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Facing Death

Confronting Mortality in the Holocaust and Ourselves

Edited and Introduced by

SARAH K. PINNOCK

A Samuel and Althea Stroum Book

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Prologue

Death as Atrocity

SARAH K. PINNOCK

> I have not really survived death. I have not avoided it. I have not escaped it. . . .
>
> Death is already in my past . . . growing old will not bring me closer to death, but on the contrary, carry me away from it.
>
> —Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*

This volume studies perceptions of mortality in the Holocaust under conditions imbued with death. It poses a number of pivotal questions. What do the murdered dead themselves reveal about death, when we listen to them carefully? What does it mean for us to look unflinchingly at the horror and magnitude of this genocide? How does the Holocaust affect our thinking about the significance of dying then and now? This project is based on the conviction that the Holocaust reveals important perspectives on mortality.

This book approaches the Holocaust through dialogue and responses, rather than impersonal facts and figures. Scholars can convey information about genocide without examining experiences and pausing to reflect on the perspectives of the individuals who lived in proximity to death. Yet those people who recorded their experience of death offer vital resources for comprehending the impact of mass murder. The Holocaust is an unusually well-documented genocide, its history distinguished by the amount of

inevitable, if not obligatory, as Skitolsky points out, for to do otherwise would be to deprive prisoner-functionaries of their humanity.

2. Granted that the effort to stay alive at the cost of the soul's health is not devoid of moral value, are we able to distinguish certain types of struggle to survive as more or less moral? Or, on the contrary, is such kind of moral nuance impossible and even morally and politically inappropriate? Is there not a very long continuum, even in the camps, between, on the one hand, "choiceless choice" and, on the other, "martyrdom" and moral heroism? Should we not think proportionally about moral behavior in the struggle to survive, even in confrontation with the Holocaust, or even as an answer to the Holocaust?

RESPONSE BY LISSA SKITOLSKY

Over the course of many years of conversations with students about the lives and choices of the prisoner-functionaries in the Nazi camps, I have come to believe that they act as counterexamples to the Socratic position that contrasts the pursuit of "life" with the pursuit of "the good life." I do not think this traditional moral perspective is relevant to assessing the value of decisions made by members of the *Sonderkommando*. Since this moral perspective also assumes a certain stance toward our mortality, I believe that we need to reevaluate the validity of the traditional philosophical stance toward death for those who still suffer from genocidal regimes. This stance is based on the view that our fear of death has no moral value and cannot play any role in proper moral reasoning about what we ought to do in any given situation.

Philosophers have claimed that our fear of death lacks moral value because the tradition of moral philosophy in the Western world associates this fear with a preoccupation with "life," which exists *in opposition to* the pursuit of "the good life." Thus this distinction is essential to the larger structure of meaning that dictates the terms of moral value, such that if an action is motivated by a desire for "life itself," then that act lacks moral value. In my chapter, I argued that it is impossible to regard the choices made by those forced to work in the crematoria as *either* motivated by the desire to stay alive (and pursue "life") *or* by the desire to do the right thing (and pursue "the good life"). In this way, I tried to bracket the authority of the inherited structure for moral evaluation (and the distinction on which it rests) in order to better assess the moral worth of the decision to work in a

crematorium to avoid death. Of course, if we use this inherited structure to evaluate this decision (if, for example, we assume that those who made this decision abandoned their values), then those who worked in the *Sonderkommando* will appear to be blameworthy for their decision to burn bodies rather than to be burned. Instead, I argued that their *particular* experience as victims of a genocidal regime threw into doubt the universal validity of the structure itself that depends upon the mutual opposition between a concern for the self and a concern for the good. Once we question the absolute validity of the structure, we can reevaluate the complicated moral position of those who worked in the crematoria against their will.

The experiences of those who worked in the *Sonderkommando* belie the inadequacy of the traditional moral dichotomy between "life" and "the good life" because their efforts to stay alive were imbued with moral significance insofar as these efforts coincided with the effort to save a larger ethnic, religious community. In a genocidal regime, the efforts of victims to stay alive against the directives of state policy are a potent form of political resistance. Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum of Poland also expressed this view while he was imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto and spoke about the difference between Jewish ethics under religious persecution—*kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of God's name)—and Jewish ethics under Nazi oppression—*kiddush ha-Hahim* (sanctification of the Name of God in life). He explains the distinction as he instructs his community on the moral course of action: "It is a time for *Kiddush ha-Hayim*, the sanctification of life, and not *Kiddush Hashem*, the holiness of martyrdom. In the past the enemies of the Jews sought the soul of the Jew, and so it was proper for the Jew to sanctify the name of God by sacrificing his body in Martyrdom, in that manner preserving what the enemy sought to take from him. But now it is the *body* of the Jew that the oppressor demands. For this reason it is up to the Jew to defend his body, to preserve his life."[17] Here Rabbi Nissenbaum explicitly assigns moral meaning to the effort of genocide victims to stay alive, for they defeat their enemies only by escaping their collective death sentence. When one is guilty not of any deed but instead of being alive, then survival is not opposed to moral action but is instead its only possible route. Their fear of dying was also the fear of losing an entire community, and if the preservation of cultural diversity is a good thing, then the loss of an ancient culture would be an evil. Indeed, this assumption—that the diversity of cultures is a good that we must protect—inspired Rafael Lemkin to coin the term *genocide* and allowed him to persuade the United

of my mother's grave that caused me to lose control of my sadness. It was the sight of the elderly women and men, huddled against the cold, old friends and faces, many frail, in their coats, reminding me of a frailty and vulnerability that they carried in their souls as survivors. They had come to bury one more of their own, the selfless, courageous, wonderful family of survivors with the accents and the histories and the stories. Our precious, inexhaustible elders, unmoved again by the elements, gathered to escort and bury their own. They are getting close to their end, I thought, and I cried uncontrollably, not for me, not for my mortality confirmed again that day, but for my mother, my father, my stepfather, David Kalt, and my uncle, Tolek Dobkowski. I cried for them and for the inevitable passing of a generation.

The difference between the living and the dead is the difference between the remembered and the forgotten. There are material tombstones and there are the tombstones of memory, the tombstones of the heart. When my youngest child was eleven, she asked me one Shabbat if I knew the names of my great-grandparents. How far back could I go? I asked her why she wanted to know. She responded that if no one knows their names, if no one knows where they are buried, then they might as well not have lived. That made her very sad and touched me deeply. To have been once alive but forgotten, neglected, or denied is a kind of social death. Yet to be dead but remembered or missed is a kind of eternal life. When the last person who remembers my parents and their generation dies, then that generation will no longer be alive. They will not be memory, maybe not even history. To remember is to affirm faith in humanity by recalling the singularity of individual life, thereby affirming a faith in the future. Memory, therefore, is really a religious concept, a theological one. Memory is really about commitment to the dignity of the individual and to a faith in the future. And we see that embodied in the lives that survivors have built as well as in how they confront their own mortality and the passing of their compatriots.

We live every day surrounded by images of death. According to statisticians, fifty-six million people die every year. We encounter these images on television, on the Internet, and on newspaper and magazine pages. There are violent deaths, death by starvation and natural disasters, as well as the natural deaths of people close to us. Death is ubiquitous: it is all around us and constant. We go to funerals and can't help crying for those we know, sometimes crying for ourselves. What are the implications of

living in common and in familiarity with death and its images? Can survivors teach us anything in this regard?

Exposure to the unbearable images of mass death in the Shoah and other genocides would be reasonable only if it led us to think about what is carried in each life individually—and to think about what disappears with death: every time, for every life, the world. What each life carries and signifies in its own way, incomparable and irreducible, is in effect nothing less than the world. Not one world among others, a world that another could replace, but the world in totality. As Genesis 1:27 powerfully proclaims, G-d created humans in His own image. Every person has individual worth and dignity because every human is fashioned in the image of G-d. Unfortunately, it is the appreciation of what is irreplaceable in each life that we lack. The living, like the dead, become all too often interchangeable and even exploitable.[13] The survivors, with their close, intimate, near-death experiences, recognize the danger in the anonymous, nameless, and faceless nature of mass death experiences. They recognize that each death, and the obliteration of memory of each life and death, is the death of a world in its totality. They recognize, and I believe that their children do as well, the dangers in not recognizing in death the collapse of the world. The danger lies in not appreciating that this is the meaning of death for the individual, as it is for those who remain behind and are forgotten. They recognize that this significance applies not only to the disappearance of those who are close to them but to the disappearance of every human life.

To paraphrase Wiesel: My life? I go on breathing from minute to minute, from memory to memory. Death was a constant shadow in my family's past, but a shadow that bent toward the sun, toward an appreciation of life and the future. The closing sentence of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize classic *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* beautifully underscores this point. "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." The years may diminish the force of memory's details, as my daughter's question powerfully revealed, but it does not diminish the force of love as long as we realize that each life and each death is both singular and unique, *and* universal.

CONTRIBUTORS' QUESTIONS FOR MICHAEL DOBKOWSKI

1. This is a very moving, deep, and revealing chapter on the meaning of death for victims, survivors, and their children and grandchildren.

Would Dobkowski agree with the statement that between family generations the processes described are universal processes—parents want to protect their children from stories of atrocities and death, and, often, also children want to protect their parents from pain and even anxiety about death—and that the metaphor of the double wall is thus a universal phenomenon that is brought to our attention in an extreme way by the stories of the survivors of the Holocaust? Or does this statement undermine the uniqueness of the Holocaust? If so, what, then, would be a unique contribution to this understanding of trans-generational dealings with death from the perspective of the Holocaust, next to its magnitude, in both quantitative and qualitative terms?

2. Dobkowski indicates that survivors and the children of survivors live with relatives they never knew and, in a way, live for them. He suggests that a life so burdened is a life that awaits death as a familiar presence. Yet he says that by facing death—being surrounded by and immersed in dead bodies—survivors know how to value life. Is not such a life so intense that it may crowd out the living? To be sure, his family, though diminished (in his words), is purposefully engaged in life and demonstrates his assertion that the decision to live well was no small achievement. If we can learn a lot from these surviving parents and their children, what can we learn about mortality from those survivors who could not rebuild their lives and lost their trust in life and love, and how can that be integrated in our reflection?

RESPONSE BY MICHAEL DOBKOWSKI

Death as the inevitable and final expression of life has obviously been a source of much reflection, conjecture, fear, avoidance, and repression. Together with birth, it is the most universal experience, and any claims made in my chapter concerning Holocaust survivors have to be tempered by the universality of the experience. It is natural to think that the fact that we are going to die should influence how we live. Death is so utterly central to our existence that I assume it has a pervasive and significant influence on how we live, whether we are survivors of genocidal traumas or not. We all confront death and respond to it in our individual ways, but my claim is that survivors probably do it differently, having been "a bullet or breath" away from death.

What are some of the common responses to death? Many people are

afraid of death; they fear the process of death; they fear that death may come too soon; they fear the unknown of death; they fear that death, because it seems to be a state of nonbeing, will inevitably mean the end of the good that life is, the deprivation of the end of life, that we are deprived of the good that we would experience were we not dead. Death is feared not because of what it feels like to be dead but rather because of the deprivation associated with it.

Another common response to death is anger. We may unleash our anger at God, or nature, or the universe for giving us only sixty or eighty years of life when the world is such a fascinating and stimulating place that it would take many more decades, and maybe never, to fully be satisfied by the possibilities of life.

Another emotion is sadness. We are sad because we have not fully experienced the life that we believe we deserve. We are sad to be separated from loved ones, from the pleasures of seeing our children and grandchildren grow into their mature adulthoods. We are sad because we believe our deaths will cause pain and anguish for those we care about or because there is still so much good work to do, so many books to write, classes to teach, charity to give. That seems to be Wiesel's lament in *Open Heart*.

But having accepted the likelihood that the pervasive emotions of fear, anger, deprivation, sadness, and so on are probably common and universal responses to death, what I am suggesting is that survivors of the Holocaust and other genocidal traumas, people who have faced mass death and were not killed, are probably less affected by fear and anger, although feelings of sadness and deprivation may still be quite powerful.

And then there is another emotion as well. Although survivors may be sad to be losing what they have experienced and cherished, particularly relationships with loved ones, I believe they have a deep sense of gratitude for being spared and for having the opportunity to rebuild their lives, as well as a sense of responsibility to live a life of meaning and accomplishment, to live well. Survival is not an end in itself. Survival for what? For many of them, even in extremity, there was rarely the response of survival for survival's sake. There is no survival without meaning and there is no meaning without survival. My parents and many other survivors I have encountered, personally and professionally, understood that. They cheated death before, and what they feel now facing death is not fear, for the most part, not anger, but gratitude that they had the gift of life at all.

We also know that many survivors were so broken by their traumatic

16 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness of the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 52.
17 Ibid., 84.
18 Ibid., 85.
19 Ibid., 75–76.
20 Ibid., 48.
21 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 3.
22 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 45.
23 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90; see Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), 82.
24 Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, 37.
25 Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 135.
26 Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), 128.
27 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 46.
28 See Nathan of Nemirov, *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom: "Shevachay HaRan" and "Sichos HaRan,"* trans. Aryeh Kaplan, ed. Zvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (New York: A. Kaplan, 1973), 148.
29 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.
30 Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, 246.
31 Alfred Rosenberg, *Race and Race History, and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Pois (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 131–32, 181.
32 Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 136.
33 See Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, 247.
34 Emil L. Fackenheim, "The Rebirth of the Holy Remnant" (lecture presented at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, June 17, 1993).
35 Ibid.
36 Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira, *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury, 1939–1942*, trans. J. Hershy Worch, ed. Deborah Miller (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000), 202.
37 Quoted in ibid., 224.
38 See H. J. Zimmels, *The Echo of the Nazi Holocaust in Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 64.

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Auschwitz and Hiroshima as Challenges to a Belief in the Afterlife

A Catholic Perspective

DIDIER POLLEFEYT

From time immemorial, humankind has felt the irresistible urge to give expression to its continuous alliance with life, surpassing the boundaries of both time and space. Therefore, throughout history, human beings have pondered over meaningful images and expressive metaphors that enable them to participate in life in the most honest and creative way without losing touch with the ever-present reality of death.

The twentieth century, however, will always be marked as the age that shook the human perception of death to the core. Auschwitz and Hiroshima uncovered an as-yet unpublished face of death: death as a collective, arbitrary, anonymous, massive, and technological event. Between 1933 and 1945, the factories of death built by the Nazi regime killed millions of people in the most systematic and efficient way, and since the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, humanity as a whole has lived with the constant awareness of the possibility of complete and immediate mass destruction.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that these apocalyptic events, among others, radically challenge our ways of coping with death and the afterlife. In the decades after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the human capacity to deal

with death in a symbolic and faithful way was unable to keep step with the speed of these life-changing historical events. This drove the world toward a new and yawning gap between the social and historical realities of mass destruction, on the one hand, and the inner psychological reality of human beings in relation to death, on the other. As a consequence, the need for a new understanding of death—but also a more intense form of fear of death—emerged.[1]

From a Catholic theological perspective, we refuse to reconcile ourselves to this pessimistic analysis of our contemporary times. Instead, we seek to offer new tracks that take us away from these pernicious currents and lead us toward a more authentic way of coping with death. We also consider whether the Christian idea of resurrection can appear in this context as a liberating chance of a return to faith after Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

Symbols of Immortality

Human beings have the ability to create symbols. They live from and through images and metaphors. The human person can only get a grasp of his or her body and soul through its imaginary capacity. In order to develop, the human person must compose these images into metaphors and models. This self-actualization of humanity is a universal process to which writers, artists, and visionaries but also scientists, philosophers, and theologians provide essential support.

Throughout history, the human desire to give utterance to the inevitability of death has also led to various vigorous symbols of immortality. In various works, the American religious psychologist Robert Jay Lifton calls them "modes of symbolic immortality." In total, he distinguishes five modes.

The first and probably most common perception of immortality is the sociobiological mode. That we live through and in our sons and daughters makes us part of a long, endless chain of humanity. This mode is of great importance in East Asian culture, but it also seems to be a universal idea. This category of thought is not a merely biological one, but comprises a social dimension as well: one lives on through one's tribe, organization, people, or nation.[2]

A second mode of symbolic immortality is the creative mode. One can extract the feeling of immortality from teaching, performing, building, repairing, writing, healing, inventing, and so forth. Through these acts, a human being is able to have an impact on the world and to have a self-transcending influence on humanity as a whole.[3]

A third mode of symbolic immortality is the theological mode. Various religions have the idea of an afterlife, or are at least familiar with the general theological principle of the triumph of the spirit over death. Therefore, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, each in their own way, transcend death or show the way to transcendence by means of diverse combinations of moral skills, rituals, and revelations.[4]

A fourth mode is the feeling of immortality one experiences because of the continuity with and in nature. One has the experience of living on in the elements of the universe. This environmental approach is a typical feature of animism, indigenous religions, European Romanticism, and Japanese perceptions of nature.[5]

The fifth and final mode differs from the others because of its foundation on an inner condition. It is called the mode of the transcendent experience. This position comprises the experiences of enlightenment or exaltation in which the boundaries of time and space become blurred. These kinds of experiences transcend both daily life and death. They are to be found in religious experience but also in music, dance, conflict, athletics, contemplation of the past, sexual relations, childbirth, friendship, and so forth. The arising of this experience is boosted by festivals and ceremonies in which daily life gets interrupted and all participants are able to forget about time and space. They experience an extraordinary psychological unity, intense corporality, or inexpressible enlightenment. These experiences can be associated with the Dionysian principle of border crossing, the mystical experience of unity with the universe, and Freud's description of the oceanic feeling.[6]

When a human being is able to integrate one of these symbolic modes of expression into his or her perception of death, he or she will, according to Lifton, obtain a feeling of immortality. The active and vital life will persist even in confrontation with contingency and death.

Psychological Disruption after Auschwitz and Hiroshima

The slaughters of the twentieth century caused a general feeling of disruption. The ancient correspondence of vital and nourishing symbols of tradition has been fundamentally harmed. Humanity has always feared death, but what is new is the awareness not only that every individual man

or woman will once stand face-to-face with death but also that segments of the population or humanity as a whole will. This threat was anticipated in Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Humanity demonstrated that it is able to apply technology to the destruction of its own kind. Previously, weapons and wars killed or wounded individuals, leaving shocked families behind, but the boundaries remained: some people suffer, others are restored. History goes on. Modern warfare, however, reveals a ludicrous experience of death: unnoticed victims with no names suffering and dying among thousands of others without ever having seen the faces of their opponents. Humanity has lost the certainty of its eternal existence as a species.

Every mode of immortality has been affected by this extreme disruption in the experience of death, and Lifton explains it from the perspective of Hiroshima.[7] This chapter considers how his argument can also be made by looking to the impact of the Holocaust on our perception of death.

Even when atomic weapons are kept in their bunkers or even if no gas chambers are currently operating anywhere on earth, their use in the past continues to constitute an inexpressible threat to our actual perception of life and death. The mere possibility of humanity destroying itself, or at least a major part of it, using its self-made technologies of atomic bombs or industrial mass extermination camps fundamentally alters the relationship between the human imagination and the modes of symbolical immortality. In that sense we have all survived Hiroshima and Auschwitz. We are all part of the struggle for meaning and sense in a world where similar tragedies can potentially emerge again.

For the biological mode, the harmful effect is the most clear. The perspective of surviving death through one's offspring becomes doubtful. It is technologically possible to extinguish a whole community, a whole people, and even the entire human race. National borders no longer offer protection. Missiles can be launched instantly, causing mass destruction. People can be deported from all reaches of a continent to one center of extermination. Humanity as a whole could be wiped out.

Problems are even more severe for the theological mode, since it was already affected by the empirical scientific reduction of reality. If very few people survive biologically, or none at all, then the image of spiritual survival loses its symbolic and consoling strength. The theological language of the spiritual and continued supernatural existence after death turns out to be a doubtful promise, if humanity is not even able to guarantee the continued natural existence of a normal life. This crisis in the theological

mode is reflected in the deep crisis that the Holocaust caused in the theological belief in a supernatural, almighty, perfectly good, personal God who is concerned with each of us individually and collectively.

Immortality through the creative mode depends on one's view of the continued existence of one's achievements in areas such as art, literature, social organization, and thought. The extermination of the Jewish people can be seen as the actual witness of the possibility of wiping out the history of a complete nation. Because of the existence of weapons of mass destruction, doubts arise over the endurance of human contributions to culture as such.

Regressing to the fourth, ecological mode is not a possibility either. We all know very well how vulnerable nature is, not only because of our polluting activities but also because of (biological and chemical) weapons. Also here, not only Hiroshima but also Auschwitz undermines the ecological mode. The Holocaust can be seen as an attack not only on humanity but also on nature. The Nazis' ideology made use of naturalistic categories to legitimize their crimes. For the victims, nature was an additional source of suffering rather than a source of redemption.[8]

The disruption of these four modes has led, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, to a greater trust in the mode of the transcendent experience. With this shift, the postmodern world of experience carries the burden of meeting these needs. It is not a coincidence that we live in an era of widespread attention to intensified forms of experience through music, Eastern meditation techniques, dance, alcohol, hunger for violence and sensation, sexuality, and drugs. Without other modes of transcendence, people are attracted by immediate sensations and, as a consequence, are less susceptible to deterioration of the historical durability upon which the other modes are much more dependent. In the end, the existential desire for meaning that is filled up by these experiences turns out to be continued and even strengthened.[9]

In the end, numbness and insensibility also become characteristic problems of our present-day society. The historical events of recent history are too absurd and dreadful to be turned into meaningful events. The symbols our culture has at its disposal are not able to make these transformations. Suicide therefore is not only a private affair. When someone takes his or her own life, he or she reveals the failure of our society to pass its symbols of continuity along to its individual members. Experiences that cannot be symbolized in a meaningful way or be internally converted can no longer

be integrated in society. Things that we can no longer face, but which cannot be avoided, are to be covered up. For medical science, for example, death becomes a defeat—an unwelcome intruder—that cannot be accepted anymore as an event characteristic to life. This attitude toward bereavement explains why Western people in general are not able to mourn anymore, despite the importance of this phase for psychological health. Today one tries to hide the factual reality of death from oneself.[10] This denial of death is also an important breeding ground for the so-called revisionism and negationism that relativize, minimize, or even deny the Holocaust extermination camps.

During the nineteenth century, the suppression of sexuality led to various underground and degenerated forms of sexuality, as Freud saw in his consultation room. Our era can be connected to the development of a film genre all its own, which one can describe as a pornography of death. Finally, the loss of belief in immortality might also lead to desperate attempts to conquer the fear of death. In this context, totalitarianism can be understood as the absolute allegiance to a political system of power composed of all-or-nothing concepts, violently suppressing the complexity of reality and nonconformity. That these totalitarian systems often victimize social groups and minorities betrays a deficient and harmful psychological attitude toward one's own immortality. Through considering others (Jews, gypsies, homosexuals) as less human, one tries to guarantee one's own immortality by radically denying that of others. In this way, psychological despair led to the legitimization of Hitler as a hero and victor over death. Due to this reality, however, the degenerated search for immortality has produced an endless flood of corpses.

Toward a Renewed Immortality

Freud's patients were victims of their repressive social situations: they suffered from fear and a sense of guilt because of their inability to express their sexuality. Today humanity faces a new taboo: the violent death of a hundred million human beings in several wars and extermination camps all over the world. These victims make it very difficult to speak about death. Death remains covered, negated, and buried as much as possible. Death has been banished from family life and is reduced to a medical act. An increasing number of funerals, for example, are held in strict intimacy, which means

without the participation of the larger community. Moreover, acquaintances are often informed afterward.

But no more than the suppressed sexuality in Freud's days will death disappear of itself without critical awareness. All over the world today people can begin to realize that the new possibility of self-destruction calls for a renewed understanding of death. If we want to overcome today's cultural-historical crisis, we will have to reconsider our ways of thinking about death. This step forward will turn out to be the only way to reorganize our lives. Auschwitz and Hiroshima offer critical opportunities for preventing an even more overwhelming destruction—a catastrophe whose shadow they have already cast before us. Therefore, it is essential to look for the revitalizing powers that are able to bridge the contemporary anthropological and religious gap concerning symbols of immortality.[11] To clarify the means of constructing this new symbolic language, we will have to turn back again to the five modes of immortality.

Today the social-biological mode crops up again in the rediscovery of certain fundamental biological facts: our choice for organic food, our perception of sexuality as meaningful, the joint education of children, the spontaneity of our corporal and psychological expressions, the increasing role of elderly people in our society. Also, the societal struggle with the binaries of masculinity and femininity, the ongoing debate over the end of life of terminal patients, the renewed interest in palliative and terminal care, and the public discussions over abortion and euthanasia point at important developments within the biosocial mode of immortality.

The way that human beings relate to their work is altering as well. More and more people strive for a working experience that contributes immediately to the continuity of their human aspirations, illustrated by the present-day working communities of artists, educators, and activists on a small scale. Technology has made it possible to leave degrading work to machines and has enlarged the facilities for spare time and its creative possibilities. In many areas, one strives to narrow the gap between work and family life.

The human aim for immortality by means of nature becomes manifest in the ecological concern that is increasing worldwide. In the search for a closer relationship, the meaning of nature symbolism is affirmed again. The confidence in nature's chances to survive is, moreover, endorsed by the gradual dismantling of large arsenals of nuclear weapons.

In the domain of the transcendent experience, more people strive toward

renewed forms of authenticity beyond the feeling of emptiness. Through their work, politics, games, meditation, and all kinds of everyday relationships, people search for periodic or permanent forms of inner harmony, completeness, and unity. In the future, this transcendent meaning can lead toward very important forms of symbolic reorganization.

Christian Perspectives on Life after Death

But what about the theological mode after Auschwitz and Hiroshima? From a Christian point of view, the revitalization of the theological perspective of life after death is crucial, especially in the light of mass destruction. If the God confessed in Christianity is really a God who loves humanity unconditionally, and thus really saves people, it is impossible for us human beings to believe that this love would cease at death, and especially at a death through genocide and mass destruction, the most radical and inhuman form of death. This conviction is based on the core of the experience of God in the Christian tradition as it finds its origin in the First Testament and is further revealed in Christ. A consequence of belief in a liberating and saving God is that there has grown an eschatological completion of reality. Neither extermination camps nor nuclear weapons can destroy this perspective; on the contrary, they make it even more necessary. If God saves humanity, he must save it especially from such a horrifying destruction, and not in a tentative and partial way, but finally and totally.[12]

In this perspective, Christian theology after Auschwitz and Hiroshima can contribute to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the symbols of immortality. But in what way, then, can the Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ give meaning to our contemporary context (theological mode)? We consider the belief of Christians in the resurrection as a particular confessional way to integrate the scattered and implicitly lived modes of immortality in a more conscious and anthropologically founded and religiously grounded way. This concept uncovers the conviction that the Christian theological representation of the "afterlife" is not an esoteric theory reserved for a limited group of insiders. Rather, it is deeply rooted in a universally accessible human experience of existence that is further interpreted and experienced in a religious way. In other words, the theological mode is no alternative or clashing interpretation of the belief in immortality but brings in the various anthropological modes and takes them up to a living reality and a living person, namely, Christ.

The theological notion of the "communion of saints" can be understood as an image of the sociobiological mode. We are part of one big human community, and our death stands for the definitive admission into this community of the deceased and future generations. This implies that our relationship with the dead can never be destroyed. That is the reason why Christians pray not only *for* the deceased but also *to* the deceased. After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this link is crucial from a Christian perspective: we stay in a lived connection and community with the victims of mass murder. We do not just remember them; we belong to the same community of the living.

Especially in the Catholic tradition of Christianity, emphasis is put on the close relationship between the "here and now" and the "hereafter." In fact, this closeness implicitly affirms the value of our earthly works (creative mode). Our actions on earth are not futile occupations but have far-reaching consequences, even in the afterlife. In process theology, this idea is even clearer: our actions on earth influence the being of God himself. After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Christians can recognize all acts of goodness that were done in favor of and by the victims of mass destruction as meaningful in God's eyes. They never get lost. In other publications, I have shown how forgiveness of the perpetrators of mass destruction is in no way possible without justice, punishment, and repentance.[13] Faith in life after death is, for believers, the ultimate guarantee that no injustice will remain unpunished.

The theological image of "a new heaven and earth" points to the Kingdom of God that comprises creation as a whole (mode of nature). Redemption for Christians is not just the redemption of the human soul but the redemption of the whole of creation. In the book *Holocaust and Nature*, which I edited, it becomes clear how the Nazis not only attacked the Jewish people but also attacked and destroyed nature, not only as a concept but also as a physical reality.[14] The consequences of nuclear weapons on nature are even more dramatic. From a Christian perspective, God entrusted creation to His people so that His Kingdom of peace and justice could expand. Therefore, God can also not let go of His creation. For this reason, from a Christian perspective, nature will be recreated together with the human person into an incorruptible and complete reality.

To conclude, the Christian conviction of the resurrection of the body points to the Christian belief in salvation for human beings as a whole, not just as a merely abstract spirit. This promise of the ultimate completeness of

humanity, averse to every inhuman dualism, implies the promise of a definitive transcendent experience of healing and salvation. Of course, this is the most difficult aspect to understand after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, given the attack on the body through mass destruction. How can this salvation of the body be conceived? A person is only fully human when his or her body is not just a means, an object, or an instrument (*un corps objet*) but if his or her body co-constitutes his or her subjectivity (*un corps sujet*). For this reason, based on their belief in God's promise of the salvation of humanity, Christians can only believe in the salvation of the total person, and this means also in the person's personal, corporal integrity. Of course, the body as object (*corps objet*) can be destroyed and exterminated, but Christians believe in the restitution of the body as subjectivity and personality (*corps sujet*), especially the flesh and bone of the persecuted and exterminated person.

The promise of the final or eschatological completion of humankind is no more than the consequence of the core of the Christian message that God is love. It relates to the human person as a social being, as a moral being, as a being in connection with nature, as a being with physical integrity, and as a being with a transcendent capacity and goal. Reaffirming this belief in light of Auschwitz and Hiroshima is a powerful response to the destructive powers in the world. It is the only thing a Christian can do and live for.

CONTRIBUTORS' QUESTIONS FOR DIDIER POLLEFEYT

1. Pollefeyt argues that the mass death that human beings unleashed on one another in the twentieth century "shook the human perception of death to the core." At the end of the day, however, the disruption seems to be less radical than his account at first suggests. If Hiroshima and Auschwitz called into question earlier ways of thinking about immortality—modes that Lifton identified as sociobiological, creative, theological, continuous with and in nature, or experientially transcendent—the result is that all five, in one way or another, obtain new life. Pollefeyt attempts to build a bridge over an abyss. At one end of the bridge are the pre-Holocaust modes of coping with death; at the other end are the same modes but now in altered forms. But what about the bridge itself? From what is it built? How does it work? What maintenance problems does it face? Is a toll to be paid, and, if so, what are its costs as well as its benefits? Such questions loom especially large with regard to Pollefeyt's theological mode, which, after all, is the one that makes the biggest difference. It does so because only that mode really holds out the hope that individual and community life, as it actually has been lived, is not devoured eventually and forever in the abyss. If Pollefeyt helps his readers to see the bridge he is attempting to build, he will create more confidence that it is honestly possible to get from one side of the abyss to the other.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche was the first philosopher to point out that the Christian belief in an afterlife may lead to nihilism insofar as it suggests that we should value this transcendent life over earthly existence, which is not valuable in itself. Are the problems that Pollefeyt associates with a loss of faith in immortality—numbness, insensibility, psychic impotence—instead the product of our egoistic desire for immortality? For Nietzsche, the danger is that this devaluing of corporeal existence may lead toward indifference for life itself. I think the same problem arises with all forms of immortality discussed in the chapter; any focus on what I leave behind or how I may transcend the limits of corporeal existence only shifts my focus away from the here and now and the immediate cry of the other. I am less optimistic about the future insofar as I witness not any sort of universal effort to arrest contemporary forms of genocidal violence but instead a widespread disinterest in the suffering of strangers, and the majority of social activists are concerned not with any sort of immortality but instead with trying to salvage a decent existence for those condemned to pain before the end of their all-too-mortal lives.

RESPONSE BY DIDIER POLLEFEYT

How to cross the abyss created by the Holocaust in our understanding of immortality? What is the price to be paid for crossing? What is the role of the theological mode in all of this? Does the theological mode of life after death not end in indifference for life itself? Is immortality not distracting social activism away from the cry of the other?

Indeed, the abyss created by the Holocaust in our desire for immortality is very deep. This point can be illustrated by the way the Nazis themselves tried to use and to pervert the modes of immortality, at least four of them.

Concerning the ecological mode, the Nazis had a great respect and admiration for nature. Nazism claimed to have a close relation with nature,

even glorifying "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boten*). It celebrated the contact of the German people with the land, and it saw an almost mystical bond between the German land and the German blood. It was through bloodlines and natural space that the Aryan race would gain eternal life.

In relation to the sociobiological mode of immortality, the Nazis were obsessed by the intergenerational continuation of the Aryan race. At the center of Nazi ideology was a social politics of Nazi eugenics directed not only against the Jewish people but also against all those seen as unworthy of life including homosexuals, the feebleminded, the degenerate, the idle, the insane, and the weak. The central idea was to take these people out of the chain of heredity to guarantee the healthy, sociobiological continuation of the Aryan people.

The Nazis also tried to use the creative modus to guarantee the eternity of the German Reich. Nazism hoped to create a thousand-year Reich that would result in a cultural rebirth of Germany. This rebirth would become clear in Nazi architecture, Nazi sports, paintings, sculpture, music, film, theater, and cinema. At the same time, the German Reich tried to free Germany of "degenerate art," which was to be purged from German culture.

It is not difficult to see in Nazism the transcendental mode also at work. Many adherents of National Socialism felt intuitively drawn to the Nazi worldview and its powerful allure. For many seekers, the primary motivation behind a (Nazi) conversion experience was a desire for transcendence, a wish to search beyond themselves to find meaning and purpose.

In *To Mend the World*, Emil L. Fackenheim argues that the foundation to live out the 614th commandment—"You shall not give Hitler posthumous victories"—today receives a grounding (*Boden*) in the ontic reality of the Holocaust itself.[15] The resilience of victims during the Holocaust testifies of the possibility of authentic thinking and acting during the Holocaust. Therefore, such thinking and acting is also possible for us after the Holocaust and, as far as possible, is also compulsory. To apply this to the issue of immortality, the way the victims during the Holocaust authentically experienced and lived out the modes of immortality is not only a basis to resist the Nazi misuse of the concepts of immortality, but it is already a part of this resistance.

In other words, the bridge over the abyss is already built by the victims of the Holocaust themselves and the way they dealt, however fragmentary that may be, with the modes of immortality, even in the most difficult circumstances. Therefore, in my view, the Holocaust shows both the vulnerability and the resilience of our perceptions of life after death.

During the Holocaust, nature was for the victims not only a source of additional pain and suffering but also often a source of comfort, hope, and even religious experiences, giving a unique expression to the ecological mode of immortality. As Viktor Frankl made clear in his analysis, many victims survived the Holocaust because of the enormous desire to be connected with the previous and future generations continuing the (sociobiological) chain of life and to mean in this survival something to others.[16] The quantity and quality of art generated by victims of Nazism witnesses the indestructible creativity of persons, even in the most terrible circumstances. Many victims could momentarily escape the suffering of the Holocaust in transcendent experiences by sharing stories, telling jokes, enacting rituals, singing songs, or finding friendship and love.

Therefore, in my view, the Holocaust shows both the vulnerability and the resilience of our perceptions of life after death: the abyss and the bridge over the abyss.

What about the role of the theological mode in all of this? The most decisive observation is that the only mode of immortality not (mis)used by Nazism was the theological mode, since the Nazis did not believe in any theological reality beyond itself (even if we also know theologians under Hitler!). As the papal encyclical *We Remember* argues: "The National Socialist ideology . . . refused to acknowledge any transcendent reality as the source of life and the criterion of moral good. Consequently, a human group, and the State with which it was identified, arrogated to itself an absolute status and determined to remove the very existence of the Jewish people, a people called to witness to the one God and the Law of the Covenant."[17]

From this perspective, the ultimate answer to the evil of Nazism, especially its manipulation of the mode of immortality, is to be found in the theological mode. If there is no reality that transcends our human constructions and actions, then, ultimately, the Holocaust will remain relative to history and its victims lost completely and forever. That was exactly the wish of the Nazis in their reaction and even their hate vis-à-vis every theological, in particular monotheistic, belief. And already during the Holocaust, victims continued to pray to God, to discuss with God, to trust in God, to put trust in his condemning or redeeming power. The theological modus of immortality gives a foundation to this hope that trust in a God

of justice and mercy is not in vain. Perhaps this hope is therefore the most ultimate answer to the Holocaust, a hope that finally the evil of the Holocaust will not have the last word, not only in the future but also in relation to the past. It was exactly this hope that the Nazis tried to destroy, but victims resisted.

Of course, I understand fully that theological life after death has also been terribly misused in the course of history, especially as an excuse to be blind to the concrete suffering of people in the here and now. The theological modus made it easy to underestimate or even neglect the pain of victims of social injustice using the "comforting" idea that later victims will have a good life in heaven. In this sense, even the theological modus can be used and perverted by evildoers. But the bad use of an idea does not falsify its more original good intention. For example, because many people divorce today, we should not automatically give up the idea that marriage is a meaningful expression of human relationships. In the Catholic tradition, there is a very strong connection between life before death and life after death. This afterlife is an idea that supports social activism rather than immobilizes it. Those people who have been indifferent or even responsible for the suffering of the other cannot put hope for themselves in an authentic theological mode of immortality. On the contrary, the Nazis hated the theological mode of immortality and tried to destroy it. In this sense, reestablishing faith in immortality after the Holocaust can be for believers a strong act of resistance against the evil of the Holocaust.

NOTES

1 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatrist Press, 1996), 354.
2 Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, *Living and Dying* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 76.
3 Ibid., 78.
4 Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 285.
5 Lifton and Olson, *Living and Dying*, 80.
6 Ibid., 25.
7 Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 339.
8 Ibid., 171.
9 Lifton and Olson, *Living and Dying*, 83.
10 Robert Jay Lifton, *Boundaries: Psychological Man in Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1969), 95.
11 Lifton and Olson, *Living and Dying*, 124.
12 Roger Burggraeve, *De bijbel geeft te denken* (Leuven: Acco, 1991).

13 See, e.g., Didier Pollefeyt, ed., *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).
14 Didier Pollefeyt, ed., *Holocaust and Nature* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013).
15 Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994; Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 22.
16 Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, with a new foreword by Harold S. Kushner (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).
17 Pope John Paul II, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (Vatican City: Libreria editrice Vaticana, 1998).