a long time, the youth was still suffering on the rope, I heard the man ask again, "Where is God now?" and I heard a voice within me answer, "Where is he? He is here – He is hanging there on the gallows..."

Marc Chagall, as is well known, has in his pictures of Christ interpreted the crucified Christ as the oppressed Jew – the Crucified One wears a prayer-shawl as a loin-cloth.[21] Even in the magnificent painting of Paradise there appears a vision of the Cross and Christ Crucified (in the Chagall Museum in Nice).[22] The meaning of the *Shoah* is unfathomable, but it shows us conclusively that God is the 'hidden' God (cf. Isaiah 45: 15), who does not reveal himself, whose judgments are 'unsearchable' and 'ways past tracing out,' whose 'counsellor' was no mortal. Thus writes Paul in Romans 11:33-34 with regard to the strange ways of God towards his people Israel. In Auschwitz this was confirmed in the most dreadful way. Now we know God is not a 'kindly old uncle' (S. Kierkegaard). God is not to be reduced to a smooth formula, he is not to be defined. The preconceived concepts of God are denied. There remains only the adoration of the absolute mystery.

4. Christology

It is above all Fr.-W. Marquardt who has ventured to write a 'Christology after Auschwitz.'[23] That Jesus was a Jew is generally known, but this knowledge which was for a long time not accepted as a self-evident truth, is still far from producing a 'Christology after Auschwitz.' What needs to be discussed? Principally the following themes:

The origin of Jesus

Jesus as a Jew among Jews

The claim of Jesus[24]

Old Testament guidelines to Christology[25]

Jesus as Israel[26]

Israel as 'formal Christology'[27]

Jesus as the "Christ appointed for you" (the Jews) (Acts 3:20ff.)

The eternal Jew Jesus at the right hand of the Father

Did Jesus bring something new into the world?[28]

5. Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology within a 'theology after Auschwitz' must ultimately accept that according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul the Church is "partaker of the root of the fatness of the olive tree" (cf. Rom. 11:17),[29] which is why the 'participation-model' seems to be the only true way of determining the relationship Church/Israel.[30] If the Church recalls that it is from the grace of God alone that she partakes of the "root of the fatness of the olive tree," which is Israel, then she will in the end pay heed to the two admonitions of the Apostle, "glory not over the branches!" (Rom. 11:18) and, "be not highminded (towards the 'obdurate' Jews), but fear!" (Rom. 11:20). "If a man would become a Christian, so God calls upon him to live in communion with the Jews" (Fr.-W. Marquardt).[31]

IV A thesis

It runs: without the construction of a 'theology after Auschwitz' there is no genuine dismantling of Christian antisemitism.

V Psalm 44:1-26

Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat and hast scattered us among the nations.

Thou sellest thy people for nought and hast not increased thy wealth by their price.

Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us.

Thou makest us a byword among the nations, a shaking of the head among the peoples.

All the day long is my dishonour before me, and the shame of my face hath covered me,

For the voice of him that reproacheth and blasphemeth; by reason of the enemy and the avenger.

All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant.

Our heart is not turned back, neither have our steps declined from thy way; That thou hast sore broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death.

If we have forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god;

Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart. Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.

Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? arise, cast us not off for ever.

Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?

For our soul is bowed down to the dust: our belly cleaveth unto the earth.

Rise up for our help, and redeem us for thy loving kindness' sake.

Finally, the terrible events of the *Shoah* cannot be comprehended without taking into account the 'for thy sake' of the Psalm. And that means: by God's will! The six million Jews who perished in the places of the *Shoah,* as in Auschwitz, were "for thy sake ... killed all the day long" and "counted as sheep for the slaughter." If the Jews were not God's chosen people, then they would not be those unique people who are out of place among the Goyim, and for which the Gentiles cannot forgive them. Herein, up to the present day, lie the true roots of antisemitism. If anything can be said for the 'meaning' of the *Shoah,* then only this "for thy sake." "Suffering befalls the community because it belongs to God."[32] And "Here the *signa crucis* already lie upon God's people of the Old Testament."[33] But the Cross rises in the dark mystery of the deity; its mystery is inexplicable, even in a theology after Auschwitz.

Notes

1. *Holocaust,* in J. J. Petuchowski/C. Thoma, *Lexikon der christlich-jüdischen Begegnung* (Freiburg 1989). R Rosenstiel and Schl. Shoham, *Der Sieg des Opfers,* German ed.

(Stuttgart 1980) and *Das Judentum – eine Wurzel des Christlichen. Neue Perspektiven des Miteinanders,* edited by B. Nacke and H. Flothkotter (with a postscript by F. Mussner) (Wurzburg, 1990).

2. In his contribution, 'Gotteslehren für uns alle' (God's teaching for us all), in the anthology edited by Nacke and Flothkoter.
3. *Von Elend und Heimsucbung der Theologie*, 145.
4. Cf. E. Grässer, 'Exegese nach Auschwitz? Kritische Anmerkungen zur hermeneutischen Bedeutung des Holocaust am Beispiel Hebr. 11', *Kerygma und Dogma* 27 (1981), 125-63 (Discussion with B. Klappert); reprinted in *Der Alte Bund im Neuen. Exegetische Studien zur Israelfrage im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen 1985), 259-70. Criticism of Grässer: K. Haacker, 'Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief und die hermeneutische Bedeutung des Holocaust. Bemerkungen zu einer aktuellen Kontroverse', ThZ 39 (1983), 152-65 (brief refutation of this criticism by Grässer loc. cit. 270 ('postscript')).
5. For the Old Testament, cf R. Rendtorff, 'Die Hebräische Bibel als Grundlage christlichtheologischer Aussagen über das Judentum', in M. Stöhr, Jüdische *Existenz und die Erneuerung der christlichen Theologie,* 32-47; E. Zenger 'Die jüdische Bibel –unaufgebbare Grundlage der Kirche', in Nacke and Flothkötter, *op cit.,* 57-85.
6. The best I have ever read about the Halakhah and the preeminence of 'performance' was in Fr.-W. Marquardt's *Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie,* 182- 90: 'The interpretation of the Halakha safeguards their claim to the present-day of the old biblical texts'; 202, 'In the meaning of the Halakha the question of fulfilment takes precedence over the question of interpretation'; 204, ' . . . In the performance of God's Will the nerve of historical reality is to be sought . . . ', exactly as with Jesus.
7. K. Müller treats this methodological error in Christian exegesis; cf. K. Müller, Zur Datierung rabbinisher Aussagen, in H. Merklein (ed.), *Neues Testament und Ethik* (Festschrift für Rudolf Schnackenburg) (Freiburg 1989), 551-87. Also F. Mussner ' 'Methodisches Vorgehen beim "religionsgeschichtlichen Vergleich" mit dem antiken Judentum', BZ 34 *(1990),* 246ff.
8. Cf. F. Mussner, *Traktat über die Juden* (Munich, 1988), 253-81 (with bibliography);. *Die Kraft der Wurzel. Judentum-Jesus-Kirche* (Freiburg 1989), 21ff.; J. Neusner, *Das pharisäische und talmudische Judentum. Neue Wege zu seinem Verständnis* (Tübingen 1984), 41-111.
9. Cf. F. Mussner, *Traktat über die Juden*, 281-93; also W. Trilling, 'Gegner Jesu – Widersacher der Gemeinde – Repräsentanten der Welt. Das Johannesevangelium und die Juden', in H. Goldstein (ed.), *Gottesverächter und Menschenfeinde? Juden zwischen Jesus und frühchristlicher Kirche* (Düsseldorf 1979), 190-210; U. C. von Wahlde, 'The Johannine "Jews". A critical survey', *NTSt* 28 (1982), 33-60.
10. See also F. Mussner, 'Theologische "Wiedergutmachung" am Beispiel der Auslegung des Galaterbriefs', *Die Kraft der Wurzel*, 55-64.
11. Compare also F. Mussner 'Israels "Verstockung" und Rettung nach Röm 9-11', *Die Kraft der Wurzel*, 39-54 (with comprehensive bibliography).
12. See also F. Mussner, 'Warum muß es den Juden post Christum noch geben? Reflexionen im Anschluss an Röm 9-11', in K. Kertelge *et al, Christus Bezeugen* (Festschrift für Wolfgang Trilling (Leipzig *1989), 67-73.*
13. 'Die Juden in einer christlichen Theologie nach Auschwitz', in G. B. Ginzel (ed.), *Auschwitz als Herausforderung für Juden und Christen*, 481-512 (511).
14. Compare also C. Thoma, 'Theologie ohne Judenfeindschaft, Eine Problemanzeige für die Systematische Theologie', in M. Stöhr (ed.), *Jüdische Existenz und die Erneuerung der christlichen Theologie,* 13-31. Not forgetting H.-J. Kraus, *Reich Gottes – Reich der Freiheit. Grundriss systematischer Theologie* (Neukirchen-Bluyn 1975).
15. Compare also H. Askenasy, *Sind wir alle Nazis? Zum Potential der Unmenschlichkeit* (Frankfurt/M. 1979).
16. Compare also F. Mussner, 'Freiheit nach Hegel, Marx und Paulus', in *Die Kraft der Wurzel*, 172-90.

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17. See also F. Mussner, 'Die "Logik" Gottes nach Röm 9-11', in ibid., *Dieses Geschlecht uird nicht vergehen* (Freiburg 1991).
18. In Fr.-W. Marquardt/A. Friedlander, *Das Schweigen der Christen und die Menschlichkeit Gottes. Gläubige Existenz nach Auschwitz* (München 1980), 33.
19. 'Die Juden in einer christlichen Theologie nach Auschwitz' (see note 13), 505.
20. Op. cit., 501.
21. Compare also H.-M. Rotermund, *Marc Chagall und die Bibel* (Lahr 1970),111-38.
22. See also F. Mussner, *Traktat über die Juden,* 76ff.
23. *Das christlicbe Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden. Eine Christologie,* 2 vols. (Munich 1990). Compare also B. McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz* (New York 1977); G. Lindeskog, *Die Jesusfrage im neuzeitlichen Judentum. Ein Beitra tear Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forscbung* (Nachdruck Darmstadt 1973); W. Vogler, Jüdische Jesusinterpretationen in christlicher Sicht (Weimar 1988).
24. See also F. Mussner, *Die Kraft der Wurzel,* 104-24.
25. Compare also H.-J. Kraus, 'Aspekte der Christologie im Kontext alttestamentlich-jüdischer Tradition', in E. Brocke/G. Seim (eds.), *Gottes Augapfel. Beiträge zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1986), 1-23; F. Mussner, 'Ursprünge und Entfaltung der neutestamentlichen Sohneschristologie. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion', in L. Scheffczyk (ed.), *Grundfragen der Christologie heute* (QD 72) (Freiburg 1978), 77-113.
26. Compare also F. Mussner, *Traktat über die Juden,* 208-11.
27. Compare Fr.-W. Marquardt, *Das christlicbe Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden,* Band 2, §7.
28. In this connection compare F. Mussner, *Die Kraft der Wurzel,* 140-50.
29. See also F. Mussner, *Die Kraft der Wurzel,* 153-9.
30. See also B. Klappert, *Israel und die Kirche. Erwägungen zur Israellehre Karl Barths* (Munich 1980), 14-37.
31. *Von Elend und Heimsucbung der Theologie,* 374.
32. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen 1961), 328.
33. Ibid., 329.

This article was developed from a brief paper 'What is Theology after Auschwitz?' which dealt primarily with the religious and secular basis of antisemitism in the past 1900 years and its relationship to the Shoah. The paper was read at the conference of the International Catholic Jewish Liaison Committee in Prague, 3-6 September 1990. © Copyright 1990.