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POLITICAL ETHICS BETWEEN BIBLICAL ETHICS AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE DEATH OF GOD

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Abstract: The text discusses the importance of religion as a symbolic construct which derives from fundamental human needs. At the same time, religious symbolism can function as an explanation for the major crises existent in the lives of individuals or their communities, even if they live in a democratic or a totalitarian system. Its presence is facilitated by the assumption of the biographical element existent in the philosophical and theological reflection and its extrapolation in a biography which concerns the communities and its governmental resorts. It is in this context that we discuss the way in which the myth concerning the death of God can influence the formation of political ethics relevant for the contemporary man. From the analysis of the signification of the death of God in the contemporary Judaic theology and philosophy emerges a series of important elements for the creation of a political ethics situated between biblical morals and the extermination of the innocents in the 20th century.

Key Words: political ethics, the death of God, European Jews, genocide, death camps, human condition, the theology of history, religious experience.

The Existence of Religion as a Survival Policy

People cannot survive without religion. The entire history of religions, but also the mythical, symbolical and ritual behaviors of the contemporary individual, the acts of community celebration or the need to invest sacred meanings in personal elements reflect this need for religiousness.[1] We cannot ignore the fact that the idea of secularization is one of the most important cultural and ideological construct having a significant impact in the creation of modernity. Yet, even if secularization is an important trait of the modern world, the profound needs of the human being are still connected to a sphere of sacredness and desire to live in a universe where values are invested with a certain kind of transcendent force. A relevant argument in this regard is the fact that people perceive religion as a fundamental need of their personal life, even if they accept the theories concerning the secularization of the modern world and of the essential components of a modern day man.[2]

Thus, the need for a coherent overall perspective of the world and the sense of living in accordance with that vision, the need for a symbolic structure able to hold all the imaginative constructions, the need to place oneself on the path of a pending accomplishment, the need for a savior able to supply for the lack of power or the disability of individuals or the community to handle power, the need to feel this power working on its own, the need to project into the future the longing for what is originary, authentic, heavenly, and many other similar needs imply that the human being cannot be conceived outside a relationship with religion, no matter how distant it is.

Religion is the answer for emptiness, for the void, for a tendency for annihilation, for the darkness, for a longing, for an absence. Religion generates fullness, the fulfillment of meaning, the occurrence of light, the emergence of hope and the appearance of a presence. Religion is part of the human condition and the human being, in its display, cannot deny its religious needs most of all because the human being is in need for a Presence. When these needs are not invested in theistic systems, they form the basis of symbolic constructions of transcendence or are projected upon different ways of displaying sacredness. One of the most complex bearers of such projections is the political sphere. We can easily notice that religion and politics are always together during the course of the history of human communities. This relationship becomes questionable in modernity because of the separation between religion and politics, as well as of the separation between the religious and the political imaginary and the separation between the purpose of political actions and decisions and those belonging to the religious sphere.

Although this separation is related to modernity, religion and politics have in fact managed to maintain very strong connections in totalitarian systems as well as in democratic systems and they continue to nourish each other, sometimes through pregnant interferences and other times through the most subtle and almost imperceptible forms. In the context of a society based on communication, as the global world is, the idea of the separation between church and politics seems to be only an ideological premise of a specific kind of public debate and cultural construct appropriate for the Western world.[3] Even so, we are accustomed to consider that the idea of this separation is one of the most important values of modernity and that it represents a very important acquisition for the democratic societies, especially for the government belonging to democratic societies. And the concept of separation between the public and the private sphere helps us to strongly argue in favor of the profoundly democratic condition of the separation between the political decision and decisions concerning public politics and the intervention of religious factors and religious authorities in these decisions.

In the following lines, I would like to discuss a mythical structure generated by the Western democratic society as a totalitarian construct which greatly affects the understanding of what could happen to the Western democracy. What is certain is the fact that during a crisis, both in democratic and in totalitarian societies, myth and religion play an important part in the shaping of individual or collective identities, often possessing even a soteriological force. The myth which I wish to analyze is that of the death of God. This myth is constructed as if it should feel responsible for the creation of a new era in the Western history, an era of liberation from any restraints, from authority and any form of absolutism. Even so, it is a myth that both the totalitarian and the democratic ideologies speculate on. This ambivalence can be interpreted through the multiple nuances which this myth presumes, at least when it comes to its ideological, theological or philosophical assimilation.

We notice that the totalitarian systems of thought assimilate the mythic and religious spirit as easy as the democratic ones, despite the fact that in some cases the political authority feels threatened by the power based on absolute values of religious and mythical authority, especially in the case of traditional religious institutions. The impulses which trigger the instrumentalisation of the religious and the mythic in totalitarian ideologies are multiple. One of the motivations concerns the fact that, at least in the case of relations based on power and their mechanism of instrumentalisation and practice, sacrality is present and sometimes hides itself among its profane forms of manifestation. It often happens that in a crisis situation, individuals who must undergo the crisis will resort to symbolic, mythic or religious explanations which they perceive as founder instances which offer them the possibility to create, in critical situations, survival politics.

Such a critical experience, such a major crisis, is the experience of the extermination of the European Jews in the Second World War. We will discuss the way in which these experiences have been described in the American culture by two thinkers who have influenced the 20th century theories concerning this experience: Elie Wiesel and Richard Rubenstein. The pairing of both their theories is not something new. Michael Berenbaum[4] reveals a very convincing comparison of some of their main features even though some of the details are somehow exaggerated in order to find arguments for a new way of perceiving Rubenstein's thought. The originality of our approach focuses on the construction of the context, its significance and the consequences of their theories on the experience of the Holocaust.

Analyzed from the perspective of symbolic consciousness, the apprehension of Nazism and the holocaust experience is defined by both authors in reference to the image of a God who is dead but who gives Man the power and the mechanisms necessary to restore Creation with the instruments which He handed them. Nazism is, in this case, regarded as a myth, having a similar meaning to the one defined by Philippe Lacoue – Labarthe and Jean – Luc Nancy. What interests them are not the mythologies used by Nazism but the fact that Nazism is constituted as a myth.[5] Unlike archaic societies where the originary factor is of great importance, in the myths of modernity what appears to be an original element is the political element. If we agree with the authors when they say that the modern man was incapable of creating new religions, we should accept the idea that modernity establishes a new kind of mythical creation, the political mythologies.

The Death of God and the Human Condition in the Death Camps. Towards a New Understanding of the Ethics of Responsibility

One of the myths used by Elie Wiesel in order to explain Nazism and the experience of the Holocaust is the myth of the death of God. This way the death of God is used as a central factor in the understanding of political myths and becomes part of a political mythology. In order to illustrate this mythology, the author uses a series of symbolic constructions created by the biblical or the Hasidic tradition. They function as hermeneutical elements as well as moral elements. When asked: "can the biblical moral still be relevant after the Holocaust", Wiesel answers: "The biblical moral is the only answer, there is no other answer."[6] Starting from this, he creates an ethics based on human action and mostly on civic and political action. In order to understand what must be done, Wiesel explores human nature in critical situations, and he is concerned about the human condition which he directly associates with God's destiny. In order to explain such an argument, he uses political, historical, religious and moral explanations. In the present paper I have

chosen to discuss about these preoccupations by analyzing a symbolic structure present in several works signed by the author, especially in the one titled *Night*.

One of the symbolic images used by Elie Wiesel in his study of the human destiny and of God's destiny in order to reveal the death of Man and the death of God is the father image. We notice that in the Judaic tradition the symbolic structure of the couple "old man – child" is present.[7] Thus, Wiesel creates two types of relationships explored by his character Eliezer in *Night*[8]: on the one hand, his relationship with his grandfather, and on the other hand his very close relationship with his father during deportation until his death and until today, with the help of memory and storytelling.

In those two types of relationship, Eliezer imagines his grandfather as being wise and pious, representing tradition and different Biblical, Talmudic or Kabbalistic characters with whom he was familiar in his childhood. His grandfather seems to be a person profoundly immersed in God. On the other hand, as Ellen Norman Stern, one of Wiesel's biographers reveals, for Wiesel, his father "was a very practical man, who thought it his duty to bring up his only son to respect and trust his fellow-man."[9] We observe here the existence of contemplation but also of practicality, of some doxological spirit but also of pious nature in reference to the human being and its authentic existence in the world. The respect towards the other human being cannot be excluded from the religious sphere, but the image projected by Wiesel as representative for his father is that of a man preoccupied by a daily life more centered around human beings than around God, being rather concerned about the image of man than that of God.

Between these two symbolic images, Wiesel introduces his own with his personal histories containing both his father and his grandfather in order to create a biography of the author but which, in symbolic terms, speaks of a biography of God. We speak here of the symbolic image of God's centrality and the symbolic image of man's centrality. The author oscillates between these two describing in the end the experience of communion with his father carrying its symbolic potential of rethinking the world beginning with the understanding of the individual with his humanly aspirations of fulfillment. Here is how Wiesel integrates his own story in a general history which is no longer only his or of his family or of his community but a history of God:

> "My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in
> man. My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in
> God. The one taught me to speak the other to sing.
> Both loved stories. And when I tell mine, I hear
> their voices. Whispering from beyond the silenced

storm, they are what links the survivor to their memory."[10]

Elen Norman Stern describes the figure of his mother's father:

> "Dodye Freig radiated love. Everyone felt his presence with pleasure. When he opened his mouth to sing the glory of God, other turned to listen to him ... then join him in singing. Hasidism believed they singing to be a direct channel to God. Their songs expressed what they felt: their joy, their sadness, their love. Their singing was their ladder to heaven. Dodye rocked back and forth when he sang; his body itself became an instrument of prayer. Hearing his grandfather sing roused Elie to a joy he knew only at very special moments. It was like being close to the presence of God."[11]

We should mention the fact that the Hasidic tradition which Elie Wiesel comes from through his grandfather, but also through the spirit of his stories written as a modern storyteller, promotes dance as a religious, ritualic, ecstatic and mystical experience. Dance brings the Hasid closer to God or even helps him live God's life. It is magical and mystical, it is a representation of a spiritual experience and an instrument of devotion; it transforms the individual into a presence and God into a Presence. A Hasidic story reveals a small glimpse of the true meaning of dance:

> "Rabbi Schmelke and Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov were traveling on a ship. A dangerous storm threatened to destroy the vessel. Rabbi Schmelke went over to the Sassover and perceived that he was engaged in a joyful dance.
>
> "Why are you dancing?" inquired Rabbi Schmelke.
> "I am overjoyed at the thought that I shall soon arrive in the mansion of my Father", replied the Sassover.
> "I shall join you, then," said Rabbi Schmelke.
> But the storm spent its force, and the ship reached port in safety."[12]

Dance is perceived as a form of liberation even in the death camps, but the liberating effect is oriented toward the abandonment of life, towards the start of a journey leading to the encounter with God on another level of existence, death. One relevant example is cited by Elie Wiesel from Lieb Langfuss's diary regarding the faithful Jews and their agony recounting the arrival in a death camp of an old rabbi who realized what will happen. At his arrival:

> "the rabbi entered in the undressing room and suddenly he began to dance and to sing all alone. And the other said nothing and he sang and he danced for a long time and then he died for *Kiddush ha-shem*, for the sanctification of God's name".[13]

The dance does not represent the salvation after experiencing the entering in his father's house, but more likely a return to his father, as a way of reconciliation, as a form of ecstatic experience of acknowledging God's existence through his own death perceived as a moment of total transgression.

We discussed these aspects of the Hasidic tradition in order to illustrate Wiesel's belief in the significance of the divine presence in the extreme experiences of the lives of individuals belonging to traditional societies, as well as in maintaining the existential force of those experiences perceived as ecstatic experiences in the extreme conditions of the death camps. The way in which he refers to these experiences demonstrates the fact that he does not tell the tale of a person who, because of losing his faith, proclaims the death of God. He is not a theologian of the death of God. He is part of the intellectual elite who seeks answers of religious nature to the problems generated by the genocide of the European Jews and draws them with the help of the literary tools accessible for him.

As we can see from his works and the works of his biographers, during his childhood, Elie Wiesel oscillates between his grandfather's image as a bearer of religious tradition and mystical initiation, his mother's image as a symbol of religious and humanistic education and the image of his father as a symbol of rationality, preoccupied with his family and actively involved in the life of the community. In this context, he defines his relationship with his father as a family relationship before the deportation experience:

> "My father's ambition was to make a man of me rather than a saint. 'Your duty is to fight solitude, not to cultivate or glorify it', he used to tell me. And he would add: 'God, perhaps, has need of saints; as for men, they can do without them'."[14]

With the deportation, this relationship becomes more and more symbolic being hard to tell when, referring to the symbolic universe represented by his father, Wiesel talks about his relationship with his father as a biological entity or he refers to him as a symbolic representation of God.

In the death camps, the whole symbolic burden of transcendence is centered by Wiesel around his father's image. All meaningful relationships

revolve around him and the most unsettling accounts from the concentration camp are the ones focusing on the stories in which the main characters are a father and a son, characters who experience different feelings and human attitudes from filial and fatherly love to scenes of abandonment, cruelty or murder.

Recounting his story, Wiesel tells us: "In the camp ... I had only my father, my best friend, my only friend."[15] The stories from the concentration camp become more significant because of Eliezer's and his father's destiny which become a united destiny, a destiny that ceases to be the destiny of a family and turns into God's destiny and the destiny of his chosen people. The image of God who has died is presented by Wiesel: "Nothing. Nothing was left me of my past, of my life in the ghetto, not even my father's grave".[16] The death of God is graphically rendered by the idea of his father remaining in the invisible cemetery of Buchenwald. The experience of such an unusual death, of an uncelebrated death, without a proper ritual and without tears is in fact the death of God. This is the symbolic explanation of Wiesel's statement: "When I raise my eyes to heaven, it is his grave I see".[17]

This way we understand why the death of his father determines a constant remembrance of his image during the death camp experience, in the recalling of the days after the liberation from the death camp and in the ritualic repetition of those experiences in the context of the world of liberties and of threats in which we live. John K. Roth, in a symbolic manner, affirms that "Night probes a void that kills not only Elie Wiesel's parental father, but his faith in God the Father, too".[18] Night is the book about the proximity of absolute evil. It explains the fact that: "The hallucinating and terrifying experience of the evil in the world paralyzes the relationship with divinity. It is suspended and when it becomes radical, God's death is proclaimed."[19] Thus, the image of the father is represented through biblical symbolism and his actions belong to a biblical history.

We do not wish to imply that the purpose of the Holocaust testimonials is of symbolic nature. They are the proof of a reality which existed, of an experience which cannot be eluded. What we have here is a double interpretation: one of the real natures of suffering and of death experienced biologically and psychologically and the other one of the transfiguration of these physical experiences in a spiritual one, an experience that while talking about human's life without life, reveals God's life without life.

Through this experience we must understand the profound significance of the fact that at the end of Night, Wiesel recounts how he was separated from his suffering father and how when he came back to help him, he realized that his father did not exist anymore, he was absent. This man's agony and disappearance is experienced by Wiesel as the agony of a deity, as an absence of God. Because of this, humanity and life itself

are absent as well. As a response to this absence, to this feeling of the void, of existential emptiness, Wiesel creates an ethic of responsibility which relies on the idea that the responsibility for another person is in fact the responsibility for the existence of God.

Thus, we notice that Elie Wiesel's realization of the death of God functions as an existential therapy. It has the purpose of discussing the death of man due to his separation from God. This existential therapy also represents the refusal of separation, the search of communication in the privacy of dreams, of the dialogue offered by remembrance and confession, the assumption of the responsibility of maintaining the memory of the community alive as part of the memory that spreads from the memory of each individual to that of the ancestors, to that of Moses, reaching the memory of God in the end.[20]

The importance of memory and testimonials in the context of a democratic society where Wiesel lives is not only part of a continuous process of remembering the suffering and the death of innocents in the death camps, but it is also a part of a process of personal engagement in the problems that the American and the global society are faced with. The words mentioned at the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace are significant in this sense:

> "When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Whenever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe".[21]

Memory represents the deliverance from indifference. Memory is both an instrument in the political battle and a way of bringing people and God into existence. This way, the symbolism of the death of God is an important element in the civic action and the political battle. Memory and acknowledgment represent the foundation of a political ethics based on responsibility and action. Monotheist ethics is defined as a central element of this new shaping of the political. In order to avert another tragic experience for the Jewish people – as well as for other people – Wiesel advises us to follow such a political ethics. This kind of political ethics should represent the basis of the construction of Europe and of the whole world.

The Death of God and the New Political Order. Towards a New Significance of the Genocide for the Global Society

Although he also uses the mythology of the death of God, Richard Rubenstein separates himself from Elie Wiesel's theory first of all through

the manner in which he conducts his analysis. In order to highlight his personal way of referencing the Holocaust, Rubenstein wrote:

> "Nevertheless, there is a very important difference between the individual witness who offer the testimony of his own experience and disciplined reflection on the *structures* that created the Kingdom of Death".[22]

Steven Katz, one of the best philosophers and historians of the Judaic ideas, in a very pertinent analysis followed by a very harsh critique of Richard Rubenstein's writings, considers his philosophy as being "an iconoclastic, though dubious mixture of Freudianism, paganism, naturalism, and eroticism"[23]. In what follows, what interests us is not a Freudian interpretation of the totalitarian experience or of the Judaic experiences. What we intend to discuss here is just a significant fragment of the theological and philosophical dimension of Rubenstein's reflections upon concentration camps.

One of Rubenstein's exegetes, Klaus Rohmann, explains the fact that one cannot understand Rubenstein's thinking outside his individual experiences as well as the experiences of his community. Theology is subjective, or more precisely it is intersubjective, and it involves the author's life and the life of his community.[24]

Thus we can track down two significant episodes from Rubenstein's existence, two experiences which have deeply influenced his way of perceiving the Holocaust. The first significant experience is the experience of his son's death in 1950, when he was only three months old. He is incapable of understanding the meaning of this death as a form of evil understood as divine punishment, which deeply unsettles his faith in the explanations offered by his Judaic tradition. The second experience is the encounter he had with the Lutheran theologian Heinrich Gruber in 1961, right in the middle of the events related to the building of the Berlin Wall. In his conversation with Gruber, he explains that the Holocaust was in fact God's punishment upon the Jewish people because of their disobedience. Even more, he claimed that what happened to the Germans in those troubled times must be interpreted as a punishment inflicted upon them because of what they have done to the Jews. This historical theology was not unknown to Rubenstein, because throughout history the reason for the suffering of the people of Israel was thought to be a consequence of the sins committed by the members of the community. What Rubenstein considered to be a new approach was the application of such explanations on contemporary events.[25] Meditating upon these interpretations, Rubenstein reaches the conclusion that the explanations of his people's suffering during the Holocaust through traditional Jewish theology has no validity and that such a historical theology must be

rejected. Regarding such an explicative mechanism, he affirms the following:

> "I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps ... The agony of the European Jews cannot be linked to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purpose. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept".[26]

Second of all, the autobiographic trait of theology is influenced by the experience of the community to which the thinker belongs. A significant dimension of the assumption of belonging to a religious community is expressed by Rubenstein when he affirms that: "I believe religion to be the way share the decisive times and crises of life through the inherited experiences and norms of our community. The Torah is the repository of those norms."[27] Thus from the point of view of his belonging to a community, Klauss Rohmann demonstrates that we cannot understand Rubenstein's radical theology without a thorough analysis of the impact of two major events of contemporary Jewish history upon religious and Jewish thought: the extermination of the European Jews and the creation of the state of Israel. These two events recount a unique history, that of the millenary exile of the community of the chosen people. It is because of these events that the condition of the Jews after the creation of the state of Israel is one of Rubenstein's major theological and philosophical concerns is.[28]

Rubenstein considers that in order to understand why the Holocaust took place we must revisit the history and analyze the two religions that emerge from the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. One of the religions is represented by the rabbinic thought which interprets the horrific events of Israel as a result of divine punishment. The other religion which is born from the fall of Jerusalem is Christianity. Rubenstein considers the destruction of Jerusalem as the Holocaust of the ancient world. The Holocaust of the contemporary world reflects, at a larger scale, this ancient event.

In his theological explanations of the Holocaust, one of the major concerns of Rubenstein deals with the symbolic structure of the son. The way in which the relationship between the son and God, perceived as an image of the Father, is conceived is paradigmatic in the understanding of the negative attitude towards the Jews as well as in the understanding of anti-Semitism. The image cultivated by the Jews in which they are the chosen people brings forward an image of Israel's community which plays

the role of God's cherished son. He discovers that one of the major sources of anti-Semitism has to do with Christianity's desire to transfer this status from the Judaic community to the Christian one in the context of the new revelations brought by the Gospels and established after the fall of Jerusalem. Rubenstein considers that the Christian Church and its desire to become the successor of Judaism, to become the beloved son, is generated by the fall of the Jewish people and by their sufferings related to the ancient Holocaust.[29] More than that, he considers that Jews as well as Christians, even if from different perspectives, explain the fall of Jerusalem from the perspective of a historical theology. Thus, if in the case of Jews the event meant the greatest ancient disaster, for Christians, the fall of Jerusalem represents the greatest confirmation of the fact that the Christian people has obtained the entire heritage and becomes the beloved son of the divine Father. From the perspective of a Christian historical theology, the ancient Holocaust was a divine punishment. From his discussions with Heinrich Gruber, Rubenstein realizes that by applying the same interpretation for the modern Holocaust, the Christians perceive the Holocaust as a divine punishment set upon the Jewish people for their rejection of Jesus.[30]

We should probably establish here the limits imposed by such an interpretation. On the one hand, the term Holocaust should refer only to the context of the death camps and of their impact on the 20th century. On the other hand, the attitude towards the Jewish deicide and the anti–Semitic position should be restricted to an ideology constituted within Christianity, without mistaking one thing for another, even if we can identify several periods during the history of Christianity in which anti–Semitism dominates the Christian communities. If these differences are not pointed out, it would be very easy for us to mistake religion for ideology or Christianity for anti-Semitism.

In a similar manner, even if slightly different, the explanation of the Holocaust is revealed in the Jewish historical theology. In Rubenstein's theory, a similarly negative role, as the one played by Christianity, belongs to rabbinic Judaism, a religious design built upon the ruins of Jerusalem. The political status of the Jewish community enables the Pharisee to control the institutions of the community and possess all the means for redemption. The political and religious revolution which accompanies the transfer of power from the group connected with the temple of Jerusalem to the rabbi group is, in Rubenstein's opinion, a consequence of the pressure of the Roman political power which decides in favor of the Pharisee whose opinions become laws. Rubenstein considers rabbinic Judaism to be the consequence of a process which sanctifies the political decisions of the Romans who tried, with the help of the Pharisee, to control one of the most important ethnic minorities.[31] In a time when the destruction of the temple was considered a major issue for the entire Judaic community, Rabbi Yohanan and his successors tried to clarify the

theological meaning of this destruction. Rabbi Yohanan reaches "a crisis of meaning" which he tries to solve by claiming that the author of the last catastrophe was God Himself and that the final meaning of these events can only be understood by accepting the fact that the chosen people was punished for disrespecting God's commandments in the way in which these commandments are understood by the Pharisee.[32]

Beside Rubenstein's criticism of such perspectives, he considers that Rabbi Yohanan possessed an incredible intuition when he realized that the only possible solution for the salvation of the Jewish community was to convey to the outside world an image of a defenseless community. This lack of defense was used as a survival strategy. However, it turned into a negative perspective in the 20th century when the Nazi politics used this lack of defense, this lack of power of the Jewish people, in order to exterminate them.[33] At the same time, it is used in the instauration of a dominating world. When Rubenstein affirms that "Auschwitz was both a slave labor and an execution center"[34] he takes into consideration the purpose of creating a new social order as well as the extermination process. This double property of the death camps is considered to be the premise of a new kind of society:

> "The death-camp system became o society of total domination only when healthy inmates were kept alive and forced to became slaves rather than killed outright. To repeat, as long as the camps served the single function of killing prisoners, one can speak of the camps as a place of mass execution but not as a new type of human society. Most of the literature on the camps has tended to stress the role of the camps as a place of execution. Regrettably, few ethical theorists or religious thinkers have paid attention to the highly significant political fact that the camp were in reality a new form of human society".[35]

Rubenstein considers the Nazi ideology and its practices as the premise for the creation of a new society similar to the one created in the death camps. Thus we realize that the problems that the Jewish people were faced with in the first part of the 20th century were not existential, moral and political problems that only concerned them. Such an ideology reveals the mechanisms with the help of which a totalitarian ideology can be imposed in a world with democratic aspirations. The Jewish issues highlighted by the Holocaust become the issues of all humanity and constitutes a pattern of thinking and operating significant for the

existence of the entire civilization. Totalitarian ideologies are a threat for the human condition and for all of humanity perceived as a whole.

The political importance and the significance which the death camps had for contemporary political ethics have been revealed by Rubenstein as follows:

> "The Camps were thus far more of a permanent threat to the human future then they would have been had they function solely as an exercise in mass killing. An execution center can only manufacture corpses; a society of total domination creates a world of the leaving dead that can serve as a prototype of a future social order, especially in a world confronted by catastrophic crises and ever-increasing, massive population redundancy ... Once a system of domination has been demonstrated to be a capability of government, it invites repetition".[36]

Rubenstein's analysis regarding the death camps, the extermination, the purpose of the genocide reveals the fact that such elements are usually part of the deliberate action of a legitimate government which, through its politics, finds such solutions for dealing with a community or with different parts of a community. Genocide is part of a dominion and a social order established by legitimate governance.[37]

The death camps describe the reality of the death of man, of the reduction of individuals to mere physical beings who are either destined to die or are destined to obey orders, who mechanically function until the final exhaustion, until the exhaustion of personal energy who is no longer a spiritual energy able to connect to a transcendent source of energy, but a mere bodily energy, biologically exhaustible. Individuals are reduced in the end to an "anonymous crowd, always renewed and always the same, a crowd of non-humans who march and labor in silence, a crowd whose the divine sparkle has disappeared... you almost feel it is not right to name their death as true death."[38]

Rubenstein is preoccupied not only with the destiny of humanity, but formulates a discourse addressed to his own community. After experiencing the Holocaust, he considers that the Jewish people must be aware and must accept the fact that they live in Godless times, even if this "death of God" is a cultural fact. By living in a world where dominant values are of Christian origin, the Jewish people must understand and accept that they live in an era marked by the death of God and influenced by such values.

Rubenstein considers that this symbolism must be accepted even if it is obvious that the symbolism of the death of God is of Christian nature.[39] He claims that the death of God is rooted in the Christian conscience which seeks the opportunities offered by this new divine epiphany. Although Judaism is not familiar with such symbolism, Rubenstein feels obliged to use this symbolism, even if he feels alien to it. This necessity comes from the fact that he cannot overcome the reality that the Jew and the Christian coexist in the same cultural universe and experiment the radical secularization of the contemporary world. This is why he considers it is not accidental that Nietzsche's Madman claims that we, the people, killed God and he is terrified by the fact that awful event took place a long time ago, which is why it might be difficult for us to comprehend it. The resemblance with the theology of the death of God determines Steven Katz to highlight "Rubenstein's indebtedness to the atheistic existentialist program of creating values through human resources and needs alone."[40] But unlike Christian theologians who claim the theology of the death of God to be an atheist perspective of the world, the utilization of this Christian symbolism is necessary for the Jewish thinker for a different purpose, for the purpose of expressing the total absence of God from the experience of the contemporary individual.[41]

Rubenstein's theory cannot be separated from the religious and cultural context of America after the war – a context only partially similar to the one in the European societies – when religious institutes started to become increasingly important, gradually transforming into social institutions, coupled with the decline of religious faith which is noticed by the researchers in the field of religion. This phenomenon is present in Christian institutions as well as in Synagogues. Unlike the traditional Jewish believer who did not question the purpose behind the accomplishment of divine commandments, the contemporary believer does not possess the certainty that by obeying the Torah, he accomplishes the divine will.[42]

One of the beliefs that the contemporary believer sees as shattered is fundamental in the Judaic community for whom "Judaism is dependent upon the belief in the historical authenticity and literary unity of the Torah."[43] The traditional Jews consider that they should fulfill the law because it was given to them by God, and in order to be a just man one must accomplish the divine commandments written in the Torah. Crucial for such a point of view is the belief that Torah is a unitary document which holds a unitary vision, and if some of the excerpts contradict one another, this contradictions are solved by rabbinic interpretation, seen as a source of oral Law. Rubenstein notices the fact that modern biblical researches reveal that Torah is not as unitary as it was thought to be and the discrepancies of the fragments which represent God's covenant with Israel raise doubts which generate insecurity and deconstruct the

certainty that a life lived according to the biblical and rabbinic teachings is in accordance with God's will.[44]

These uncertainties determine the contemporary Jew either to reject the religious practices of Judaism or to find a new founding argument for his actions. In this background, associated with the experience of the Holocaust of the European Jews, Rubenstein claims that it is necessary to abandon the fundamental myths of Judaism. He is convinced that in order to survive in a post-Holocaust world, the Jews must abandon the traditional image of God and focus on a theology of life, of existence in a world where the death of God is a cultural fact which cannot be avoided.

Even if we can trace down different elements in Rubenstein's work which can be considered pagan, they do not represent the idea of pantheism or of the reduction of sacredness to the natural world, to the biological world, forcing secularization to its limits, to the disappearance of sacredness through the transubstantiation of the sacred in the profane. In a similar manner, we can find this issue in Hans Jonas's work as well. As Silvana Procacci and Lodovico Galleni meticulously observed: "Jonas argues that a renewed theology can be reconciled both with the challenge of a secular history devoid of providential consolation and with the best evidence of the contemporary physical science of nature".[45] But nature's and man's centrality in Jonas' opinion must be understood with the help of his explanation regarding the manifestation of divinity in relation with the Holocaust. And from this perspective, we must accept the Gnostic and mystical background that Jonas offers in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice.*[46] In a similar matter, Rubenstein's paganism and naturalism must be interpreted from the perspective of the mystical visions of Judaism.

We cannot refer to the absence of God or the death of God understood as a moment of absence determined by God who chooses to turn his back on the world or to retire from the world in order to offer us the freedom of action, to offer it to a human being designed to live in the world. With Rubenstein, the death of God becomes a myth whose purpose is to be used by the Jewish people as a main tool in their strategies of surviving. At the same time, the death of God enables the rethinking of the entire religious discourse from the perspective of a relationship between the divine and the human to the perspective of an authentic relationship between man and his otherness, understood in its subjectivity and greatness. The death of God on Mount Sinai is not a moment of celebration, because as Klaus Rohmann affirms "the death of God is not a joyful event"[47], it involves the rediscovery of the human condition in the troubled present times. This rediscovery of the human being proves that death is never the end in the conscience of the Western man. As a result, this myth functions as a fundament for the creation of a politics of survival in the political order of the Western democracy.

The Death of God – From Personal Experience to Political Ethics

Gershon Greenberg shows that, except for the Jewish Orthodox communities, Jewish American thought was not focused on reflecting upon the Holocaust in the first years after the events. The discussions concerning the Holocaust had an impact on American society only after the events which took place in Israel during the War of 1976.[48] Relevant in this case is the lack of interest shown by publishers (both in Europe and America) for the publication of Wiesel's book *Night*[49] for the fact that an important work as Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* is published only in 1966.

It is important to mention that the debate regarding the Holocaust becomes important when, besides being an ethical and social issue, it becomes relevant for a political debate. This debate enables the implication of what is personal and communitarian, of what is significant from a community's perspective towards another community, it becomes important with the realization that the extermination of the innocents, the genocide, are not local issues but global concerns.

As we all know, a slogan of the feminist political philosophy reveals the fact that all which is personal is political. The importance of the personal sphere, raised to the level of political conscience, explains why the autobiographical discourse is central to the understanding of the Holocaust, as well as to the understanding of Nazism, and, as oral history shows, it becomes important for the understanding of communism as well.

The existence of the biographic element in the explanation of historical and political experiences facilitates explications by using mythical and symbolic structures. This kind of structures are often used because it is believed that a subjective experience is closer to a sacred experience, and the filtering of events through our personal experience creates some kind of familiarization with the sacred element and with the presence of God in historical action and can function as a significant element in the understanding of history.

This intervention of subjectivity generates a greater appreciation of the mythology of the death of God. The personal experience which this myth implies, as well as the collective awareness, reveals a new perspective of religious experience, of the understanding of religiousness and of the appreciations of sacredness in the life of the modern man. The attitudes, the different types of symbolic constructions, the types of behavior can be very different, and that is why we can notice the existence of strong discourses from "getting out of religion"[50] to the theorization of "the diffuse religious pathos"[51] or the growing influence of "new religious movements"[52] or the fact that religion becomes only a field for statistic analysis[53] or the fact that "religion becomes a shelter for the people in risk of social and economic exclusion"[54].

Useful for the understanding of this context is one of Rubenstein's statements:

> "The religious symbols and the God to whom the religious symbols points were never more meaningful than they are today ... God stands before us no longer as the final censor but as the final reality before which and in terms of which all partial realities are to be measured. The last paradox is that in the time of the death of God we have begun a voyage of discovery wherein we may, hopefully, find the true God".[55]

It is almost impossible for man to separate himself from religion. As the history and the philosophy of religions prove, when the individual does not invest in the connection with transcendence understood as a transmundane reality, he will seek to discover sacredness in intramundane manifestations, or he will project the dimension of sacredness upon significant elements of his aspirations and his daily life. This presence of sacredness belongs to the logic of religious symbolism which belongs to the creation mechanisms of a community. The myth of the death of God is probably the most significant myth of the contemporary world. It has the ability to generate a new beginning, a new genesis; it allows the possibility to seek and to discover the manifestation of the Presence. It is the myth that mediates the revelation of a final reality in a world in which this hides in forms that are unrecognizable from religious perspectives. The myth of the death of God is also relevant from an ethical point of view. It can be used in different circumstances, from the founding of individual morals, to the formulations of professional ethics, to the foundation of a minimal ethics or to the elaborated forms of social and political ethics.

Notes:

[2] Not even one of the optimist discourses concerning the religious presence in the global world can ignore the fact that beyond the persistence of the traditional forms in which we are accustomed to perceive the presence of religiousness "we assist ... to a double decomposition and reduction and implicitly secularisation of the religious: politic, nationalist or psychological individual, in other words to its dissolution in sentiments either collective, politically and economically instrumented, or private and focused egocentrically on individual happiness". Lavinia Elisabeta Popp, "Difficulties and Opportunities of the Spiritual Dimension

in Globalisation", *Revista de Cercetare şi Intervenţie Socială*, Vol. 36 (2012): 204. See also Marcel Gauchet, *Dezvrăjirea lumii. O istorie politică a religiei* (Bucureşti: Ed. Ştiinţifică, 1995); Gianni Vattimo, *A crede că mai credem. E cu putinţă să fim creştini în afara Bisericii?* (Constanţa: Pontica, 2005).

[3] I have discussed about the perspectives of transcendence, of the dialectics of the sacred and the profane in the context of the global communication society in Sandu Frunză, "Does communication construct reality? A New Perspective on the Crisis of Religion and the Dialectic of the Sacred", *Revista de cercetare şi intervenţie socială*, vol. 35 (2011): 180-193; Sandu Frunză, "The relational individual in a communication built society. Towards a new philosophy of communication", *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XX, No. 3 (Autumn 2011): 140-152. See also Richard Rorty, "Anticlericalism şi ateism" in Mihaela Frunză (coord.), *Feţele toleranţei*, (Iaşi: Ed. Fundaţiei Axis, 2003), 105-118; Judith Fox, "Secularization" in John R. Hinnels, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 291-305.

[4] Michael Berenbaum, *The Vision of the Void. Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979).

[5] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Mitul nazist*, translated by Nicoleta Dumitrache and Ciprian Mihali, (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1999).

[6] Elie Wiesel and Philippe-Michael de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, translated by Jon Rothschild (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 18.

[7] David Patterson, *In Dialogue and Dilemma with Elie Wiesel*, (Wakefield, New Hampshire: Longwood Academic, 1991), 21.

[8] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Translated from French by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

[9] Ellen Norman Stern, *Elie Wiesel: Witness for life* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 10.

[10] Elie Wiesel, *Souls in fire. Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (New York: Random House, 1972), 1.

[11] Ellen Norman Stern, *Elie Wiesel: Witness for life*, 13.

[12] *The Hasidic Anthology. Tales and Teaching of the Hasidism*, Translated from Hebrew, Yiddish, and German, Selected, Compiled and Arranged by Louis I. Newman, in collaboration with Samuel Spitz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 68.

[13] Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" in Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowitz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown, *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, Annotated by Elliot Lefkovitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 12.

[14] Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 3.

[15] Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers run to the Sea. Memoirs* (New York: Schoken Books, 1995), 50.

[16] Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence. The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, vol. III, Selected and Edited by Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 357.

[17] Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers run to the Sea. Memoirs* (Schoken Books, New York, 1995), 99.

[18] John K. Roth, *A Consuming Fire. Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*, Prologue by Elie Wiesel (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 60.

[19] Cristina Gavriluță, Romeo Asiminei, "The problem of evil and responsibility in Elie Wiesel's view. New perspectives on the Holocaust", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol.7, No.4, (2011): 77.

[20] Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers run to the Sea. Memoirs* (New York, Schoken Books, 1995), 111. Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, edited by Thomas J. Vinciguerra (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 56. More details concerning the religious function of memory in the context of Judaic tradition and of the Holocaust experience can be found in Sandu Frunză, "Ethics, Religion and Memory in Elie Wiesel's Night", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies,* vol. 9 issue 26 (Summer 2010): 94-113.

[21] Elie Wiesel, *The Nobel Acceptance Speech* Delivered by Elie Wiesel in Oslo December 10, 1986 in Elie Wiesel, *The Nobel Peace Prize 1986* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 118-119.

[22] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology" in Raphael Jospe and Samuel Z. Fishman (eds.), *Go and Study,* Essay and Studies in Honor of Alfred Jospe (Washington D.C.: B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, 1980), 224.

[23] Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues. Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 195. A psycho–analitical perspective is cultivated by Rubenstein in such works as Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination. A Study in Psychoanalysis and Jewish Theology* (Boston: Beacon press, 1968); Richard L. Rubenstein, *Morality & Eros* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970); Richard L. Rubenstein, *My Brother Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[24] Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard L. Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from its Beginnings" in Betty Rogers Rubenstein, Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 3.

[25] Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard L. Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from its Beginnings", 6.

[26] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After* Auschwitz, 153.

[27] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 145.

[28] Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard L. Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from its Beginnings", 3.

[29] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology", 232

[30] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology", 233. For understanding complex perspective on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity see Emmanuel Levinas, *Dificila Libertate. Eseuri despre Iudaism* (București: Hasefer, 1999), 137, 222; Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, translated by Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 163.

[31] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology", 226.

[32] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology", 226.

[33] Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Birth of Holocaust Theology", 228.

[34] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History. The Holocaust and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 47.

[35] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History,* 46. For the dangers of the genocide practice, see Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Age of Triage. Fear and Hope in an Over-crowded World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

[36] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History,* 79.

[37] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Age of Triage. Fear and Hope in an Over-crowded World* (Boston. Beacon Press, 1983).

[38] Giorgio Agamben, *Ce rămîne din Auschwitz. Arhiva şi martorul*, translation by Alexandru Cistelecan (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2006), 31. For ethical consequences of using violence, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalitate şi infinit. Eseu despre exterioritate,* trans. by Marius Lazurca (Iaşi: Polirom, 1999), 5; Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, *Despre violenţă* (Cluj : Ed. Idea Design, 2004), 7-23.

[39] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: The Bobs-Merrill Company, 1966), 244. See also Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merril Company, 1966); John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, *După moartea lui Dumnezeu*, trans. by Cristian Cercel (Bucureşti: Curtea Veche, 2007).

[40] Steven Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 190.

[41] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 245.

[42] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 228.

[43] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 228.

[44] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 228.

[45] Silvana Procacci and Lodovico Galleni, "Science & Theology and the Dialogue among Cultures: Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Jonas, Biology and Environmental Ethics", *European Journal of Science and Theology,* Vol.3, No.1 (March 2007): 13. The assumption of a minimal ethics in the spirit of postmodern thinking can be revealed in the understanding of this account: Antonio Sandu, "Post-modern Bioethical Challenges", *Revista Română de Bioetică*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January - March 2012): 87-88.

[46] Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice" in *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, edited by Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 131-143. See also Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas. Jewish Dimensions* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007); Michael S. Hogue,"Theological Ethics and Technological Culture: A Biocultural Approach", *Zygon*, Vol. 42 no. 1 (March 2007): 77-95.

[47] Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard L. Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from its Beginnings", 15.

[48] Gershon Greenberg, *The Blackwell Companion to Jewish Culture. From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Blackwell, 1990), 350-351.

[49] Nowadays, Wiesel's book is studied in high schools and colleges, and Rubenstein's book, after generating a scandal and being considered injurious by a part of the Jewish community, is a book which cannot be ignored when discussing the theological and philosophical meaning of the Holocaust.

[50] Marcel Gauchet, *Ieşirea din Religie*, trans. by Mona Antohi (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2006).

[51] Francoise Champion, "Spirit religios difuz, eclectism şi sincretisme" in Jean Delumeau (coord.), *Religiile lumii*, (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1996).

[52] Nicu Gavriluţă, *Mișcări religioase orientale. O perspectivă socio-antropologică asupra globalizării practicilor yoga* (Cluj: Provopress, 2006). See also Nicu Gavriluţă, "Science and Religion in the New Age Mentality", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (September 2012): 65-71.
[53] Claudiu Herteliu, "Statistical Indicators System Regarding Religious Phenomena", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies,* vol. 6 issue 16 (2007): 115-131.
[54] Corina Cace, Sorin Cace, Victor Nicolăescu, "The Social Programs Run by the Romanian Orthodox Church During the period of the Economic Crisis", *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială* Vol. 35, (2011): 28-45. The importance of the relationship between the social condition of individuals and the values they share can be traced down in consecrated texts as well as in newer researches like that of Stefan Cojocaru, Daniela Cojocaru, Constantin Brăgaru, Raluca Purcaru, "The Influence of Religious Affiliation of Vulnerable Families on Their Investments and Consumption. Secondary Analysis of a Program Evaluation", *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială* Vol. 35, (2011): 93-107.
[55] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 241.

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