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THE LIGHT BEYOND THE CLOUDS

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Abstract: Review of Alberto Castaldini, *Il Dio Nascosto e la possibilità di Auschwitz. Prospettive filosofiche e teologiche sull'Olocausto* (The Hidden God and the possibility of Auschwitz. Philosophical and theological perspectives on the Holocaust), (Cluj-Napoca: Romanian Academy, The Center for Transylvanian Studies, 2016), 370 pag.

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The Hidden God and the possibility of Auschwitz written by Alberto Castaldini was published in 2016 at the Center for Transylvanian Studies of the Romanian Academy in Cluj-Napoca. The book mirrors the author's doctoral thesis, resulting in a hidden gem that can easily become a focal point for everyone interested in discovering the philosophical and theological significations of the Holocaust and the part that God played in it. The work of Castaldini is a testimony to what can be accomplished through extensive research, proving once again that there are no shortcuts to profound answers.

The backbone of the book is its lengthy bibliography, which can be seen as a living force, but also as an homage paid to those who lost or won their battle with the darkness of the Holocaust. However, the impressive amount of data used by the author does not discourage, on the contrary, Castaldini proves that his writing style is an open invitation even for those who do not have studies in the field of philosophy or theology; this is actually an important key to the book, since the subject of the Holocaust belongs to everyone. Evidently, there are numerous books written on the subject, but there are few that are so well documented and with such tremendous respect for the issue at hand. More so, the author offers his readers the possibility to understand the Holocaust not only as a historic fact, but also as a point of no return for the relationship between the Jewish people and God. Even more, by treating each part of the story with thought-provoking hypotheses, the author achieves a fascinating travel through time, history, religion, and society.

Rather than focusing on why the Holocaust was possible, Castaldini confronts perhaps an even more difficult question: why did God allow something like that to happen? It is not only a brave question, but its answer is extremely intricate and, without a doubt, sensitive. Being aware of this, Castaldini focuses on creating a web of different paradigms, but they are not seen as opposed to one another, instead they operate with the same structures of knowledge, making the reader understand that beyond being a human tragedy, the Holocaust acted as a sharp blade between God and Jews, forcing them to reconsider and rebuilt their faith. At its core, it is a story about God and his relationship with mankind, but also an effort to comprehend the idea of an omnipotent God and the existence of evil. The author writes as if understanding that men have always been puzzled by the existence of evil and the image of a benevolent Creator, but he treats this paradox by telling the story of the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of those who drew their last breath of life at the hands of it, the Jews. By doing so, Castaldini builds a scientific web, each string representing a philosophical, theological, biblical and social perspective. Given the extensive documentation, the author created three major chapters, each followed by a series of subchapters. Thus, Castaldini was able to reach the full circle of the story, arranging facts, opinions and ethical dilemmas in a way that allows anyone to go with the natural flow

of the story.

Considering that the author has a tight connection to Romania and its academic field, Castaldini voices a few facts about Romania during the Holocaust. It is not only a sign of respect for the country where the author fulfilled his studies, it is also a sign of his devotion towards an accurate and complete research process. However, the author fails to enrich his book with the works of fellow Romanian authors, such as Sandu Frunză, who also has a very similar approach to Castaldini. Works such as *God and the Holocaust according to Elie Wiesel* (Frunză 2010) or *The Memory of the Holocaust in Primo Levi's If This Is a Man* (Frunză 2008) are examples of how Castaldini could have extended his research and even created a bridge between a Romanian and Italian perspective. Despite this missed opportunity, Castaldini shares with the lecturer the stories of two important Jewish men, one of them a rabbi, that suffered but also had a great involvement in their respective communities, proving that history shines its light on every act of valor, even a small, quiet one.

With a preface signed by Ioan Aurel Pop and a postface written by Cristian Barta, the content of the book seems to be sealed between two great experts and men of great culture. The first chapter, *The God of History and the Scandal of Evil* introduces not only the main concepts of the book, but also the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people, before and after the Holocaust. This is the context in which the author begins his quest for understanding the roots and consequences of a hidden God; subsequently, we are gradually introduced to a series of names that will appear throughout the book, such as Martin Buber, B Spinoza, I. Kant, L. Pareyson, R. Rubenstein, E. Wiesel, just to name a few. They are all part of an explanatory strategy that focuses its efforts on the darkness that surrounded mankind and the Jewish people especially during the Holocaust. Castaldini does not shy away from a hermeneutic approach, proving a great amount of sympathy for L. Pareyson. Furthermore, the author spares no effort to filter his arguments through the specter of philosophy, pairing it with theological depth. Still, it must be said that Castaldini wrote the first chapter very similar to a maze, as it is easy to lose track of the footsteps of symbols. For someone who is not familiarized with certain authors or terms, it can be a daunting reading, but Castaldini proves his talent by surpassing this seemingly obstacle and engaging even an unauthorized reader into a deeply meaningful story. However, the first chapter is a tenacious prelude to a profound analysis. The question of God seems to be embodied in the human being and its history, making it even more crucial to understand why God seemingly left men in the dark during one of the most tragic events in human history.

This is the tone set for the second chapter, *Thinking about God after Auschwitz*, where Castaldini brings to the reader the possibility of understanding the relationship between the Jewish people and God, but

also what makes it so different especially in such an abominable context, the one of the Holocaust. At this point, it is crucial to understand that the author engages in an intimate search for answers, gradually reducing the scale of his answers. He understands that by focusing on the relationship between God and the Jewish people he will ultimately create a source of understanding for every individual, no matter his religious identity. This is the main reason why the rabbinic tradition takes a front seat in chapter two, describing in detail the attributes that God has in the eyes of the Jews. Each one of those attributes is carefully placed in its right place, portraying not only Judaism, but also a quiet yet powerful culture of God. Castaldini manages to use the right amount of information, suggesting an almost deceiving lightness, but a necessary one if the reader wishes to continue this thought provoking journey. However, there is a concept that stands out among all others, and that is the idea of freedom. Despite the fact that it does not have a subchapter per se, freedom is the central piece that holds everything together. According to the author, this sense of freedom is the one that allows evil to exist, or even more clearly, it does not exclude it. The concept of freedom is a binding force for the thesis of the author; it is both a nucleus that holds everything together and a rather surprising element that distinguishes Castaldini's perspective from others. More so, the author focuses on compassion among other attributes of God, and he supports his arguments by using the teachings of the Bible as a helping mechanism for philosophers that are searching the roots of God's silence during the Holocaust. Once again, the author proves he prefers a hermeneutic point of view, and it is quite a suitable one, since it balances philosophy and theology without disrupting the natural flow of ideas that is born at their point of meeting.

Last but not least, the third chapter, *The Becoming God and the Pain of the World*, is the most dense and rigorous when it comes not only to its complex content, but also to the numerous authors mentioned by Castaldini. However, it does not leave the reader feeling depleted of energy, on the contrary, it leaves the impression of a well built story that allows the reader to imagine the ending. This last chapter can be seen as a triad of pain, justice and future perspectives, as it focuses on the post-Holocaust world. In the center of this construct stands the relationship between God and man, and the possibility that God has suffered along with men; it is a complex perspective that becomes possible in the view of the author through the freedom that God has given to man. On this matter, Castaldini reaches the Talmud and Kabbala to confront his arguments, but equally suggests an ethical perspective, which he determines with the help of P. Ricoeur and E. Levinas. Furthermore, every concept used by the author has an explanation behind it, nothing is left to chance, but this does not appear as a forced strategy to the reader, it is rather an extensive guide to meaning and purpose that helps build the pattern for understanding the place of God during the Holocaust. The question raised

by Castaldini throughout the book is ultimately answered, but the author finds the end of his quest in a seemingly simple way: by establishing the way God becomes incarnated in a sense through the victims of the Holocaust. By doing so, Castaldini forms the perfect circle: a fluid cycle of time and redemption, of justice that goes beyond theodicy, and of pain shared by the Creator and his Creation.

In conclusion, the book written by Alberto Castaldini is a testament of depth and meaning, two elements that can be read as a guide by those who decide to find meaning at the end of an event such as the Holocaust, even if darkness seems more appropriate to describe it. Ultimately, we can rarely say that we are given the opportunity to have a bridge between cultures, meanings, even traditions, but Castaldini manages to bring together all these elements, leaving behind a testimony of thought, spirit and redemption.

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