Elie Wiesel as Theologian

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Please let me begin by commenting on what Jean Duchesne has just quoted from Cardinal Aron Jean-Marie Lustiger. Lustiger held that there are not simply Jews on the one hand, and Christians on the other; there are also baptized Jews. But where does that leave Christians who were born of a Jewish mother, or father, and who turn their backs to Jesus and become Jewish? That was the choice I made. It is as Jew who once was Catholic that I address you today.

Elie Wiesel's relationship to Christianity and Christians was at once intense and often painful. How could it have been otherwise? His childhood and adolescence were spent in a shtetl where there were surely more synagogues than Orthodox and Catholic churches combined, since every Jewish group, every yeshiva, had its own synagogue. In the Eastern Europe, relations between Jews and Christians were largely characterized by hostility on one side and fear on the other, though personal dealings could modify that centuries-old negative, and sometimes tragic, situation. However, the dominant feature was ignorance of the Other, what Jules Isaac called the Christian "teaching of contempt."[1] The response was fear and mistrust on the part of the Jews. Eliezer Wiesel knew as a child that he had to cross the street when coming upon a church, because the shtetl was rife with rumors about the kidnaping of Jewish children.

Nonetheless, Eliezer developed some positive ideas about Christians during the war, after the spring 1944 arrival of the Nazis in Hungary and, more specifically, the Carpathians. The Orthodox Christian Maria, who worked in the Wiesel household as a maid, offered to hide Eliezer and his sisters in her home. Their parents refused the offer, preferring that the family stay united as they moved into the ghetto and witnessed the first transports toward a destination unknown. How many hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents lost their lives because of the naïve notion that relatives should remain together? Thereafter, Eliezer came across Christian fellow-prisoners, if probably not at Birkenau, then certainly at Buna and Buchenwald, but he never spoke of them. Jews were the most isolated of all, segregated into their own barracks and work details. Yet communists at the last camp saved him, along with other Jewish youths who had been in the barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Having escaped the Nazi hell, Eliezer was surrounded exclusively by Jews in the colonies set up in France by the OSE.[2] Only when he left those enclaves to pursue higher education did Wiesel perforce meet Christians, though he does not refer to them in his writings. His first encounter with a militant Christian—if we may put it in those terms—took place in 1955, when he went to see writer François Mauriac (1885-1970). Even his first publishers were Jewish. His earliest mentor in the fields of philosophy and French literature was François Wahl, a de Judaized Jew. He introduced Wiesel to Christian or Christian-derived thought, for example in the work of Montaigne or in the French theater of the seventeenth century.

The encounter with Mauriac was something radically new for our evolving writer, who had until then published only journalism in Yiddish and Hebrew and was soon to start composing *…Un di velt hot geshvign* […And the World Remained Silent], the original Yiddish version of *La Nuit* [*Night*]. Mauriac—winner of the Nobel prize for literature and member of the French Academy—was the very personification of the Catholic strain in French literature ever since the death of Georges Bernanos. Mauriac ushered the young stateless Jew, a correspondent for the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*,

into the world of literary greats. This was something of which Eliezer, now Élie, had always dreamt, perhaps unbeknownst even to himself. The child from Sighet had been captivated by mystical Judaism. All his life he would consider himself an adept of the rabbi Wishnitz, a friend of his grandfather Dodi Feig. Now, he had started what would be a long dialogue with Christianity via Mauriac, who aided in the publication of *Night*, his first French book on his experiences during the Shoah.

At first glance, everything stood between the French Catholic writer and the young Jewish journalist from the Carpathians. Their respective traditions and, more specifically, their inner spiritual conflicts were at odds. The first night Wiesel spent at Auschwitz had ripped asunder his soul, his faith, his consciousness of the world. Mauriac also knew struggle within his soul, but his was a Christian, mystical struggle. But what stiffened Wiesel's attitude was how Mauriac related the Holocaust to Jesus suffering on the Cross. This Christian interpretation was made even more problematic by Mauriac's wish to see Wiesel as a kind of incarnation of the Shoah. The Catholic writer considered Wiesel's survival a near-resurrection; he was a modern-day Christ. For Mauriac, Wiesel was a Jewish mystic who had a most singular knowledge of Christ, whom he pictures wearing phylacteries, as Chagall saw him, a son of the synagogue, a pious Jew submitting to the Law, and who did not die, "because being human he was made God." Élie Wiesel stands on the borders of the two testaments: he is of the race of John the Baptist.[3]

The only problem is that the main party involved never saw himself as belonging to "the race of John the Baptist," or as musing over Jesus who did not die "because being human he was made God." In one of my conversations with Wiesel, he said that despite all the friendship and gratitude he bore toward Mauriac, "I respect Christians who are attached to the New Testament, provided that they respect my attachment to our Bible, to the *Tanakh*."[4}

Theological differences between the two men were no doubt too great; Mauriac could not grasp wholly where Wiesel was coming from and who he truly was. Nonetheless, he understood *Night* as few others have, thanks to his own faith. He tirelessly supported the book's publication. Why he did so entails comprehending the agonic nature of Mauriac's faith, similar to that described by Miguel de Unamuno in *The Agony of Christianity*.

Wiesel was grateful to Mauriac not only for his help in helping *Night* appear, as important as that was. We see this in what he says about Mauriac in *A Jew Today*:

He knew that my story would wound him, that it would offend some of his dogmas and reopen them to question; he simply had to realize that. Yet he did not hesitate. On the contrary, he urged me to write, in a display of trust that may have been meant to prove that it is sometimes given to men with nothing in common, not even suffering, to transcend themselves…

I shall never forget that first meeting.[5]

Mauriac was wounded by Wiesel's agony that threw into question the mystical faith the boy had held before that first night at Auschwitz. The French writer would feel injured by our accusation of God, whom we call *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* [the Holy One, Blessed Be He]. He would feel wounded by the death, even the suicide, of God in the gas chambers—as Levinas puts it so clearly, as Paul Celan screams out in all his poetry. One stands "before a God who breaks the Covenant," as the philosopher so tragically wrote in 1986, and there is no way we can respond when he goes onto say, "as if He had abandoned you."[6] Words so fateful, fearful, allowing no answer, admitting no contradiction.

Indeed, we have to go back to Mauriac's preface to *Night* to understand how wrenching it was for Mauriac to read Wiesel's manuscript:

The child who tells us his story here was one of God's chosen. From the time he began to think, he lived only for God, studying the Talmud, eager to be initiated into the Kabbalah, wholly dedicated to the Almighty. Have we ever considered the consequence of a less visible, less striking abomination, yet the worst of all, for those of who have faith: the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly faces absolute evil?[7]

Let us pause for an instant here. Is not Mauriac saying something incredible: that the worst horror was not the extermination of an entire people, not the Shoah itself, but rather the "death of God in the soul of a child"?

Thereupon Mauriac quotes the emblematic passage on the first night Wiesel spent in the camp—"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed"—and then adds:

It was then that I understood what had first appealed to me about this young Jew: the gaze of a Lazarus risen from the dead yet still held captive in the somber regions into which he had strayed, stumbling over desecrated corpses. For him, Nietzsche's cry articulated an almost physical reality: God is dead, the God of love, of gentleness and consolation, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had, under the watchful gaze of this child, vanished forever into the smoke of the human holocaust demanded by the Race, the most voracious of all idols.

And how many devout Jews endured such a death? On that most horrible day, even among all those other bad days, when the child witnessed the hanging (yes!) of another child who, he tells us, had the face, of a sad angel, he heard someone behind him groan:

"For God's sake, where is God?"

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

"Where He is? This is where—hanging from this gallows."[8]

Cardinal Lustiger, too, has spoken of this scene. However, I am quite sure that the theologian who discussed it best was the German Johann Baptist Metz, born the same year as Wiesel:

Who has the right to offer the answer given here to the question of God, of where is God?: "This is where—hanging from this gallows?"

If such an answer is possible, who can give it? I think the only one with the right to say it is the Jew threatened, along with all children, with death at Auschwitz. He is the only one… No one may even begin to answer thus, if it is at all possible to do so, except for the Jew… who finds himself in that hell, where, as Wiesel has said, "man and God, full of fear, look each other in the eye." Only he

may speak of a God “hanging from this gallows.” We Christians outside of Auschwitz may not do so, for we have sent the Jew, in one way or the other, into so desperate a situation, or have left him there. Here I see no meaning we may attest to without the Jews. Here we would be, without the Jews in the hell of Auschwitz, condemned to meaninglessness, to a theism.[9]

Who has gone so far in this regard as Johann Baptist Metz? What he grasped could probably not have been felt with such acuity by Mauriac, despite his generous heart and spirit. Lest there be any misunderstanding, it bears saying that Wiesel’s assertion—God is “hanging from this gallows”—cannot be reduced to Nietzsche’s “God is dead,” cited by atheists. Rather, Wiesel’s faith is rooted in Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s dictum: “There is no whole faith except broken faith.”

Nor should this be taken to mean that some survivors of the camps—whether Jewish or not—did not lose their faith, while others came out observant though they had not been so before. The American Reform Jewish theologian Richard L. Rubenstein has said something essential, which Wiesel has criticized, or even refuted. I would go so far as to say that it is all the more important because Wiesel has refuted it; this shows how distant it is from any dogmatism. Rubenstein said that midrashic structure was forever broken by Auschwitz and that the God of history is dead.[10] In 1986, I asked Wiesel where he stood with respect to Rubenstein’s thought, and he replied in no uncertain terms:

I have always refuted that philosophy. My protest is within faith, not outside of it, whereas Rubenstein says that the God of Jewish history is dead and that therefore the God of Israel is dead. I think, despite everything, that the idea that we have gone through 3,500 years of history as Jews in order to go back to a kind of paganism and say that we can live without God today, after Auschwitz—it’s a bit late in the game to say that and moreover it’s inacceptable.[11]

Here we turn to Levinas in our scriptural analysis of God’s death, of His withdrawal (*tzimtzum*, the Kabbalists would say) in the death camps, and of Wiesel’s vision of these matters in *Night*. Levinas has formulated some of the most daring statements about God after Auschwitz, statements devoid of rhetoric. It is as though rhetoric had broken down in the face of a reality absolutely beyond it, beyond any attempt to rationalize or theologize it. We agree with the author of *Totality and Infinity*[12] that after Auschwitz, no sermon is possible:

The ultimate question: can one remain Jewish in the face of a God who has broken the Covenant, who no longer answers, who rejects pleas, who lets you die, as if He had abandoned you? By remaining Jewish, do we not take lightly the despair—and perhaps the doubts—of those who were about to die?[13]

Mauriac’s preface to *Night* responds on one small point to the idea that there is no longer any sermon to be heard; he asserts that the message of the New Testament has become unintelligible to Jewish ears:

We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. That is what I should have said to the Jewish child. But all I could do was embrace him and weep.[14]

The words “all is grace” can hardly be understood in the context of absolute horror, absolute Evil. Yet before those final words Mauriac had written:

Did I explain to him that what had become the stumbling block for *his* faith had become a

cornerstone for *mine*? And that the connection between the cross and human suffering remains, in my view, the key to the unfathomable mystery in which the faith of his childhood was lost?[15]

On Rosh Hashanah at the Buna camp, Wiesel writes what he felt upon reciting the *Shemoneh Esreh* [the Eighteen Benedictions], the centerpiece of the morning prayers. We have to read his words with great attentiveness:

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?...

"Blessed be the Almighty…"

The voice of the officiating inmate had just become audible. At first, I thought it was the wind.

"Blessed be God's name…"

Thousands of lips repeated the benediction, bent over like trees in a storm.

Blessed be God's name?

Why, but why would I bless him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine alter?...

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 favor, 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![16]

After having lived through such things, anyone who holds faith as though nothing had happened is lying to himself and to others. I would argue that these are the major theological sentences in *Night*. Nothing else needs to be said; every essential word is uttered. Faith here has become agonic; it is traumatized faith that struggles and succumbs in total despair. Such is the sole true faith possible in our time. All other types of faith are mendacious, are "flossin'," as a rapper might put it. In this regard, Wiesel is a master teacher. He has seen what John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila could simply not have imagined in their wildest nightmares, in their most anguished dark

nights.

Cardinal Lustiger, with his particular kind of faith, understood this well. In his dialogue with his friend and brother, Élie Wiesel, he went over the episode of the hanging in *Night*, commenting thus:

It seems to me necessary to say clearly that this experience of the silence of God was an experience of faith itself. Even when faith is darkened, or crushed, it is still faith. Believing in God includes understanding that He stops answering.

Instead of "experience of faith," it might be more accurate to speak here of a test of faith. Such is Wiesel's infinitely precious contribution to dialogue with Christians and, more universally, with anyone of faith, anyone seeking transcendence. We see this in his dialogue with another cardinal, John O'Connor of New York, which led to a book *A Journey of Faith*, published in 1990.[17] In a significant moment of his conversation with Wiesel, O'Connor pointed out that in the hell of the concentration camps some rare internees, in a few well-known cases, had managed to sustain inner peace. One example was the Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl. Another, notably, was the now canonized Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe, who volunteered to take the place of a fellow inmate, someone whom he did not even know and who was to be executed with nine others in reprisal for one captive's attempt to escape. Kolbe and his companions in misfortune were held in a special block, slated to die of hunger and thirst. The guards and the SS heard from there no cries of fear; instead religious chants issued forth. Wiesel reacted to O'Connor's evocation of Kolbe with a comment about ultrareligious Jews he had known in the camps: "Even they had no inner peace."

But let us consider Wiesel's theological dialogue with Lustiger. Soon after the release of *Le choix de Dieu* (translated as *Choosing God, Chosen by God*)[18] —which recorded Lustiger's conversations with socialist politician Jean-Louis Missika and sociologist Dominique Wolton—Wiesel published a long article in *Le Monde*. In his analysis of the book, he profoundly criticized the idea that one could be both Jewish and Christian at the same time. A few days later, as I was working with Wiesel in New York on our volume of conversations, *Le Mal et l'Exil* (translated as *Evil and Exile*), I asked him about something often written or said by Cardinal Lustiger. It reappeared in his response to Missika's predictable question as to whether God had abandoned His chosen people during the Shoah. These are Lustiger's words that shocked me and even more so Wiesel:

No, He did not abandon them. But that answer is unbearable. I can bear it only by seeing it as part of the mystery of the suffering Messiah and His compassion.

To situate properly Wiesel's rejoinder to Lustiger, we have to go back to an interview that the then Archbishop Lustiger gave to Y. Ben Porat and Dov Judkowski, the former editor in chief of *Yediot Aharonot*. (Judkowski had, incidently, hired Wiesel as a correspondent for that newspaper in 1948.) Lustiger stated the following about Jewish victims of the Holocaust:

I think that somehow they pertain to the suffering of the Messiah. But only God can say that, not I. And I think that one day those who persecuted them will realize that it is thanks to them that we are saved.

We know that for Wiesel there is no answer, no explanation for the Shoah. When I showed him Lustiger's words, he responded in these terms:

To me this is unacceptable… The coming of the Messiah Himself would not necessarily bring an answer to that immense and unjustifiable suffering. And now we hear that the explanation is to be found in the suffering Messiah! No. For me, Auschwitz remains a question…

To make suffering into a theology is almost to justify it, and we have no right to do that… As soon as we erect suffering into an answer, we are justifying it by assigning a meaning to it. Thus we betray both the answer and the suffering.

At one fell swoop, the Passion of the Jews is compared with, practically merged into, what the Passion of Christ represents for Christians: a redemptive Passion that in no way accounts for the "despair—and perhaps the doubts—of those who were about to die." There was one thing that was clear and irrefutable for Wiesel, one thing that nullified any supposed mystery of Redemption. It was his certitude that "even if the Messiah were to come tomorrow, He could not redeem the agony and death of a million and a half Jewish children." Of any children.

I would to return to one of the crucial assertions Levinas has made. It goes even further than some of the quotations here from Wiesel (though not the passage on the impossibility of offering Rosh Hashanah prayers at Buna). Levinas had the loftiness, the intelligence, the "fundamental insight" of a philosopher, a phenomenologist, a man of faith and conviction. This afforded him great lucidity in his varied reflections on the divine, such as the following:

A certain God and a certain way of thinking about God, characteristic of positive religious authorities, have reached their end. However, what matters for the divine is something other than its force and omnipotence. I do not deny these attributes, but I wonder about the origin of that way of thinking.

Nietzsche's denial of God has been confirmed by the twentieth century. A God of promise, God who gives, God as substance: obviously, none of that can be maintained. But the primordial fact, the miracle of the miracle, resides herein: that a man can mean something for another man.[19]

Later in the same conversation, Levinas does not shrink from agreeing when his interlocutor asks whether Nietzsche's God reflects "an idea of God that has gone down the path of nihilism":

That God still has a voice. He speaks with a mute voice, and the words are heard. But that God is Nietzsche's dead God. He committed suicide at Auschwitz.

However, the other God—whose existence cannot be proven statistically and figures only as a fact for humanity—is a protest against Auschwitz. And that God appears in the face of the other.[20]

But there is something that our teacher Levinas says that we must repeat here. In a text that both terrifies and opens onto an ethics of hope, he refers to 1941 in these terms:

1941! A hole in history, a year when all the visible gods had abandoned us, where god [*sic*] was truly dead or had gone back to his irrevelation.[21]

It is clear that for Levinas, and not only for him, it is indispensable to speak with intellectual honesty of the moment when “god was truly dead or had gone back to his irrevelation.”

All this is very close to Celan’s crushing, haunted poetry. Protest, revolt, despair come in the wake of Auschwitz. Levinas takes Fackenheim very seriously. However, he goes even further, speaking with fear and trembling of a “teaching” to be gleaned from Auschwitz. It is something that can be hardly formulated or heard, but must stand as a warning. For Levinas, there is no sermon or preaching or happy ending possible after the Shoah. In Israel’s inherent availability for “unwilling sacrifice and exposure to persecution,”[22] the philosopher sees something like Israel’s ultimate essence. Wiesel joins him in this regard.

I would like to return to the dialogue between Lustiger and Wiesel and point out four crucial moments in it.

The first is when the Cardinal says of his Jewish brother that he is “one of the great theologians of our time.” That is what I am trying to demonstrate here. What Wiesel says about the silence and the absence of God, the superiority of man with respect to the divine, and the need to place God on trial, should be, despite all the problems such notions pose, taken up by rabbis, priests, and even imams—why not? Father Johann Baptist Metz has suggested as much, but he, like Lustiger, has been little heeded in this regard. Instead, Wiesel is seen as a poet. But if theology today fails to take such reflection on the divine seriously, it will rigidify, wither away, and speak only to those who do not wish to ask questions that could reduce their pitiable faith to ashes. Or rather, their faith is already ash. The only worthwhile faith today may well be agonic faith; traumatized faith; faith ever poised on the edge of a precipice; faith refutable as absurd blind trust in an uncreated Being we call God, Dieu, Gott, Elohim, Adonai, Allah, what have you. In accordance with this, the first lines of *…And the World Was Silent*, the original Yiddish source of *Night*, read as follows:

In the beginning there was faith—which is childish; trust—which is vain; and illusion—which is dangerous.

We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived within the illusion that every one of us had been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekhinah’s flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and his soul a reflection of God’s image.

That was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals.[23]

Before approaching the central issue that divided the two men—the Cardinal’s dual allegiance as Jew and Christian—I shall make my second point concerning Lustiger and Wiesel. It goes beyond their televised conversation and hovers over their dialogue of twenty-five years. I am referring to Lustiger’s forceful demand that Jews cease considering Christians as *goyim*, as idolaters, but instead view them as believers in the one and only God. That was an extraordinary step, and Wiesel, of course, agreed wholeheartedly to what Lustiger proposed.

Starting with *Night*, Lustiger had already seen Wiesel as “one of the great theologians of our time”—quite something for a cardinal to say about a Jewish writer. At around the time of the televised dialogue, he expanded on his assertion in the Jesuit journal *America*:

Such an assertion may come as a surprise. Élie Wiesel himself will not admit to being a “theologian.” He shies away from what those who consider themselves “theologians” call

"theological" thinking. He even goes so far as to remind us continually that, strictly speaking, "Jewish theology" does not exist.

Élie Wiesel dismisses the idea that he is a theologian doing theology.

But one may also conceive of a theologian in another way. As a person to whom God speaks and who, in turn, speaks to God and then tells the story…[24]

Lustiger emphasized that the author of *Night* was not a theologian of "the death of God." I would draw a parallel between the Cardinal's long essay from which I have just quoted and a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Baba Bathra* (12b): "R. Johanan said: Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children." To poets also, we may add, because Wiesel *was* a poet; though he was not the theologian of the death of God, I see him as the theologian of the silence of God. Let me propose the following: Wiesel is one of those rare beings who have chosen to bear upon their shoulders the insupportable muteness of the God of Israel and of the Nations; along with George Steiner, he is one of those children of Israel who has "taken upon [themselves] the inconceivable guilt of God's indifference, or absence, or impotence."[25] And it is in that sense that Wiesel was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, even if he refused that honor, that great responsibility. Steiner went even further, when he wrote these words inspired by Paul Celan's *Psalm*:

If in the Christ passion, a divine being, the Son of God and of man, is held to have died *for* man, so in the Shoah, the Jewish people ("Radix, Matrix") … can be seen, understood, to have died *for* God, to have taken upon itself the inconceivable guilt of God's indifference, or absence, or impotence."[26]

A third moment in Wiesel's and Lustiger's dialogue relates to the painful affair of the Carmelite Convent at Auschwitz and an unfortunate statement made by John Paul II in August 1989. Unexpectedly, in the midst of this crisis in Jewish-Christian relations, the Pope recalled the Church's teaching that Jewish disobedience had led to the advent of the New Covenant—as though *its* followers had never disobeyed by committing blasphemy, perjury, and the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent non-Christians throughout history. Subsequently, as we know, John Paul II made magnificent and unanimously celebrated strides, particularly toward the Jews.

I have saved for the end a fourth moment in the Wiesel-Lustiger dialogue. Actually, it was what came first. The initial reason for their encounter concerned the path taken by Lustiger and the way he considered himself a Jew. Some of those in attendance here witnessed the scene in an office in the Sorbonne, when Wiesel "flew off the handle." He challenged Lustiger bluntly by saying he had no right to call himself, as he was wont to do, a "fulfilled Jew." In front of the TV cameras Wiesel tread more lightly, but in his article for *Le Monde*, from which I have already quoted, the criticism was far more unsparing:

Cardinal Lustiger is unsettling… He unsettles extremist Christians, because he still considers himself a Jew; he unsettles Jews, because he has become a Christian… It is the Jew in me who, facing the Jew in him, is saddened… He is convinced that he has not left his people… He might be right in an ethnic sense, but not on the plane where he, and we, truly place ourselves: that of religion, or of religious tradition…

I persist in believing that, for a Jew, salvation is possible only within his Jewishness. Judaism is for the Jew what Christianity is for a Christian: the best way, perhaps the sole way possible, for him to reach the truth intended for him.

I would emphasize a statement Wiesel made during their televised dialogue: “I do not believe that a Jew has to convert to be fulfilled.”

But what is ultimately to be said about the exchange between these two eminent witnesses of the twentieth century? Each lost his mother at Auschwitz-Birkenau and worked in his specific way for reconciliation among peoples and religions, and particularly between Jews and Christians.

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To finish, I shall recount to you a crucial incident, of which Wiesel rarely spoke, and certainly not with much force or violence, so painful was it to him.

It took place at New York University in 1978, the end of a class he was teaching. He told his students how on April 11, 1945, the day of his liberation from Buchenwald, religious Jews assembled themselves into *minyanim*. They formed these ritual quorums of ten men in order to recite the Kaddish, which is at once the ultimate sanctification of the Divine Name and the prayer in memory of the departed; it has been compared, rightfully, to the Lord’s Prayer. This is what Wiesel added, as Arthur Kurzweil related in *Hadassah Magazine*:

Now Wiesel looked intensely at his class. “And I will say this to each of you; I will say it in public; I will even say it facing the Torah scroll: God did not deserve that Kaddish.”[27]

This is an assertion of unsoundable depth, reflecting the infinite despair of a man whose heart and faith were forever broken, and who can now neither cry out nor remain silent. We owe to Wiesel this way of grasping the ungraspable, of saying the unsayable. It seems to me that this teaching redeems some unfortunate sweeping pronouncements he made. Cardinal Lustiger and Johann Baptist Metz saw this early on, with the kind of overwhelming insight that causes us to let go of our hasty judgments, our unjustifiably good conscience, of our “consolations that cost us nothing and our compassion without suffering.”[28]

Having said this, I realize that I have not dealt with Wiesel’s faith, or have only touched upon it. But the question must be confronted. In the Talmudic treatise *Yoma* (69b), our sages tell us that after the desecration and destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, Jeremiah omitted the divine attribute *nora* [terrible, awe-inspiring] in reciting the central benediction of the *Sh’monah Esreh*. They continue to recount that centuries later Daniel cried out, “Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might?” and therefore would not utter the word *ha-gibor* [the Powerful] to refer to God in his prayer. But the rabbis put the term back in—wrongfully, in my opinion. But what exactly do we, Jews and Christians, do when we recite our traditional liturgy in the face of the Shoah, in the face of all the catastrophes happening everyday throughout the world? Are not our prayers just a web of lies?

I return to Wiesel—though I have really not moved an inch away from him. In his book *Paroles d’étranger* [Words of a Stranger (*or* Foreigner)], he writes something that should make us assume the position of believers, at the cost of despairing of any prayer. Once again, Wiesel tells a story. He was a born storyteller who could take you to the very end of night with tales that could move you to tears... or sometimes to dance.

Here is a story. It's about pious and devout man who gets tripped up in his prayers. Every day when he arrives at the passage *Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu* (For Thou hast loved us with great love), he stops. And chokes. Nothing emerges from his mouth. Each word has become an obstacle.[29]

Further on, Wiesel has this to say about the liturgy:

It's totally unsatisfactory. Whatever prayers we have are inadequate. In the century that saw Auschwitz and Maidanek, how can a man affirm and confirm the grandeur, the greatness, the mercy of our Father in Heaven?...

"A great love"—and what about Auschwitz? "An immense compassion"—and what about Belsen? How can a worshiper recite these words without turning them into lies and blasphemy?[30]

All we can add to that statement is a poem, one of the two or three most gripping poems by Celan. *Tenebrae* and *Psalm* are no doubt Celan's most theological pieces, those most marked by what Jean-Luc Marion has called *anatheism*. But they are also his most tragic poems, due to the complete inversion of categories. We read in *Tenebrae*:

We are close, Lord

Close and within reach.

Seized already, Lord,

clawed into our selves as though

the body of each of us were

your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,

pray to us,

who are close by.[31]

In turn we must ask the question: is it not too late? What Celan says here is that a dizzying

theological abyss was opened by the Shoah. It is no longer we who must pray to God; rather, He should address his prayer to us. In this respect we are thinking as did Steiner—and as did Wiesel, though he would not have said it the same way. It is as if there were an inversion of categories between humankind and divinity; each has taken the place of the other.

What does this poem say theologically? It seems to me difficult to consider it outside its theological dimension. But we understand the term “theological” to mean what Marion called “anatheology”—an alien term that not only is a neologism but denotes a total paradox. Still, let us relate the poem to Wiesel’s vision of the Messiah. It would seem that the Jewish people has assumed the attributes of the Suffering Servant, attributes so well used in Christian theology. But here the Jewish people has become the Messiah. And Alex Derczanski waxed theological by writing in 1980 these words about Wiesel:

He is too reserved to raise his people to the rank not of martyr but of messiah. Perhaps that is why he leaves us wanting more… Wiesel’s work contains hints of liturgy.[32]

One may glimpse here one of the possible meanings of the midrash that runs throughout the history of the Jewish people. Understanding Celan via Wiesel and Steiner is to see the Jewish people as “having taken upon itself the inconceivable guilt of God’s indifference, or absence, or impotence.” That is precisely what it means to be the Suffering Servant. We have a Suffering Servant, chosen by God, or chosen by himself, to be Messiah, to be the Messiah. With its theological and messianic dimension, only the Jewish people may say, without appearing ridiculous, such things as the following:

Pray, Lord,

pray to us,

who are close by.

Ora est.

What is Wiesel’s answer to this anatheism, this meaninglessness, this madness of history and of the disappearance of anything divine from humanity’s horizon, this incurable trauma that he has transmitted to us, transfused into us, and with which he has inoculated us? His answer is to chant.

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[1] Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

[2] OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants) was an organization that saved numerous Jewish children during the German occupation of France.

[3] François Mauriac, Bloc-Notes, 29 May 1963, quoted in Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 271.

[4] Wiesel and Michaël de Saint-Chéron, Evil and Exile, trans. Jon Rothschild and Jody Gladding (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 74. *Tanakh* is the acronym for the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: *Torah, Neviim*[Prophets] and *Ketuvim*[Writings].

[5] Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 19-20, 23.

[6] Emmanuel Levinas, “Le scandale du mal,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers 85* (1986): 16, quoted in Saint-Chéron, *Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas 1983-1994* (Paris: Livre de Poche, Biblio Essais, LGF, 2010), p. 151.

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[7] Mauriac, “Forward,” in Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p. xix.

[8] Mauriac, “Forward,” pp. xix-xx.

[9] Johann Baptist Metz, “En face des Juifs: La théologie chrétienne après Auschwitz,” in Elizabeth Schlüsser-Florenza and David Tracy, eds., *Exégèse: Le judaïsme après Auschwitz: Une question radicale, Concilium* 195 (1984), p. 51.

[10] Cf. Emil Fackenheim, *The Human Condition After Auschwitz: A Jewish Testimony a Generation Later* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971).

[11] Saint-Chéron and Wiesel, *Dialogues avec Élie Wiesel 1982-2012* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2017), p. 35.

[12] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

[13] Levinas, “Le scandale du mal,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 85 (1986): 35.

[14] Mauriac, “Preface,” p. xxi.

[15] Mauriac, “Preface,” p. xxi (italics in the original).

[16] Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 66-68.

[17] Wiesel and John O’Connor, *A Journey of Faith* (New York: Primus, 1990).

[18] Jean-Marie Lustiger, *Le choix de Dieu: Entretiens avec Jean-Louis Missika et Dominique Wolton* (Paris: Fallois, 1987); *Choosing God, Chosen by God*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

[19] Levinas, “Emmanuel Levinas: Visage et violence première,” interview by Hans Joachim Langer, trad. Arno Münster, in Münster, ed., *La Différence comme non-indifférence: Éthique et altérité chez Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Kimé, 1995), p. 133.

[20] Levinas, “Emmanuel Levinas: Visage et violence première,” p. 135.

[21] Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 28.

[22] Jean Greich and Jacques Rolland, ed., *Emmanuel Levinas: L’Éthique comme philosophie première: Actes du colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle 23 août—2 septembre 1986* (Paris: Cerf, 1993).

[23] Wiesel, “Preface to the New Translation,” *Night*, pp. x-xi (italics in the original).

[24] Lustiger, “The Absence of God? The Presence of God? A Meditation in Three Parts on *Night*,” in Harold Bloom, ed., Élie Wiesel’s Night, new ed. (New York: Infobase, 2010), pp. 27-28. Lustiger’s piece originally appeared in America, Vol. 159, No. 15 (19 Nov. 1988), pp. 402-406.

[25] George Steiner, “The Long Life of Metaphor,” in Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), p. 169.

[26] Steiner, “The Long Life of Metaphor,” p. 169 (italics in the original).

[27] *Hadassah Magazine* (Dec. 1978); quoted in French by Yvonne Lévy in *Information Juive* (Feb. 1979) and translated here back into English.

[28] Levinas, Proper Names, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 16.

[29] Wiesel, *Paroles d’étranger* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 167.

[30] Wiesel, *Paroles d’étranger*, p. 176.

[31] Paul Celan, “Celan’s *Tenebrae*,” trans. Scott Horton, *Harper’s Magazine* (28 Mar. 2008). <https://harpers.org/blog/2008/03/celans-tenebrae/> (accessed 29 Sept. 2018).

[32] Alex Derczanski, “Comprendre Wiesel,” *Esprit* 9 (Sept. 1980): 93-94.

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