ESSAYS & IDEAS

# HOLOCAUST THEOLOGY

## DOSTOEVSKY AND THE MORAL ABYSS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ENGLISH EDITION

ONIRIKON · THE PURPLE NOTEBOOK

# Holocaust Theology, Dostoevsky, and the Moral Abyss of the Twentieth Century

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# Introduction. What No Explanation Can Settle

A man is ordered to hand over a list. Those demanding it have weapons; those named on it are hungry. He does not know whether refusing will save anyone or bring a massacre forward. Several hundred miles away, another official arranges the trains that will take those people to their deaths. He, too, speaks of orders. The verbal resemblance conceals a decisive difference: one man is trapped within a machinery of persecution; the other helps keep it running. Any reflection on the Holocaust that fails to distinguish their positions begins by committing an injustice.

The Holocaust, or Shoah, was the genocide of European Jews perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Studying it requires attention to identifiable policies, institutions, decisions, and victims. The word “evil” can convey the gravity of the crime; it can also become a fog that obscures who did what. Theology must learn to speak without creating that fog.

Here, theodicy means the attempt to reconcile God's goodness and power with the existence of evil. The question is ancient. The destruction of Jewish communities in the twentieth century makes it unbearable when an apparently pious answer turns murder into a necessary stage of a plan. Anyone claiming that such suffering prepared the way for a greater good must answer a question: who authorized them to dispose of the lives of the murdered? An explanation can be coherent and still be morally unacceptable.

This booklet brings history, philosophy, literature, and theology into conversation while respecting their differences. A novel lets us observe the formation of a conscience; it cannot replace the documents of a trial. Testimony communicates an experience that a statistic cannot contain; it does not, by itself, represent every survivor. A religious interpretation may sustain the person offering it; that does not give them the right to impose it on someone who suffered.

Dostoevsky stands at the center because he presents a difficulty that cannot be dismissed as simple hypocrisy. A writer capable of hearing a child's humiliation, and of challenging a happiness purchased through that child's torment, could also reproduce antisemitic prejudices. Sensitivity did not make him immune to hatred. Reading him critically allows us to ask what happens when compassion for particular people gives way to a story about peoples destined either to save or to corrupt the world.

The journey begins with communal responsibility under persecution and moves to acts of rescue. With Frankl and Celan, it examines the limits of the search for meaning; with Arendt, the responsibility to judge; with the Haskalah and Heidegger, the promises and exclusions of belonging. It then returns to the Jewish councils, spends time with Dostoevsky, and ends by questioning the transformation of salvation into a political program. Its final question is Christian, without claiming to speak for Judaism: how can we affirm a hope that does not feed on another person's misfortune?

# 1. The Remnant of Israel and the Morality of Sacrifice

## Communal responsibility in occupied France

In occupied France, the Union générale des israélites de France, or UGIF, operated under conditions imposed by persecution. Its organization should not be confused with that of the Jewish councils in the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Comparing these institutions requires attention to differences in territory, authority, and population, as well as to the pressures they faced.

André Baur was one of the UGIF's leaders in the occupied zone. He was not a rabbi. The Mémorial de la Shoah documents his responsibilities, his efforts in the face of persecution, and his deportation with his family. His case requires us to examine an institution subjected to coercive demands while also undertaking relief work. Naming the institution alone cannot settle our judgment of each action taken by its members. [1]

## What it means for a remnant to remain

The biblical idea of a remnant appears in contexts of destruction, judgment, and hope. In Isaiah 10:20–22, those who remain are more than a population's numerical residue: the text articulates a possibility of return and faithfulness. Yet the term's uses vary across texts and traditions. There is no single doctrine we can carry unchanged from a prophet to a deportation office.

There is a difference between hoping a community will survive and deciding that some of its members must die for that survival

to acquire meaning. The first attitude may sustain teaching, the care of children, or the preservation of a language. The second risks turning living people into pieces of a story whose ending matters more than they do. A promise does not make its interpreter the owner of those to whom it is addressed.

The difficulty increases when saving everyone is materially impossible. An emergency may require distributing scarce food, arranging care, or deciding which patient can benefit from treatment. Such decisions require debatable criteria, information, and review. They do not establish that some lives are worth less. Turning an operational priority into an absolute hierarchy of human worth is a leap that necessity alone cannot authorize.

Under Nazi rule, moreover, the persecutor could change the conditions and break the promises on which leaders tried to base their calculations. The alternative on offer was not a contract between free parties. When a criminal power demands that people be handed over in exchange for supposed deliverance, responsibility for the threat and the murder belongs to that power. This does not make every action by an intermediary irrelevant; it prevents us from judging intermediaries as though they had chosen the rules of the game.

## Responsibility without omnipotence

A morality of sacrifice becomes dangerous when it allows someone to offer another person's life without their consent and call that loss "necessary." Yet a morality that demanded impossible results from the persecuted, recognizing dignity only in an exemplary death, would also be inadequate. A leader trying to gain time may make mistakes. The historian must ask what that leader knew, what they could do, what privileges they obtained, and whom they harmed. We cannot attribute to them the complete knowledge now available in the archives.

The remnant then ceases to function as an alibi for selection. It can be understood as an obligation toward whatever can still be cared for: a person, a record of names, a prayer, a memory. This is an interpretive proposal, not a description of what every Jewish leader thought. Its purpose is to prevent collective continuity from being purchased by declaring expendable those who did not live to see it.

# 2. Mother Teresa and the Witness of Light

## An analogy is not a documented rescue

Mother Teresa worked in India; the Missionaries of Charity was founded in 1950. That work does not place her in the historical category of the Righteous Among the Nations. Yad Vashem's recognition concerns non-Jews who helped Jews during the Shoah under specific conditions and risks. Using the expression as a general compliment would erase its documentary meaning. [2]

The connection proposed here is a limited ethical comparison: attention to someone whom their surroundings consider a burden. It does not equate Calcutta with a ghetto or turn relief work into an explanation of extermination. Nor does it require accepting every practice of a charitable institution without scrutiny. We can recognize a gesture of hospitality while continuing to question standards of care, patient autonomy, and the use of resources.

To discuss rescues during the persecution, we must turn to those who carried them out. André and Magda Trocmé took part in the sheltering of persecuted people associated with Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. That help depended on networks, homes, family decisions, and cooperation. If we reduce rescue to a solitary hero, we lose sight of those who obtained documents, transported food, or agreed to remain silent. Goodness, too, needs organization. [3]

In Lithuania in 1940, the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara issued transit visas that helped Jewish refugees escape. His actions show a concrete way of using an administrative position to open a route rather than close one. We do not need to attribute a Christian theology to him to recognize their importance. [4]

## Grace and the right to keep one's own name

In Christian language, grace means a gift from God that is not earned as wages. If divine action is understood to extend beyond a Church's visible boundaries, a question arises: how can we recognize the good done by someone from another tradition without appropriating it? Calling a rescuer "a Christian without knowing it" may sound generous; it can also take away that person's own understanding of their actions.

A hospitable theology must accept that both the person helped and the person helping retain their names, convictions, and disagreements. A rescued Jew is not obliged to recognize their rescue as proof of Christian superiority. The rescuer acquires no right over the rescued person's conscience. Otherwise, help leaves a religious debt precisely where it should have opened a space of freedom.

This distinction changes how we think about holiness. A Christian may interpret an action as a sign of grace without claiming that this is the only valid account of it. They can speak with someone acting from civic solidarity, Jewish faithfulness, a Buddhist tradition, or a professional obligation. Dialogue begins by recognizing the action and asking about its reasons; it fails

when it already has an identity ready to impose on the other person.

## Goodness does not offset the crime

Acts of rescue disprove the claim that every action was predetermined. They do not establish that anyone could have done the same thing anywhere, nor do they permit us to reproach a victim for failing to find a rescuer. Opportunities, risks, and available networks were unequal. Responsible history studies those differences to understand how acts of help became possible.

It is also unacceptable to place the murdered and the rescuers on opposite sides of a balance, as though the emergence of the latter justified the deaths of the former. Solidarity reveals a human capacity that the crime sought to destroy. Its value lies in the lives protected, not in supplying readers with a reconciliatory ending. The light in this chapter does not explain why there was darkness; it lets us see what some people did within it.

# 3. Viktor Frankl, Paul Celan, and the Search for Meaning

## Two lives that cannot be merged

Viktor Frankl was deported to Theresienstadt, passed through Auschwitz, and was held in Dachau subcamps. He did not spend all his years of imprisonment in Auschwitz. His logotherapy gives a central place to the search for meaning: a relationship, a task, or a responsibility may orient a life subjected to extreme conditions. This is not a claim that finding meaning guarantees survival. [5]

Paul Celan, a Jew born in Czernowitz, was subjected to forced labor; his parents died after being deported. His life, too, should not be summarized by calling him an Auschwitz survivor. He wrote in German, a language of intimacy and poetic creation that had also been used to order persecution. His relationship with that language cannot be resolved by a simple choice between keeping it and abandoning it. [6]

The contrast between them is fruitful if we do not turn it into a competition. Frankl does not win because he offers a vocabulary of meaning. Celan does not win because wounded poetry seems more faithful to catastrophe. Their work makes different demands: how to orient a life, and how to make language answer for what happened without pretending to possess an integrity it has lost.

## Inner freedom has conditions

In Man's Search for Meaning, the possibility of an inward response preserves something the camp seeks to annul: a person's status as a subject. Yet a reader outside the camp may turn that affirmation into an accusation. If everything depended on attitude, those who succumbed would have failed spiritually. That conclusion is unjust and does not follow from acknowledging a capacity to respond.

Hunger, illness, terror, and the destruction of relationships affect the ability to decide. Situated freedom is not an untouched reserve hidden inside the individual. It may be minimal, intermittent, sustained by others. Sometimes it appears in sharing information; sometimes in accepting help. It is not the observer's place to demand serenity, heroism, or an edifying final sentence.

The meaning someone finds after a loss does not establish that the loss was necessary. A person may devote their life to supporting others because they suffered harm. That project deserves respect. It would be different to say that they had to suffer to acquire it. Rebuilding belongs to the survivor; justifying the harm claims to speak for them and often for those who did not survive as well.

This distinction matters beyond the camps. Faced with illness or assault, asking what might sustain someone now is different from asking them to be grateful for what happened. The first gesture supports their freedom. The second tries to reassure those who cannot bear to hear pain that still has no explanation.

## Poetry that does not provide consolation on demand

Celan's work is not a treatise forbidding hope. Its difficulty requires attention to broken words, uncertain addressees, and encounters that do not guarantee reconciliation. Reading it as an illustration of "despair" reduces his work to a mood. Reading it as a code from which to extract a moral reduces it in another way.

A reading of "Death Fugue" must recognize persecution and the relationship between repetition, violence, and language. Yet the poem should not become background music for solemn emotion. Its form demands attention: how a voice is organized, what becomes repeatable, what relations of domination are inscribed in a sentence. Reading requires us to linger where a slogan would hurry us along.

"Psalm" allows us to question a prayer whose addressee has become problematic. "Todtnauberg" raises, among other questions, the expectation of a word in the encounter with Heidegger. Neither permits us to turn an actual meeting into the philosopher's absolution. Nor can Celan's death be used to declare poetry, hope, or the possibility of life after persecution refuted. A life is not a test of doctrinal consistency.

## “Thy will be done”

Christian prayer can express trust when spoken from within one's own pain. Its nature changes when an authority uses it to demand that someone else endure abuse. God's will is not an explanation available whenever someone wants to avoid the responsibility to intervene. In the Gospel narratives, the anguish of Gethsemane does not disappear because there is trust.

The expression “active passivity” therefore needs a modest definition. It may name the surrender of an illusion of control accompanied by a willingness to act: to receive care, preserve memory, seek justice, support another person. It must not mean obedience to an aggressor. Nor is it a criterion for dividing survivors into those who knew how to suffer and those who supposedly failed to measure up.

Frankl helps us ask what allows a person to go on living; Celan prevents us from demanding an easy answer. Keeping both demands open is more honest than manufacturing a synthesis in which all the dead end up contributing to our moral education.

# 4. Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil

## The official's defense

At his trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann tried to present his work within the deportation apparatus as a matter of obedience and administrative competence. Arendt heard in that defense a surrender of judgment: ready-made expressions had taken the place of an actual relationship to what his actions did to others. Her phrase “the banality of evil” does not mean that extermination was a trivial event. [7]

Nor does the term assert that every perpetrator was the same or that hatred disappeared from their motivations. There is a historical controversy over how accurately Arendt described Eichmann. Her critics have emphasized the ideological commitment that the image of an empty bureaucrat can obscure. This objection requires us to correct the portrait when the documents demand it; it does not eliminate the question of the administrative language that makes crimes executable.

An organizer can be antisemitic, ambitious, and obedient at the same time. These motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The system's effectiveness depended on convictions, interests, and routines being able to work together. That is precisely why looking for an explicit confession of hatred in every form is not enough to establish the responsibility of the person processing it.

## Thinking is not the accumulation of culture

For this discussion, thinking means interrupting a justification and examining it. “It was legal” requires us to ask who made the law and what it ordered. “Everyone took part” demands that we identify who was included in that supposed everyone. “My position was a small one” requires us to reconstruct the effect of that part within the whole. A moral argument is not settled by the phrase an institution uses to describe its procedure.

Higher education can provide knowledge and abilities without guaranteeing such scrutiny. The twentieth century prevents us from trusting that a well-read library automatically protects anyone from criminal collaboration. This does not make philosophy or literature useless. It requires us to subject them to the same judgment they demand of other activities. An elevated vocabulary can also conceal a prejudice.

Nor does thinking mean remaining forever undecided. Someone who identifies an order of persecution need not resolve the whole of moral philosophy to recognize its criminal character. Reflection can clarify a boundary and lead to refusal. The consequences will depend on position, support, and risk; hence the importance of institutions that protect disagreement before every refusal becomes heroic.

## Guilt and responsibility

A society can inherit obligations of remembrance, reparation, and reform without all its members being personally guilty of the same crime. Attributing uniform guilt to an entire people reproduces a way of thinking that abandons individual actions. Paradoxically, it can also benefit particular perpetrators, who dissolve into a diffuse guilt that cannot be specified.

Judgment needs names, decisions, responsibilities, and evidence. It also needs to study structures: an office or a company can organize harm that no participant describes as their own. Institutional analysis and personal responsibility need each other. The former prevents us from pretending that everything was a sum of private aberrations; the latter prevents the system from appearing to act without people.

The same precision must apply to the Jewish councils. A coerced person and an official of the persecuting apparatus do not occupy equivalent positions simply because both took part in an administrative procedure. Recognizing that inequality does not prohibit questions about abuse or favoritism within a subjected institution. It requires more exact questions and keeps primary responsibility where it belongs.

# 5. Haskalah, Heidegger, and the Impossible Homeland

## The promise of belonging

The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, brought together projects of education, cultural renewal, and participation in European societies. It had different stages and geographies. Its supporters did not all propose abandoning Jewish life: there were movements toward the renewal of Hebrew, openness to science, and the reorganization of education. Immanuel Etkes stresses that the movement should not be confused with just any process of acculturation. [8]

The modern promise of citizenship contained a practical question: can someone participate fully in a society without erasing inherited ties? Learning a national language, practicing a profession, or sharing public space should not require a minority to disappear. Yet certain discourses of integration imposed an endless test: every sign of difference was considered disloyalty; every success, a threat.

Antisemitism could accuse Jews both of remaining separate and of having infiltrated society. The contradiction did not weaken it because it was unwilling to submit its claim to verification. If any behavior confirms the suspicion, the accused has no answer that can acquit them. Exclusion then precedes the supposed evidence.

It would be wrong to conclude that the Haskalah caused the catastrophe or that every emancipation was destined to fail.

Such a reading holds those who demanded equality responsible for the violence of those who destroyed it. It also erases real opportunities, conflicts, and choices. History helps us understand how certain guarantees were dismantled; it does not authorize us to declare that they never had value.

## When a place becomes a destiny

Dasein, a central term in Heidegger's Being and Time, names the mode of being of human existence that asks about being. It does not simply mean “the German race” or “native soil.” The relationship between existence, historicity, and community requires philosophical analysis; translating a word into a national slogan in advance would prevent that analysis.

This caution does not serve to separate thought and politics artificially. Heidegger's support for National Socialism and the antisemitic passages in his Black Notebooks require us to ask how certain conceptions of history and collective destiny could incorporate exclusions. Peter Trawny has studied the role assigned to a supposed “world Jewry” within that philosophical narrative. Other interpreters dispute its systematic reach; the controversy does not permit us to deny the texts. [9]

The problem emerges when a community's rootedness ceases to be a historical experience and becomes an exclusive entitlement to reveal the world's meaning. The neighbor comes to represent uprootedness; an actual population becomes the emblem of an illness of the age. Philosophical abstraction can thus repeat the operation of prejudice, even when its terminology is more difficult.

One can value a language, a home, or a tradition without attributing inferiority to those who lack them. Displaced people also dwell, remember, and create ties. Belonging need not become a possession that exists only by denying someone else's belonging. This conclusion is the criterion we propose for examining philosophies of rootedness, not a complete refutation of Heidegger.

## The homeland a work can offer

Writing can preserve a relationship with a lost world, but it cannot replace housing, citizenship, or effective protection. Celebrating exile as though it freed people from every limit can be as cruel as demanding that they remain in a country that persecutes them. A metaphor of hospitality does not, by itself, open a border.

Celan brings us back to that distance. His continuing to write in German does not establish that the language had repaired the harm or that German philosophy had become reconciled with itself. A work can sustain a bond across a fracture. The reader's task is to listen to that form of belonging without forcing it to become a happy story of return.

# 6. The Judenrat Dilemma

## An institution under threat

The Judenräte were Jewish councils imposed by the German occupiers in the ghettos. They had to carry out orders while also attempting to maintain services for confined and impoverished populations. Relief work does not make the imposed institution benign; its coercive function does not establish that all its activities had the same meaning. [10]

We must distinguish the councils, their leaders, and their different phases. Conditions changed from one ghetto to another and as the policy of extermination developed. Information about the fate of deportees circulated unevenly. Strategies could rest on false hopes, desperate calculations, personal interests, or combinations of these. There is no single psychology of the persecuted leader.

Adam Czerniaków, chairman of the Warsaw council, took his own life in July 1942, amid mass deportations. His diary is a central document for reconstructing his responsibilities and circumstances. In Łódź, Chaim Rumkowski advocated a strategy of survival through labor and accepted demands to hand over sections of the population. The contrast has fueled debates that cannot be resolved by turning one man into a pure image and the other into an explanation of the entire system. [11]

## What could be known, and what could be done

Rigorous retrospective judgment must reconstruct the information available at each moment. Knowing today that a Nazi promise was false does not establish that everyone knew its falsity with equal certainty at the time. Conversely, uncertainty does not automatically absolve every decision: there were rumors, warnings, earlier experiences, and internal disputes whose reception must be studied.

It also matters to distinguish inability to prevent a deportation from participation in decisions that increased the harm. A leader might lack the power to defeat the occupiers while retaining some room to act in the distribution of food. The two scales are not interchangeable. The absence of a general way out does not make the daily treatment of the most vulnerable irrelevant.

Contrasting testimonies are indispensable. A council member may remember a negotiation as an attempt to gain time; an affected family may remember the same episode as abandonment. Neither perspective becomes false because it does not encompass the whole. They must be placed alongside documents and other accounts, with attention to silences and to the conditions in which each testimony was produced.

The tragedy does not consist merely in having several unpleasant options. Here the persecutor sought to turn victims into instruments of persecution and burden them with the appearance of choice. That imposition could break communal trust long before physical destruction. Studying it requires recognizing the design of the violence as well as evaluating the responses it generated.

## Understanding without making a model

Not all conduct under coercion deserves the same judgment. There can be differences between trying to protect, exploiting a position, humiliating, lying to gain time, and collaborating in expectation of an advantage. “It was impossible” is not a sufficient answer to every question. But neither is “they should have rebelled,” pronounced from a safety that bears none of the risks being described.

Dignity does not require an exemplary death. Someone who tried to survive need not establish that their survival was useful to humanity. Someone who died is not honored by being turned into an offering. The study of the councils must preserve this double caution, lest it end by dictating how the persecuted should have supplied posterity with a morally orderly story.

# 7. Dostoevsky and the Abyss of Compassion Perverted

## The child who prevents the account from being closed

In “Rebellion,” a chapter in Book V of The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan presents Alyosha with accounts of cruelty toward children. His objection targets a future harmony that would claim to justify innocent suffering. It is not enough for the whole to end well if happiness requires accepting that price. The objection retains its force even for someone who disagrees with Ivan's religious conclusions.

The scene does not propose an evaluation from afar. The child is not an interchangeable figure in a sum of goods and evils. That child's pain demands an attention that the promise of totality threatens to cancel. We might call “the accounting of salvation” the operation that tries to settle this claim through the universe's final benefit. The name designates an interpretive problem here, not a category Dostoevsky formulated in those terms.

After the Shoah, the objection requires us to distrust any narrative that turns extermination into an indispensable preparation for reconciliation. This connection does not make Dostoevsky a prophet of events that followed his death. It allows us to recognize in his novel a question that remains active: who can forgive, accept, or give meaning on someone else's behalf?

Alyosha does not answer with a demonstration capable of making suffering necessary. The novel attempts other forms of response: closeness, responsibility, and action. These do not eliminate Ivan's difficulty. Their importance is that they allow a relationship with someone who suffers without first having won an argument about the order of the world.

## The inquisitor and the benevolence that governs

In the poem of the Grand Inquisitor, also in Book V, Ivan imagines an authority who accuses Christ of having demanded a freedom too burdensome for human beings. Security, bread, and obedience appear as reasons to administer happiness from above. Domination presents itself as compassion for those supposedly unable to bear being free.

The political question is precise: what happens when an institution claims to know people's good better than they do and regards their resistance as evidence of incapacity? Help can become unlimited guardianship. The ruler no longer needs to listen; every refusal is interpreted as an illness the program must cure.

Not every form of protection is paternalism. A child needs care, and an unconscious person may need emergency decisions. The difference lies in limits, review, and the intention to restore autonomy. The inquisitor, by contrast, turns the exception into a permanent regime and uses human fragility as the foundation of his power.

This problem returns in millenarian narratives that promise an absolute end to conflict. If the future must be reconciled once

and for all, dissenters appear to threaten not a debatable policy but salvation itself. Initial compassion may end up justifying the imprisonment or elimination of those it claimed to liberate.

## The contradiction is not outside the work

Dostoevsky is not protected by having written these scenes. In A Writer's Diary, especially the 1877 interventions on the Jewish question, he reproduced antisemitic stereotypes and generalizations. The critical problem is to read that writing alongside his novelistic ability to listen to the humiliated. It is not enough to declare the artist great and the citizen deplorable, as though they never touched.

Gary Saul Morson has revisited this difficulty in an essay whose title captures the contrast between love of humanity and hatred of Jews. That formulation is an entry point, not a sufficient explanation. We must ask how an individual voice, when heard within a novel, can receive an attention denied to an entire people when it appears transformed into an idea. [12]

Prejudice can survive within an intense sensibility because it decides in advance who deserves an individual hearing. Faced with a character close at hand, the writer distinguishes desires, shame, and contradictions. Faced with the hostile category, those differences vanish. The particular person must prove they are an exception; the stereotype never has to prove itself.

It would be too comfortable to conclude that Dostoevsky had no real compassion. His novels would lose their difficulty if everything were a sham. The problem is that real compassion can be distributed unequally and subordinated to an idea of

national destiny. That is why feeling, however profound, needs criteria that prevent recognition from being arbitrarily withdrawn.

## Russia and the right to represent everyone

The aspiration to a universal Russian mission can turn a particular tradition into the agent of human salvation. The difficulty is not loving a culture or valuing its contribution. It arises when that culture considers itself authorized to speak for everyone and uses other peoples as a contrast confirming its purity.

If one people represents spiritual self-giving and another is reduced to material calculation, the diversity of their lives is no longer being described. Roles are being assigned within a story. Any contrary evidence can be downgraded to an accident. The generous merchant will be an exception; the self-interested believer will not alter the spiritual essence of their nation. The scheme remains safe from the people it claims to explain.

We should not respond by reversing the roles and attributing a cruel essence to “the Russian soul.” Such a reply would leave intact the operation we criticize. Russian history contains conflicts, persecutions, resistance, institutions, and people. An analysis of nationalism must specify its discourses without turning an entire population into their embodiment.

The novels offer resources for questioning certainties that also sustain their author. In Demons, projects for the absolute organization of life expose connections between ideal, manipulation, and violence. In Notes from Underground,

resistance to systems promising to calculate happiness does not automatically produce a good life: it can enclose itself in resentment and cruelty. Criticizing a false solution does not guarantee that the critic is free of its effects.

## Compassion can become possession

Compassion is not perverted only when it disappears. It can also become a form of appropriation: someone needs the other person to remain unfortunate so that they can continue playing the savior. The person receiving help ceases to have projects of their own and occupies the place assigned by the benefactor's sensibility.

The Idiot allows us to examine the distance between a compassionate intention and the complexity of those receiving it. The novel should not be reduced to a verdict on Myshkin. Its difficulty is that innocence, pity, desire, and humiliation do not arrange themselves obediently around a benevolent intention. Wanting to rescue someone does not mean we have understood what they need.

Reading Dostoevsky can educate us precisely where he resists our conclusions. A character may articulate a truth and remain responsible for an act of cruelty. An act of generosity does not cancel an act of domination. Readers who keep both in view learn not to turn one virtue into a general pardon.

Applied to antisemitism, this prevents us both from using literary greatness as a defense and from using prejudice as an excuse to stop reading. Critical reading requires us to explain the relationship between the two dimensions and identify where a

moral insight ceases to apply. Ivan's child cannot remain inviolable only when belonging to the group whose story moves us.

## McReynolds and the economy of redemption

Susan McReynolds proposes connecting Dostoevsky's difficulties with Christianity to his antisemitism and Russian messianism. The publisher's account of Redemption and the Merchant God highlights discomfort with the crucifixion as a means of redemption and a projection onto Jews of rejected aspects of that religious economy. This is a critical hypothesis about the relationship between religious images, prejudice, and nationalism, not a single explanation of his entire work. [13]

The hypothesis raises a productive question: can a conscience that rejects purchasing happiness with suffering accept salvation expressed as payment? And if that tension remains unresolved, can it displace the figure of calculation onto a population already stigmatized? These questions do not amount to diagnosing the writer's private mind. They serve to study relationships among images, arguments, and prejudices.

The reading must avoid a further injustice: repeating the association of Judaism, money, and calculation as though it were a description that now merely needed explaining. It is an antisemitic stereotype. The inquiry asks how it works and why it is used, not what secret truth it supposedly contains about Jews.

This critical approach prevents the problem from being confined to a personal weakness unrelated to the author's elevated ideas.

Compassion, the cross, and national mission may participate in the same tension. Examining it does not require reducing the entire work to a single key; it allows us to recognize a contradiction where a devotional reading might wish to find unity.

# 8. Antisemitism and Political Millenarianism

## The promise of a final solution

In its religious sense, millenarianism is connected with the expectation of a kingdom or a final transformation of history. In speaking of political millenarianism, we use an analogy that must be made explicit: a movement promises to eliminate conflict definitively and attributes to its own action a mission of collective salvation. Not every project of reform is millenarian, nor does every religious hope lead to a program of violence.

The risk appears when a promise's failure can no longer be discussed as a mistake. If the program represents humanity's necessary destiny, resistance must come from a corrupting force. Economic difficulty, cultural disagreement, and intellectual criticism cease to require different explanations. They are assigned a common enemy, supposedly hidden and omnipresent.

Antisemitism has supplied a figure especially adaptable to this operation. It can accuse Jews of embodying capitalism and of directing its revolutionary destruction; of having no homeland and of acting as a national bloc. The incompatibility of the charges is not accidental. Their function is to produce a culprit whom no behavior can release from the accusation.

Calling this political theology does not mean attributing every modern crime to a religious doctrine. It means studying how certain forms of authority transfer categories of election,

sacrifice, absolute enemy, and redemption into the exercise of power. The relationship must be demonstrated in each case. A similar word is not enough to establish a genealogy, and the analysis loses precision if it turns every intense form of politics into a concealed religion.

## Historical differences matter

Christian anti-Judaism, economic prejudices, nationalisms, and modern racism are not identical phenomena. They can combine, transform, and provide resources for one another. Nazi persecution, with its state apparatus and genocidal project, requires specific study. It is not explained by saying that it directly carried out a sentence written by a nineteenth-century Russian novelist.

Dostoevsky died in 1881. Situating his texts prevents us from making him a participant in later decisions, but it does not make his generalizations harmless. An idea can circulate, find readers, and change its function. Investigating those mediations is more demanding than drawing an inevitable line from a novel to a gas chamber.

The idea of a "structure" should therefore be understood here as a recurrent mechanism under examination. We are not claiming that every millenarianism necessarily contains antisemitism, or that every antisemitism derives from a single apocalyptic expectation. The hypothesis is narrower: a promise of final purity can be reinforced by inventing a population that represents the absolute obstacle.

## Solzhenitsyn and collective responsibility

Solzhenitsyn exposed the Soviet repressive system in The Gulag Archipelago. Later, Two Hundred Years Together, published in Russian in 2001 and 2002, addressed the history of Russians and Jews. The center devoted to the writer records his rejection of an explanation of the Revolution as a Jewish conspiracy. Neither the importance of his denunciation of the Gulag nor a general label can replace examination of a particular historical claim. [14]

The participation of people of Jewish origin in an organization does not turn their acts into actions by "the Jews." We must ask what they did, what authority they held, and how they related to their origins. The same criterion applies to Russian, Georgian, or any other participants. A life history may be relevant; ancestry does not transmit guilt.

Criticism must also attend to the symmetry of its own demands. If it explains every crime by one group through circumstances while attributing another group's acts to a collective essence, it has already decided the outcome. Examining proportions, lives, and decisions requires denominators and contexts, not insinuated associations. Judgment must concern demonstrable responsibilities.

## Recognizing the mechanism in the present

An accusation begins to close in on itself when the absence of evidence is interpreted as proof of the accused's ability to conceal it. The power attributed to the enemy grows whenever a fact contradicts the theory. No one can correct it because correction, too, is regarded as an operation of the enemy.

The response requires concrete habits: identifying who is making a claim, locating the document, distinguishing a decision from an identity, and asking what evidence could change the conclusion. These habits do not guarantee virtue. They reduce the space in which a feeling of justice can be recruited to persecute people who did not commit the act being denounced.

# 9. Christianity, Sacrifice, and the Reworking of Meaning

## Who offers, and who suffers

A Christian reading of the cross must distinguish giving one's own life from the power to dispose of another person's life. Accepting a risk to protect someone does not authorize imposing that risk on them. If a community celebrates the sacrifice of someone whom it did not allow to refuse, it must examine the violence of its own celebration.

The crucifixion was an execution. The language of redemption cannot make the torture and murder it recounts morally right. A believer may affirm that God acts within a violent history without concluding that violence is good or that it ought to be reproduced. The difference matters whenever a victim of abuse is asked to remain in that situation in order to imitate Christ.

The figure of the merchant God allows us to question a representation of salvation as a transaction: someone demands a debt and accepts an innocent person's suffering as payment. Not every Christian account of sacrifice has this meaning; traditions differ, and a historical study of them exceeds the scope of this booklet. The criticism concerns an image's moral consequence when it turns pain into currency.

It would also be simplistic to replace a problematic image with the assertion that authentic Christianity has always been free of it. Communities inherit mixed languages. They must read them, debate their effects, and acknowledge harmful uses. A

theological reconstruction acquires credibility by accepting this work, not by declaring its difficulty nonexistent.

## The passion of Jesus does not absorb Jewish history

Interpreting the Shoah as a new crucifixion may seem a gesture of closeness. Without care, it incorporates the murdered into a Christian story they did not choose and makes their deaths an argument about Christ. The comparison must recognize that limit before being used. Judaism is not a preparatory scene whose function ends when another religious system reaches its conclusion.

Nor can the State of Israel, Jewish continuity, or any later good be presented as compensation that makes extermination necessary. It is possible to study historical relationships between events without attributing a providential purpose to murders. A consequence does not thereby become a sufficient reason for the crime that preceded it.

Hope of resurrection belongs to a confession of faith; it is not information an observer can use to diminish the gravity of someone else's death. Even those who trust in ultimate justice have present obligations: to care, investigate, repair, and prevent further harm. The hoped-for future does not perform those tasks in advance.

## The right to protest

Job, the psalms of lamentation, and biblical disputes show that protest is not foreign to religious language. But this diversity does not authorize us to claim that every victim remained a believer in their own way. Some retained faith, some transformed it, and others rejected it. None of these responses can be demanded as proof of dignity.

The reworking of meaning is legitimate when people reshape their own understanding of their experience. It becomes appropriation when someone else decides what suffering was supposed to teach them. The principle extends to unbelief as well: a person who lost faith is not obliged to interpret another survivor's trust as a deception. Religious freedom includes the right not to share an answer to catastrophe.

A theology that accepts this limit can relinquish the attempt to explain why the innocent had to die and concentrate on what their memory demands. That relinquishment does not solve the intellectual problem of God. It changes the speaker's position: they cease claiming a total vision and commit themselves to duties they can recognize.

## The responsibility of the speaker

A Christian theology seeking to preserve hope without justifying harm must think about forgiveness alongside reparation, consent, and responsibility. Above all, this changes who may speak. An authority may investigate a crime and a community may offer support; neither automatically possesses the right to forgive in place of the person harmed.

Compassion becomes more demanding when it stops promising that everything will have a satisfactory explanation. It must listen to the particular claim, accept that a wound may persist, and resist the desire to end the conversation in order to recover peace of mind. It can accompany a hope; it must not exact that hope as the price of help.

# Conclusion. Compassion Willing to Be Corrected

This essay's opening scene presented two men facing an order. After this journey, we know why a similarity of vocabulary is not enough to distribute guilt. We must reconstruct relations of power, room for action, information, and effects. Morality begins to lose its way when an explanation's elegant form excuses us from that task.

The Jewish councils require us to judge without imagining a freedom that did not exist. Rescuers show that help needs decisions and material conditions. Frankl allows us to ask what can orient a life; Celan demands a language that does not provide consolation on demand. Arendt requires us to examine the phrases through which a person delegates judgment. The Haskalah and the Heidegger problem prevent us from mistaking culture for moral immunity.

Dostoevsky presents the most uncomfortable test. We can learn from his challenge to the suffering of children and still have to judge the antisemitism of his writing. Neither cancels the other. Reading him teaches us something about our own habits: it is easier to defend universal compassion in the abstract than to recognize a person who belongs to the group we have cast as the enemy.

Understanding does not mean justifying. Yet the distinction is not a formula that permits us to abandon analysis: understanding requires checking facts and listening to perspectives; judging requires explaining criteria and accepting

correction. Condemnation without investigation can identify the wrong person as responsible. Investigation that never allows a conclusion can become self-serving delay.

For the twenty-first century, these readings propose limited but verifiable obligations. Do not attribute the conduct of some members to an entire population. Do not turn a loss into a necessary stage of progress. Do not demand that someone receiving help adopt our beliefs. Do not use an admirable work to pardon its author's prejudice. Do not ask a victim to complete the observers' comfort with their forgiveness.

What remains is a compassion less certain of its own innocence. It will have to ask what the other person needs, accept their refusal, and revise its own representations. It will not offer an explanation capable of settling the deaths of the murdered. Its value may be recognized in more precise acts: a life protected, an accusation withdrawn for lack of evidence, a memory preserved without falsification, an institution learning to stop the harm it once administered.

# A Short Glossary

## Antisemitism

Hostility or prejudice against Jews because they are Jews. It is not limited to insults: it can organize political theories, cultural images, and collective attributions of guilt.

## Haskalah

The name of the Jewish Enlightenment and its various projects of educational, cultural, and social renewal. It is not synonymous with abandoning every form of Jewish identity.

## Judenrat / Judenräte

Jewish council / councils imposed by the German occupiers in the ghettos. Conditions and actions varied; the term does not identify every Jewish organization of the period.

## Political millenarianism

An analogical expression used here to examine programs that promise a final transformation of history and may treat opponents as an absolute obstacle to collective salvation.

## Remnant

What remains after destruction; in certain biblical texts, it is associated with continuity and hope. Its meanings depend on context.

## Shoah

A Hebrew term used to designate the Nazi genocide of the Jews. “Holocaust” is widely used, but its sacrificial history requires caution in an essay that rejects turning murder into an offering.

## Theodicy

The attempt to explain how a good and powerful God can coexist with evil. This essay discusses the moral limits of answers that justify other people's suffering.

# Notes and Sources

These notes identify the historical foundations and readings. Chapters in novels are located by book and title so they can be found in different translations. The essay's interpretations are proposed readings, not unanimous conclusions of scholarship.

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The discussion of Frankl refers to Man's Search for Meaning, whose core testimony appeared in German in 1946. The reading of Celan concentrates on “Death Fugue,” “Psalm,” and “Todtnauberg”; biographical information and a guide to his work are available in source [6].

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Can universal compassion coexist with hatred of a people? Dostoevsky compels us to ask without protecting the writer from his own contradictions.

Jewish councils under persecution, acts of rescue, Frankl, Celan, and Arendt open a journey through responsibility, meaning, and the limits of religious explanation. An essay on the duty to care without making another person's suffering the price of salvation.