GOD'S ACTION IN HISTORY

KLAUS VON STOSCH

University of Paderborn

Abstract. The explication of the Christian hope of resurrection requires Christianity to spell out the way in which God actually deals in the world. Only if we succeed, with regard to past, present, and future, in making the talk of God's special action in history plausible, are we able to reasonably assert essential Christian beliefs. Yet due to past horrors, present ongoing suffering, and a future that promises of little else, it is precisely this talk that has become doubtful. This article tries to describe God's action as a process enabling freedom and love in order to develop a theodicy-sensitive speech about God's action.

I. EXPOSITION OF THE PROBLEM

> The writer Elie Wiesel tells the story of a small group of Jews who were gathered to pray in a little synagogue in Nazi-occupied Europe. As the service went on, suddenly a pious Jew who was slightly mad – for all pious Jews were by then slightly mad – burst in through the door. Silently he listened for a moment as the prayers ascended. Slowly he said: 'Shh, Jews! Do not pray so loud! God will hear you. Then He will know that there are still some Jews left alive in Europe.' (Fackenheim 1970a: 67)

What becomes clear in this narrative written by Jewish Auschwitz-survivor Elie Wiesel is how much the National-Socialist mass murder of Jews has challenged the belief in YHWH's ability to powerfully intervene in history. The Bible testifies to a God who has repeatedly intervened to save his people. Yet this narrative portrays him as an all-devouring demon. If one doesn't want to accept the claim that God's character has changed, the only solution seems to be to infer that God has obviously lost his power and can now only impotently observe evil from the sidelines.

Due to metaphysical developments arguing that God is more limited than traditionally construed this option is admittedly somewhat popular in the contemporary theological and philosophy-of-religion debate. However, this proposal would demand nothing less than that the main strand of Jewish and Christian tradition abandon its identity. For the experience of God's action in history is not only the root of Jewish identity and Israel's testimony of faith; it is also a fundamental feature of Christian belief.

Thus if increasingly many people struggle to conceive of God as acting in history, and if this approach has indeed been 'wholly lost, the God of history is Himself lost' (Fackenheim 1970a: 79). Hence the question arises how traditional Jewish and Christian belief can still be defended at all.

Despite the uniqueness of its horror, the National-Socialist mass murder is but one among many testimonies against God's action in history. For Christian belief, since this atrocity was directed against the very people whose testimony upholds Christians' traditional belief in God's historical action, these unutterable horrors thus threaten belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, according to Christian testimony, has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as God for all people, today as much as 70 years ago. Historical-critical exegesis of the Bible indicates that, according to Biblical testimony, it is only in retrospect that people understand the ways in which God has dealt with them.

Accompanied by one's grateful memory of God's salvation, it is exactly this view that Auschwitz calls into question. How is it possible to give thanks to God for a full life and his guidance, if innumerable people have, for no reason, been butchered? How to rely on the power of intercession, if so many screams have gone unanswered? Can I still thank God for his signs of love and faithfulness in my life, if innumerable people have waited for these signs in vain? May I still give praise to God's providence and power in history, if this power has done nothing to stop the million-fold murder of innocent children, or if the belief in providence has, because of its abuse in the form of ideologies, been widely discredited?

Caused by Auschwitz, questions of this sort are not only unavoidable for Jewish reflection on faith, but almost even more for Christians. Since the history of horrors and suffering did not stop after the Nazis but has occurred recently – remember the unimaginable cruelties of the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 – it is therefore understandable, that, in both

Jewish and Christian reflection on belief, the confession of God as the loving and powerful guide of history, and the strong leader of his people out of Egypt, rebels against utterance. History as a place of encounter with God has become questionable. What becomes even stronger in the face of these horrors, however, is the yearning for this God and his justice. Believers, therefore, increasingly turn from gratefully remembering God's action in history to deeply longing for it.

With belief reduced to this experience, it makes sense to ask what can ground this hope, if there is so little evidence of God's presence today. On which powerful signs, that can still be experienced today, can the belief in God as someone who directs history, be based? Neglecting this question threatens to expose religious belief to the suspicion of being based on unfounded hopes, offering insight only into what human beings long for. Yet it is deeply unsatisfying to assume without further inquiry that God is active today. Accordingly, the boom enjoyed by the talk of God's action in evangelical groups and mainline charismatic movements is an increasing irritant, as this talk ignores all of the challenges bequeathed by the modern era. Apparently, in searching for comfort, more and more people are turning a blind eye to the horrific challenges of claims to God's action, and in suppressing critical inquiries they surrender themselves to the desire for his presence.

Admittedly, such naive talk of the presence of God and his action is understandable in light of its ability to bring relief. But in the light of the history of suffering it has lost its innocence. Since the aforementioned questions can no longer be put aside (if they ever could), the abovementioned questions make it indispensable for any theology which asserts God's action in history to be sensitive to the question of theodicy.

From what has been said so far, it should have become clear that the explication of the Christian hope of resurrection requires Christianity to spell out the way in which God actually deals in the world. Only if we succeed, with regard to past, present, and future, in making the talk of God's special action in history plausible, we are able to reasonably assert essential Christian beliefs. Yet due to past horrors, present ongoing suffering, and a future that promises of little else, it is precisely this talk that has become doubtful. As the talk of God's action in the world is indispensable for the Christian message, the all important question for me is therefore whether it can be developed side by side with concern for worldly suffering.

II. GOD'S ACTION AS A PROCESS ENABLING FREEDOM AND LOVE

The standard solution of contemporary Christian theology consists in defining God's action from the viewpoint of love and tracing the horrors of history back to human abuse of freedom. The background of this thought is formed by the idea that the relationship between God and man is understood as dialogical and free. In this relationship, it is imagined, God tries to win man's love by means of love alone. From this perspective, God's ultimate goal of creation and the focus of his action consist in his intention to win 'co-lovers'. This relationship is not based on any achievements of the creature or needs of the creator, but forms an end in itself. It is based on nothing other than in the free and original decision to enable freedom for others. Accordingly, God's act of creation is already spelled out in terms of acting out of freedom and creating out of nothing.

> Their connexion [of creator and creature; K.v.S.] is not conditioned by anything except freedom, which means that it is unconditioned. Hence every use of a causal category for understanding the act of creation is ruled out. Creator and creature cannot be said to have a relation of cause and effect, for between Creator and creature there is neither a law of motive nor a law of effect nor anything else. (Bonhoeffer 1959: 31)

If God's relationship to his creation is imagined as free and thus unable to be understood in terms of causal yet personal categories, it must – as Bonhoeffer goes on to explain – be based on creation out of nothing. Moreover, creation out of nothing is to be imagined as the creator's free self-limitation and as a reproduction of the inter-Trinitarian relationship of love. Just as it is the essential characteristic of love 'that the loving person limits her- or himself on behalf of the beloved' (Jüngel 1990b: 154, my translation), God enables the freedom of his creation by limiting himself and creating the world as an end in itself.

God, in every moment of history, must be thought of as the foundation enabling natural evolution and freedom (*creatio continua*). With his work of creation based in nothing but uncaused love, God makes possible a relationship of free and mutual recognition with his creatures, remaining radically true to it in every moment of history.

The radical nature of this faithfulness and the seriousness of God's invitation to love can be seen in the fact that God uncompromisingly and exclusively uses love to win man over. Indeed, God tries to win mankind over even when they strongly deny his goodness:

> God wouldn't be truly serious in his relationship with humankind if he didn't endorse it uncompromisingly; if he, so to speak, had other means than love up his sleeve to exercise his power over humankind. God really banks on the power of love and he does not make recourse to other means. (Werbick 1985: 114, my translation)

On this view (which is centrally anchored in Christian tradition), the freedom to love is thus the fundamental goal of God's creation. God's most important intention, which can therefore help to identify his action, is to promise (himself as) love to mankind, with this promise taking fundamental shape in the action of Jesus. Thus God's intention is realized all the more when people act out of love. Yet love is only itself, if it is not manipulated by others, and can by definition only be based on an independent decision. Therefore, if God's intention is to enable love to set mankind free, and if love is only possible if free, then God can realize his intention in this world only. That is, he must act by setting mankind free and showing them love, without manipulating them into loving him but rather just affirming and encouraging it.

From this perspective, God's will is realized, if human beings, in their words and actions, 'mutually attribute the meaning of their being to each other by making each other aware of their freedom and by affirming and recognizing each other in freedom, i.e. by loving each other' (Pröpper 2001: 238, my translation). And on this view, held among others by Thomas Pröpper, the most radical event of God's special action in the world – which the Christian tradition regards as miraculous – can be nothing other than the realization of God's intention that we freely recognize each other and him.

At this point, it is crucially important not to define divine and human action as being in competition. Otherwise one would always have to ask how divine action can be operative at all if free agents decide in favour of one another. The point of the foregoing, rather, is that, with regard to events in the world, divine and human freedom are directly – not inversely – proportional. The more a human being realizes her or his freedom, the more God acts in her or him, and the more the intention of divine freedom becomes true through his or her action. If a human being loves, God acts through her or him.

> 'Love comes from God' (1 John 4:7), and: 'Ubi caritas, ibi deus est – et agit.' Wherever human beings are enabled to do what they do not naturally tend to do – i.e., overcoming their egotism – and to surpass themselves

> so as to become human beings for others, God is acting through human beings. (Kessler 2002: 290, my translation)

The underlying idea of this personal-action theory must not be misunderstood. It does not claim that individuals are unfree. It claims rather that the innermost possibility of free self-determination is ultimately made possible by God's action. The highest dimension of human autonomy is, in its very autonomy, willed and supported by God. Thus the more I change the world in an attitude of love, the more God's intention with his creation becomes reality. But how can my freedom and autonomy grow by God's action? Is not my freedom rather restricted by God's giving a new direction to my life?

III. GOD'S ACTION AS ENABLING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIFE

I believe that an insight of Jürgen Werbick's can help us see things more clearly. In defining the notion of God's omnipotence, he ascribes to God the power 'to overcome the lack of alternatives in times of natural and quasi-natural inevitabilities' and, in this way, to call upon human beings to use their freedom. (Werbick 2004: 109, my translation) Werbick adds:

> To enable freedom means to offer opportunities (S. Kierkegaard) and to offer real opportunities, to the extent of generating a practicable vision for the future that can, against mere necessity, really be chosen. (Werbick 2004: 110, my translation)

God's action as enabling freedom can thus be understood as God pointing out to us new opportunities for living and new alternatives for behaving. Since men and women are not forced to choose the new alternative, God's action preserves his or her complete autonomy. The choice is completely left to her or him. Yet God can try to woo man, to call upon him, and to attract him, by offering and granting new life opportunities. Precisely in his perpetual enabling of different perspectives and possibilities of rescue from impasses, God can therefore realize his freedom without reducing human freedom but rather increasing it. From this perspective, God's calling to us can be discovered in all conditions of life, offering to integrate us into his plan in a way appropriate to us. J. R. Lucas illustrates this thought, as suggested by Brümmer, by pointing to the allegory of a Persian carpet maker who, together with his children, manufactures a carpet. 'In his wisdom and sovereignty the father manages to integrate all of his children's mistakes into the emerging pattern, by continually

revising the way in which he envisions the final product, thus creating a perfect design. – God acts in a dialogical and responsive way.' (Bernhardt 1999: 156, my translation) Thus from this perspective, God cannot determine his creatures' decisions, but he can motivate and inspire them to do his will.

> In this Trinitarian way, however, God's agency is not coercive but enabling and motivating and therefore does not deny freedom, responsibility, or personal integrity of the human agent through whose action God realizes his will. On the contrary, it is still up to us as human agents to do God's will, and if we decide not to (in spite of being enlightened, enabled, and motivated) then God's will is not done. (Brümmer 2008: 75f.)

God could therefore be understood as the author of a novel, designing a good overall story from the personalities and behaviours of his characters.

It is by inspiring them with his will that God lays claim to the will and the action of human beings, but it remains up to the individual to cooperate with God or not. The effectiveness of God's action and the freedom of the creaturely actors are also combined in the thinking of Austin Farrer. Very much in the sense outlined above of a direct proportional relationship between divine and human freedom, Farrer even assumes that human freedom is strengthened by God's influence.

Assuming a relationship of this kind implies, of course, the basic assumption of relational theism saying that the belief that God wants to have a relationship with us and that he has therefore freely decided to make some of his actions contingent on our needs and actions. According to this conception, there is something like a freely chosen contingency in God. God does not get everything he wants. However, he can always try to realize his intention; he might for instance try to win the free individual by acting through other human beings, or by pointing to new possibilities for life.

> Thus, God influences history through his word and his spirit, but with very flexible plans which always respect the freedom of the individual. Man's free decision to use his abilities and to take control obviously seems to be meaningful to God himself; he does not ignore or force this decision; he tries to win man over for and to ask for it. (Greshake 1997: 302, my translation)

In the light of the considerations advanced so far, there now seem to be two possibilities for defining the relationship between divine and human action. According to the first, there is a strict identity between divine and human action. In this case, the autonomy of creaturely action is maintained, so long as the relationship is conceived as God acting through human actors. In this sense, I believe, we can understand Werbick's aforementioned idea as God's acting where his will is done.

The second possibility construes God's action in pointing out new alternatives to man as being mediated differently. Rather than being identical, human and divine action are dialogically related. The idea is that human action can be understood as response to the divine demonstration of different opportunities for life. We might also appeal to Trinitarian theology to try to define and to substantiate both ways of action more precisely. In the sense of strict identity, we might conceive of God's action through human actors as mediated through God's self-manifestation in the logos. Moreover, we might conceive of God's dialogical action in offering new opportunities for life as mediated through God's self-manifestation in the Spirit.

The liberating impact of the Spirit can therefore always be perceived by those who cease to feel coerced, controlled by circumstances, and who begin to choose their way for themselves. As long as we no longer allow ourselves to be controlled by borders and compulsions, and as long as we stand up against the exploitation of people for whatever means, we can perceive the Spirit. It becomes reality so long as we do not surrender to the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but consciously live according to our own convictions and thus enable community with another being. One could therefore say that the Spirit's action cannot be realized without the concrete performance of freedom – already enabled by that same Spirit – which is what positions one in a dialogical and free relationship.

What is meant here, can, in a limited way, already be experienced in love. Lovers, by performing acts of love and commitment and by living through and for the other person, experience freedom and a new form of being oneself. Love makes the requirements of everyday life seem less important. Habits and circumstances lose the power to shape one's life and all of life's performances are influenced by the image of the other person. In this way new opportunities for life and new beginnings emerge. In this way 'lovers are, at least a little bit and maybe only for a certain time, endowed with independence from other requirements and from the "obsessions" of everyday life, as a future is opened up to

them which offers much brighter prospects than those which could be provided and secured through cunning calculation'.

It is exactly this experience of liberation through love that shows how close the connection is between the freedom worked by the Spirit and the experience of love. Just as freedom is the condition of possibility of love, freedom is actually carried and made possible by love. Yet in the light of the darknesses of history, one can still ask how it is possible to speak this affirmatively of love and freedom. How can God's power in history be spoken of in this way by someone who is sensitive to the history of suffering of this world?

IV. CRITERIA FOR THEODICY-SENSITIVE SPEECH ABOUT GOD'S ACTION

First of all, it is important that our speech concerning divine action contain vulnerability and moments of irritation and uncertainty. Yet from the perspective of practical reason, this vulnerability and uncertainty is not justified, but is based on the ongoing impossibility of become reconciled with God's creation. As long as human beings are tortured to death or perish miserably in floods, theology of history cannot resist bafflement or irritation. Therefore, we must not try to protect our beliefs in God by aiming for an unshakable foundation, but must speak in a sensitive way that takes into account our place in history.

Moreover, we must neither identify the course of history with God's good will, nor try to mask outrageous injustice and suffering that is simply not supposed to be happening. Divine action must rather be understood in such a way that it cannot be identified with the history of the winners. Like W. Benjamin's notion of the 'angel of history' (Benjamin 2003: 392), God's action, in its 'power of powerlessness', has to be conceived as an attempt to put an end to mankind's criminal delusions. It must be imagined as wanting to enable new beginnings even after the most disastrous effects of natural laws. As the angel, God does not look away from the ruins of history, instead remaining to put back together what has been smashed. Yet his efforts are repeatedly ruined by mankind's delusionary belief in the progress of history and men's abuse of freedom related to it. The image of the angel of history portrays God as a lasting authority who can be called upon to act against the wrongdoings and catastrophes of history, even if this means to do what Job does: to call on

God against God. Even though we are faced with a horrendous history tolerated by God, the only possible saving authority is God himself.

The tension of calling on God against God cannot, of course, be maintained endlessly. On the contrary, we must be able to enjoy confidence that God will ultimately in his all-embracing goodness and mercy bring true salvation and justice. Yet history constantly frustrates this confidence, leaving us to express it as eschatological unrest. For only by God's bringing an end to history can we hope that his goodwill will be realized everywhere – for in this case it will be the only remaining power able to shape reality. Only then can we hope that God in his holy power will make his presence felt in all things.

The abovementioned eschatological hope is based on God's self-revelation in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The belief in Jesus' resurrection can, moreover, help make it clear that God's saving will can even persevere in the most hopeless of situations. Yet looking at the cross reminds us that there is no certainty that God's will will be done in the world, because (as we have seen) he limits himself to the means of love. It reminds us that his Good News too often seems to be frustrated by the factual course of history. Moreover, looking at the ceaseless repetition of human suffering as unbearable as that of the cross forbids theology from speaking confidently of victory. Because the fullness of God's presence has not yet arrived, theological speech must continually be cognizant of the abovementioned eschatological tension.

Faced with the monstrous extent of human guilt, theological speech, must also avoid spelling out God's goodness and mercy without including mention of his justice. We must not demand God's all-embracing and saving closeness without also demanding that he enforces justice. Otherwise it would be impossible to communicate God's will to save everyone to a concentration-camp survivor. At this point, Christian thinkers and pastors, who sometimes speak carelessly of reconciliation and love, have a good deal to learn from the emphasis placed by Jewish theology on God's justice.

Yet theology will continue to insist, in the tradition of Paul and Luther, on spelling out God's justice as 'making righteous'; it will thus become clear that no amount of guilt can put an end either to God's will for reconciliation or to his willingness to love. Yet faced with the severity and the incomprehensibility of the guilt, one can only warn of thinking divine reconciliation through to the end in an all-too-human way without any irritation. Instead of working out a theory of final

reconciliation in terms of the doctrine of apocatastasis, we must try to maintain the tension between the demand for justice and the hope of reconciliation. Only in God's incomprehensibility, which can only be explicated as limit-concept, can the possibility be maintained that God's love, making just without also dissolving justice, can even seek and be reconciled to the worst of criminals.

Moreover, in this context it is important to consider (as we have seen in history) that we cannot have reconciliation without also remembering injustice. Therefore, another feature of a theodicy-sensitive theology is its anamnetic outline. For not only is the core of Christian belief formed by the remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ, but the history of the people of Israel, which is so crucial for Christian belief, is characterized by a horrifying history of suffering combined with the Israelites' unparalleled willingness to remember it. Therefore God's action cannot simply ignore past suffering. Accordingly, a theodicy-sensitive talk of God must – non-negotiably – contain the hope that a history of suffering can be inwardly transformed, making it possible to affirm life without turning a blind eye to one's own suffering or that of others. Moreover, by holding fast to the hope of God's transforming power, we must not forget the sufferings of others and must expect transformation and new creation for everyone.

Thus apart from remembering and recognizing our own suffering, it cannot be overemphasized that we must do likewise – and even more so – with regard to the sufferings of others, and indeed even of our enemies. Thus understood, God's action in making one aware of reality would always imply a sharpening of our perception of its painful aspects. Instead of perceiving only reality's pleasant facets, we must perceive its ambivalent entirety. This means being attentive to the perspective of the underdogs and the unfortunate.

Sensitivity to theodicy thus always also means sensitivity to suffering as an indelible part of reality. Only the perception of another person's suffering enables me to see reality fully. If appreciation of reality is meant to be the basic motivation for human beings as well as the basic challenge for human reason, then it is precisely here where an important moment of theodicy-sensitive action of God can be found which has to be explicated. In this context we can notice that it is not only the Christian tradition in which sensitivity to reality, in particular to the sufferings of others, promotes spiritual perfection and encounter with ultimate reality. However, if awareness of the history of another's suffering, and

appreciation of reality in its entirety, are regarded as moments of divine action, they cannot be conceived of without a total respect for the dignity of the suffering person. What follows from this insight is that we must never speak of God's action in the world in a way that loses from view the dignity of the individual with her or his history of suffering. For we misunderstand the Jewish and Christian God if we fail to grasp that his action calls upon us to appreciate every other individual and that he never considers human beings as a means but rather as an end in themselves. Since, if in the logic of the deuteronomistic theology of history, Israel's opponents are regarded as 'instruments of God' and are therefore reduced to mere means in the divine plan of salvation, they cannot be appreciated by God as persons. They turn from subjects to mere instruments of divine action as they realize their devastating intentions and thus forfeit their own dignity. In the context of the deuteronomistic theology of history, when they fulfil God's plan to punish Israel, they do serve a purpose intended by YHWH in calling Israel to turn back to him from their sins. Yet this action does not provide Israel's opponents with any value, and the biblical testimonies are compatible with the insight that, although these people degrade themselves to mere means in this context, God will also call them in their dignity to be enactors of his will elsewhere.

Apparently, however, God has categorically decided himself not to implement his goodwill without his creatures' participation. And it is exactly in this decision in which the highest appreciation of man by God can be found. For man has not only been created as an object of God's love entitled to love him back, but has been empowered to encourage others with the love of God and to therefore himself give shape to the reality of God's action. Only in acknowledging God's action in inviting man to participate in the appreciation of reality and to fight gratuitous suffering is a theodicy-sensitive speech of God's action in the world possible. A final criterion of any theodicy-sensitive talk of God's action in the world finally is that it must be introduced into a practice that anticipatorily makes present what is eschatologically expected from God: to comfort all who mourn, to cure the sick, to encourage the frightened, to overcome injustice and to establish a community that, in reconciled diversity, excludes nobody. We must talk of God as someone who, here and now, rescues us from bondage, who will lead one through the desert to her or his promised land. To do this we must oppose any form of human enslavement, refresh the hungry and thirsty in the deserts of

life, and open up life-perspectives for others which recognize them even when they differ from us.

We can summarize the criteria as follows: Theodicy-sensitive talk of God's action must

- remain vulnerable (by referring to history) and react with uncertainty and shock to suffering
- have an anamnetic outline and, when turning towards God and speaking of his promises, be unwilling to forget the past sufferings of the world
- be mindful of the whole reality, describing God's action as sharpening our perception for the painful aspects of reality. A crucial aspect to be sensitive to, here, is to recognize the dignity of the suffering person
- It must be conceived as resistance and protest against outrageous injustice and take seriously that the claim that man has been appreciated and empowered by God to participate in transforming the world by the power of divine love
- It must be characterized by eschatological unrest, and must point towards the final implementation of God's goodness and justice, while also trying to make it present here and now.

We have yet to see whether these criteria can be sustained in the face of the ultimate challenge to God's action in the world: the barbaric mass murder of Jews during National Socialist rule in Germany. For not only must our criteria reject clearly cynical claims concerning God's action in the concentration camps, it must sustain the possibility of talking about an exceptional action of God's even in the harshest catastrophe. Only if both conditions are met can the criteria be considered justified and can we accept them as basic coordinates for speaking of God's action in the world.

V. AUSCHWITZ AS A TEST FOR THE CRITERIOLOGY DEVELOPED ABOVE

In the light of Auschwitz, the attempt to offer a comprehensive theory would, of course, be misguided from the outset. Thus the following intends merely to collect a few examples of theological speech of divine action in the interest of ascertaining whether the criteria compiled above are appropriate.

A first example of an attempt to talk about God's action in Auschwitz is that of an inmate thanking God for sparing him during the daily 'selections'. Each day the Nazis selected and killed those who were no longer capable of hard labour. In this situation, a behaviour that is very likely for a pious Jew (just as it is for a Christian in a comparable situation) is to pray that God spare him. However, the Nazis (at least in the example discussed here) deliberately and perversely always sent a fixed number of forced labourers death, so that God's answer to one person's prayer would have meant another person's death. Hearing a fellow inmate's prayer of thanksgiving after such a selection, Primo Levi, an Auschwitz-survivor, describes his thoughts:

> Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.
>
> Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas-chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?
>
> If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer. (Levi 1960: 151)

Comparing Levi's criticism with the criteriology developed above, one could say that Kuhn's prayer of thanks violates at least two of the abovementioned criteria. Therefore his prayer cannot be regarded as legitimation for a theology after Auschwitz. I do not want to be misunderstood here. It would be patronising in the extreme to say how a person facing death must pray, and I am in no position to do so. But one needs to consider Metz's frequently invoked dictum that after Auschwitz we may only speak of and to God because the inmates at Auschwitz prayed. And faced with Metz's dictum, we must also consider which forms of prayer and confession can, faced with these horrors, carry the burden of legitimation and which can definitely not.

We have seen two reasons why Kuhn's prayer seems unable to carry this burden. First, it neglects the suffering of the other person. Kuhn does not take into account that he has been saved only because Beppo will die.

In this case, God's saving intervention is impossible: one cannot be saved without the other being killed. With God loving every person equally, he will never overrule creaturely autonomy for the sake of exchanging one person's life for another person.

It would be a different story if an inmate prayed that God free the Nazis from their logic of death and destruction and release all prisoners. If we grant that human beings have free will then, as we have argued above, we must realize that God will not fulfil this prayer by manipulating the Nazis' minds. He will instead try to motivate him with love to abandon his criminal behaviour. If the Nazi closes his mind to God's pleading, however, Kuhn cannot be helped. There are thus no grounds to thank God for having been spared. As a result of the criminal madness of the Nazis, in the situation depicted above God accordingly has no direct possibility of intervening to change Kuhn's fate. At the same time, Levi expressly states that it is impossible for human beings to make this catastrophe right again. Therefore, he does not criticise to expect the final and eschatological implementation of God's goodness and justice in eschatological unrest.

At the end of the same book about his experiences in Auschwitz, Primo Levi mentions another example of speech about God's action in Auschwitz. At the time this incident happened, Levi took it to involve God's action, rejecting this interpretation only when he later lost his faith in God. In it, at the end of his shocking descriptions of everyday life in Auschwitz, he describes an Allied air raid on the concentration camp which SS officers had already abandoned, reporting that the wind prevented the still inhabited barracks from being burned. After all the horrors he experienced, when recalling this event he does not dare to explain it in terms of God's action. But nevertheless he acknowledges: 'But without doubt in that hour the memory of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity passed like a wind through all our minds.' (Levi 1960: 187)

Even if Levi, due to losing his faith, does not want prayers of thanks to be offered in this situation, they can, in fact, be used as a basis for discussion about talk of God's action in Auschwitz. So long as this speech does not paper over the ungodly horrors of Auschwitz, and so long as it does not ignore the suffering that continues in spite of alleged divine action, the above criteria for theodicy-sensitive speech about divine action would probably be met. At the same time and in contrast to the example of Kuhn's prayer, no manipulation of human freedom of will

would be required. Influencing the wind could rather occur within the randomness of natural law and therefore remain hidden to science.

Action in the randomness of the laws of nature thus allows for God to offer some form of limited help amidst such horrors. It cannot, however, assuage matters altogether. A third example reports how, after an extermination campaign in the gas chambers of crematorium I in Auschwitz, a sixteen year old girl is found still living under the dead bodies. The physician reporting on this incident remarks that nothing like this had never happened before and could only be explained by a whole series of fortunate events.

This incident interrupts the usual mania of extermination and powerfully reminds those involved in the 'Sonderkommando' of what they are actually doing. With the members of the 'Sonderkommando' still thinking what to do now, 'Oberscharführer' Mußfeld, the SS supervisor, discovers the girl. Mußfeld's job is to manage crematorium I and those who daily murder small groups of inmates. The physician in charge has a good relationship with him and implores him to spare the girl. He suggests that the girl might be secretly integrated into a group of women engaged in road building.

In this situation, Mußfeld is confronted with the possibility of ceasing his murderous behaviour at least once. This singular incident even forces him to face up to his criminal behaviour altogether. He must and can choose, and does not have the excuse that he has no choice.

For me, everything said above, seems to point toward understanding this situation as God's calling Mußfeld, trying (without force) to move the murderer and so win his freedom. He does not use force to change the SS man but powerfully tries to win him over. But his call remains unheeded. Mußfeld fears that the girl 'in her naivety' will talk of her rescue and cause difficulties for him. His fears deafen him to God's call and he resumes his murderous mania. Yet his courage to kill the girl has vanished, maybe because he feels that in her the face of God has become so close to him. So he recruits a colleague to commit the murder and continues to function in the killing machinery of the camp.

Many such examples can be found in which perpetrators had choices to stop but did not. For me, they seem to make it possible, even when faced with Auschwitz, to confess God as someone trying to win over human beings even in the deepest misery and as someone trying to free them from their barbaric mania of extermination. But he does not force people. He does not prevent the gas from pouring out by intervening in

the natural laws, but tries to stop the murderous action by confronting the murderers with the face of the girl. If, therefore, the SS men refuse to be freed, then even God's ability to rescue is thwarted.

However, we are not only baffled with the question whether God's mercy on the murderers goes too far. We can also ask why he seems to remain silent when people cry for help. In this respect, Awraham S., an Auschwitz-survivor, reports:

> There was a Hungarian rabbi, and we came back from the square, fewer children, far fewer. Then he said that we should start the prayer. And suddenly he looked up at the sky and half in Yiddish, half in German, he said: 'My dear God, if you exist, if you are there, give a sign! Now is the time! Have you seen what they have done to our children? Is a God there in heaven? Then answer! Do something!

No one knows whether the rabbi was given an answer. In any case, he did not receive the sign he wanted, which was that children be saved. The author of this collection of testimonies therefore remarks:

> Of an answer nothing is reported. Who could look these children in the face, blue from the gas and with their fingernails torn open from suffocation, and say to them: your death makes sense. (Fruchtmann 1982: 16)

Yet we must take care here. With regard to the current discussions of the question of theodicy this problem can be solved without making the perverse claim that sense can be made of the death of innocent children: we can maintain the claim that God is active even in Auschwitz. With regard to the sign demanded by the rabbi, we must only note that such a sign could not have consisted in stopping the Nazis against their will. For this is impossible if God is conceived as someone who is indeed willing to forgive unconditionally and who wants to use only love to win people's freedom. Whether the rabbi was given an answer is left open by the witness whom Fruchtmann quotes and cannot be speculated upon. Signs on one's own journey cannot be recognized from the outside.

What should be clear by now, however, is that neither the examples we have discussed, nor the need to allow for the possibility of signs unnoticed by others, allows us to maintain belief in providence in its traditional form. We must agree with Leo B., another survivor:

> There is no providence. And if providence exists, and if God exists, then he is not a good God, he is a God of destruction, a God of vengeance, no good God!

> For, I saw people dying in Auschwitz, children dying in Auschwitz, who were good, who had done nothing yet, and who did not even have the opportunity of doing anything. I knew people who were the best people one can ever imagine and who perished – who were beaten to death or were killed or starved, starved without anyone – without a godly hand – ever doing anything!

In light of the unfortunate situation that God time and again does not intervene to save, and in light of our repeatedly frustrated prayers, we are forced to diverge from the traditional belief in providence. Speaking of God must leave room for protest, and the belief in some form of providence can only be developed if it does not lead us to reconcile ourselves with what is happening.

However, it seems to me that the suggestions developed here can, even in light of the testimonies from Auschwitz, allow for theodicy-sensitive talk of God's action in history. People's agony – and their hope to be saved from it – should forbid an abandonment of the eschatological unrest and the hope in God's powerful presence by eliminating the possibility to speak of a special divine action in the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adler, Hans G., et al. (eds) 1979. *Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte*, 2nd ed. (Köln-Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt)

Ben-Chorin, Schalom. 1986. *Als Gott schwieg: Ein jüdisches Credo* (Mainz: Grünewald)

Benjamin, Walter. 1991. *Abhandlungen: Gesammelte Schriften I/2*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Surkamp), pp. 691-704

Benjamin, Walter. 2003. 'On the Concept of History', in Howard S. Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Belknap Press), pp. 389-400

Bernhardt, Reinhold. 1999. *Was heißt 'Handeln Gottes?', Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus)

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1959. *Creation and Fall: Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* (New York: Macmillan)

Brümmer, Vincent. 2008. *What are we doing when we pray? On Prayer and the Nature of Faith* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing)

Fackenheim, Emil L. (ed.) 1970. *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper and Row)

Fackenheim, Emil L. 1970a. 'The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz', in Emil L. Fackenheim (ed.), *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 67-104

Fackenheim, Emil L. 1970b. 'The Structure of Jewish Experience', in Emil L. Fackenheim(ed.), *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 3-34

Farrer, Austin. 1964. *Saving Belief: A Discussion of Essentials* (London: Hodder & Stoughton)

Farrer, Austin. 1967. *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology Containing the Deems Lectures for 1964* (London: Adam & Charles Black)

Fruchtmann, Karl. 1982. *Zeugen. Aussagen zum Mord an einem Volk* (Köln: Kiepenheuer &Witsch)

Gasser, Georg & Josef Quitterer (eds). 2010. *Die Aktualität des Seelenbegriffs. Interdisziplinäre Zugänge* (Paderborn et.al.: Ferdinand Schöningh)

Geach, Peter. 1977. *Providence and Evil: The Stanton Lectures 1971-2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Greshake, Gisbert. 1997. *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder)

Jüngel, Eberhard. 1990a. *Wertlose Wahrheit: Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen III*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 107 (München: Mohr Siebeck)

Jüngel, Eberhard. 1990b. 'Gottes ursprüngliches Anfangen als schöpfe-rische Selbstbegrenzung', in Eberhard Jüngel, *Wertlose Wahrheit: Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen III*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 107 (München: Mohr Siebeck), pp. 151-162

Jüngel, Eberhard. 2001. *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck)

Kessler, Hans. 2002. *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten: Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi in biblischer, fundamentaltheologischer und systematischer Sicht. Erweiterte Neuauflage* (Würzburg: Echter)

Levi, Primo. 1960. *If This is a Man*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Orion Press)

Lucas, John R. 1976. *Freedom and Grace. Essays* (London: Eerdmans)

Marcus, Marcel, Ekkehard W. Stegemann & Erick Zenger (eds). 1991. *Israel und Kirche heute. Beiträge zum christlich-jüdischen Dialog. Für Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder)

Metz, Johann B. 1990. 'Theologie als Theodizee?', in Willi Oelmüller (ed.), *Theodizee – Gott vor Gericht?* (München: Wilhelm Fink), pp. 103-118

Metz, Johann B. 1991. 'Kirche nach Auschwitz', in Marcel Marcus, Ekkehard W. Stegemann & Erick Zenger (eds), *Israel und Kirche heute. Beiträge zum christlich-jüdischen Dialog. Für Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder), pp. 110-122

Nyiszli, Miklós. 1979. 'Sonderkommando', in Hans G. Adler et al. (eds), *Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte*, 2nd ed. (Köln-Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt), pp. 64-73

Oelmüller, Willi (ed.). 1990. *Theodizee – Gott vor Gericht?* (München: Wilhelm Fink)

Petersen, Birte. 1998. *Theologie nach Auschwitz? Jüdische und christliche Versuche einer Antwort. Mit einem Vorwort v. O.H. Pesch*, 2nd ed., VIKJ 24 (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum)

Pinnock, Clark & Richard Rice et al. 1994. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove/Ill: InterVarsity Press)

Pröpper, Thomas. 2001. *Evangelium und Vernunft: Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder)

Sanders, John. 1998. *The God Who Risks. A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove/Ill: InterVarsity Press)

Schmidt, Werner H. 1985. *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 3rd ed. (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter)

Stosch, Klaus v. 2005. 'Gottes Handeln denken. Ein Literaturbericht zur Debatte der letzten 15 Jahre', *ThRv*, 101: 89-108

Stosch, Klaus v. 2010. 'Gottes Handeln denken. Zur Verantwortung der Rede von einem besonderen handeln Gottes im Gespräch mit den Naturwissenschaften', in Georg Gasser & Josef Quitterer (eds), *Die Aktualität des Seelenbegriffs. Interdisziplinäre Zugänge* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh), pp. 55-80

Stosch, Klaus v. 2013. *Theodizee* (Paderborn et.al.: UTB)

Stump, Eleonore. 1989. *Die göttliche Vorsehung und das Böse: Überlegungen zur Theodizee im Anschluß an Thomas von Aquin*, FHSS 8 (Frankfurt a.M.: Knecht)

Werbick, Jürgen. 1985. *Schulderfahrung und Bußsakrament* (Mainz: Grünewald)

Werbick, Jürgen. 2002. 'Fundamentaltheologie als Glaubens-Apologetik', *ThRv*, 98: 399-408

Werbick, Jürgen. 2004. *Von Gott sprechen an der Grenze zum Verstummen*, Religion – Geschichte – Gesellschaft 40 (Münster: LIT Verlag)

Werbick, Jürgen. 1991. 'Art. Geschichte/Handeln Gottes', 2nd ed. *NHThG*, 2: 185-205

Wiesel, Elie. 2006. *Night*, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang)

Zenger, Erich. 2004. *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*. Fünfte, gründl. überarb. u. erw. Aufl. (Stuttgart et.al.: Kohlhammer)