ISSN: 2282-4189

LUISS

Research Center
for European Analysis
and Policy

EMUNA Brief 13/2025

Understanding of Religions - October 29, 2025

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THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY AND DIVINE KENOSIS

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«ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσον τῷ θεῷ, ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν, μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν, γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ»

Phil 2, 7

To bring the issue into sharper focus, I prefer to begin with the theme of theodicy in its connection with the idea of divine kenosis, precisely the Pauline concept in the Letter to the Philippians.

How can we explain theodicy, how can we explain the suffering of the righteous, for example, the tormenting story of Job?[1] Perhaps we must believe, with Jaspers, that Job's "guilt" is ultimately the guilt of the creature who cannot avoid existential failure and shipwreck?[2] Or must we hold, with Camus, that Job's "guilt" is, in essence, the "absurdity" of existence?[3] Or again, must we agree with Sartre in his opinion that man is a "useless passion"[4] that no illusory peace can console, and that only in the awareness of evil and limitation is the discovery of true human identity? On the other hand, if we do not allow ourselves to be captivated by the themes of existential literature that have rethought, in their own way, the reason for Job's question, the question remains: perhaps the key to understanding it lies precisely in the divine *mysterium tremendum*, in the experience of the mystery of God, in the affirmation that He, the inaccessible, can be experienced purely per *negativum* and therefore His true revelation is a concealment? Yet, the concept of *Deus absconditus* appears problematic for Judaism. Jewish doctrine, the Torah, is based on the assumption that knowledge of God is always possible, even if imperfectly, limitedly, since He Himself has revealed Himself and His will. It is therefore necessary today to reinterpret Job's entire story from other hermeneutical perspectives, after the experience of pain, guilt,

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[1] The bibliography on the question of theodicy is evidently vast. Here, I will limit myself to citing a few important studies on the subject. *Libro di Giobbe*: G. Ravasi, *Giobbe*, Boria, Roma, 1984; G. Moretto, *Giustificazione e interrogazione. Giobbe nella filosofia*, Guida, Napoli, 1991, p. 115; *Domande a Giobbe*, a cura di M. Ciampa, Città Nuova, Roma, 1989, p. 84; E. Bloch, *Ateismo nel cristianesimo*, tr. it. di F. Coppellotti, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1971, pp. 159 sgg.; Ph. Nemo, *Giobbe e l'eccesso del male*, tr. it. di A. M. Baggio, Città Nuova, Roma, 1981; G. Mura, *Angoscia e esistenza*, Città Nuova, Roma, 1982, pp. 123 sgg.; pp. 158 sgg. e passim; P. Colonnello, *La questione della colpa tra filosofia dell'esistenza ed ermeneutica*, Loffredo, Napoli 1995.

[2] Cf. K. Jaspers, *Del tragico*, trad. it. di I.A. Chiusano, SE, Milano, 1987, p. 26; cfr. anche Id., *La questione della colpa*, a cura di A. Pinotti, Cortina, Milano, 1996; P. Ricoeur, *Finitudine e colpa*, a cura di I. Bertoletti, Morcelliana, Brescia, 2021.

[3] It is well known how the theme of the "absurd" recurs in the works of A. Camus, from *Il mito di Sisifo*, *Opere*, a cura di R. Grenier, tr. it. di A. Borelli, Bompiani, Milano, 1992, pp. 195-335, to *La peste*, *Opere*, cit., pp. 369-615. Su Camus, cfr. A. Bresolin, *Sofferente e fumatore. Camus e la bilancia di Giobbe*, Castelvecchi ed., Roma, 2024.

[4] J.P. Sartre, *L'essere e il nulla*, tr. it. di G. Del Bo, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1988, p. 738.

and negativity has been influenced by the countless exegetical streams of negative theology, dialectical theology, and crisis theology. One of the most interesting hermeneutic proposals today comes from Hans Jonas, a Jewish thinker who has long reflected on the intertwining of theodicy and kenosis, starting from an epochal experience of the twentieth century, the Holocaust of the Jews in Auschwitz.[5]

Job's question, Jonas observes, has always been the fundamental problem of theodicy. However, if the biblical prophets could initially answer Job's question by resorting to the idea of covenant, recalling how the very people who had made a pact with God had become unfaithful, later, in the centuries of faithfulness that followed, no guilt could be invoked to legitimize, justify, or even explain suffering, evil, or negativity. Instead, they resorted to the concept of testimony, first developed in the age of the Maccabees and later identified with the concept of martyrdom, that is, with the sacrifice of the just and innocent called "to bear the scandal of evil." However, in Jonas's opinion, none of this helps us understand the epochal event of Auschwitz, a completely unprecedented experience that cannot be understood in the light of traditional theological categories: "There is no longer any room for fidelity or infidelity, faith and agnosticism, guilt and punishment, or for terms like testimony, proof, and hope of salvation, nor even for strength and weakness, heroism or cowardice, resistance or resignation. Auschwitz knew nothing of all this, devouring children who did not yet possess the use of speech and to whom this opportunity was not even granted. Those who died there were murdered not for the faith they professed, nor even because of it or any personal conviction."[6] Therefore, the preliminary question to ask can only be this: "Why did God allow this to happen? But which God could allow it?" If one does not wish to abandon the concept of God altogether, then one must take the "risk" of thought, attempting the adventure of rethinking this concept in a completely new way, and thus truly seeking a new answer to Job's old question. Jonas thus ventures down truly arduous paths, whose contours, not always visibly traced, refer back to the Kantian question of orientation in thought.

Jonas first proposes a suggestive reworking of the biblical theme of divine creation, drawing on that "form of communication of thought that Plato admitted for the sphere that transcends the knowable world," namely myth. He develops some theological implications of the mythical narrative of creation in a unique way. First of all, the image of a suffering God gains prominence, but not in the sense of the Christian myth, that is, in the sense of an event that occurred once and for all in history, namely the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. Suffering in God, instead, means that the relationship between God and the world, beginning with the act of creation, implies, in some way, suffering for God himself. Secondly, the myth elaborated by Jonas presents the image of a God of becoming, which is in antithesis to the Platonic-Christian tradition of philosophical theology: here a "temporalized" God is hypothesized, one who lacks an immutable essence in eternity. The fact is that God's relationship with the world implies that He "experiences something at one with the world and that His own being is affected by what 'happens and passes away' in the world."[7] Furthermore, alongside the idea of a suffering and

[5] Cf. H. Jonas, *Il concetto di Dio dopo Auschwitz. Una voce ebraica*, tr. it. di C. Angelino, Il Melangolo, Genova, 1989. On Jonas: C. Manzo, *Dalla mistica di Isaac Luria al Dio di Hans Jonas impotente contro il male della Shoah*, Elison Publishing, Novoli (LE), 2016; F. Fossa, *Il concetto di Dio dopo Auschwitz. Hans Jonas e la gnosi*, ETS, Pisa, 2014.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

evolving God, the image of a God "who cares, a God who is not distant, detached, and closed in on Himself, but involved in that which He concerns Himself with" takes shape.[8] Starting from these assumptions, Jonas advances the hypothesis that it is necessary to renounce one of the attributes assigned to God by traditional doctrine, namely, unlimited divine power, which can coexist with absolute goodness only if God is incomprehensible or accepted as a mystery. Only in the face of a completely inaccessible, unattainable God can one affirm that, despite being absolutely good and omnipotent, He tolerates the existence of evil in the world. In short, the three fundamental divine attributes—goodness, omnipotence, and comprehensibility—are in a relationship in which the relationship between the two excludes the third. What, then, are the two truly essential concepts, and which must be excluded after an event like Auschwitz has occurred in history? Certainly, goodness is coextensive with the very concept of God. Even comprehensibility cannot be denied, although it recognizes the double limit of God's infinite essence and human limitations. It has already been said that the concept of *Deus absconditus*—like the concept of the absurd God—appears problematic, if not even alien to Judaism. Divine omnipotence, therefore, must be ruled out: "During the years in which the fury of Auschwitz was unleashed, God remained silent. God was silent. And now I add: He did not intervene, not because He did not want to, but because He was not in a position to do so."[9] Here Jonas departs from the most ancient Jewish doctrine, but it must be noted that he refers divine importance only to physical reality. In his view, God renounced His power precisely by granting human freedom.

All of Jonas's arguments, however, seem to converge on a moral epicenter: they recall full human responsibility for evil. Thus, the path to salvation, and the abandonment of guilt, begins with man's attempt to "make himself in the image and likeness of God's infinite goodness," not of His presumed omnipotence.

Upon closer inspection, however, Jonas's response—that is, his reference to God's impotence—is completely opposite to that offered in the Book of Job, where the fullness of God's power as Creator is asserted. Yet Jonas seems to suggest that in the righteous man who suffers, we can glimpse God Himself, who suffers, who sympathizes, who endures.

In any case, the Jewish thinker's theoretical proposal is undoubtedly evocative and original. Here it matters little that it appears distant from both the most ancient doctrine of Judaism and the canons of Catholic orthodoxy; what is of interest is its ideal consonance with some contemporary hermeneutical proposals, which have also treated the theme of the negative or of the "non" (the "non"-power) or the theme of evil in God. I am referring, in particular, to Luigi Pareyson and the clarification conducted in the last phase of his thought of that "stumbling block," that shocking element which is the "evil" in God.

Pareyson's thesis is that precisely to assert Himself as a positive reality and a victory over evil, "God had to know negation and experience the negative," transforming, in His creative activity, the static nothingness of the initial "non-being" into the "active nothingness" that is evil. Yet evil appears in Him

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

only as a remote possibility, born already vanquished and devoid of any attempt to actualize itself. Let us leave aside the question of the connection between Luigi Pareyson and the late Schelling: in reality, Pareyson's theses explicitly present themselves as a reworking and development of Schelling's positive philosophy, which had also traced to God, the cause of the world, the cause of the imperfection and evil that the world contains. It is not the place here to dwell on the theme of the "wonder of reason" as a fundamental choice of Schelling's late work. It is worth recalling, in Pareyson's latest speculation, the value and role of suffering, which is identified, not by chance, with the soul of the universe, with the very breath of the cosmos: "The power of pain does not stop here [...]. Suffering becomes revelatory: it opens the aching heart of reality and reveals the secret of being. It teaches that man's destiny is atonement, and that, stronger than evil, pain is the meaning of life and the soul of the universe." But the power of pain arises from the fact that God also suffers. Just as in Jonas's theoretical proposal, a suffering God appears, a God who endures, who "by granting man freedom, has renounced His power," similarly in Pareyson's later theses the figure of a God who suffers and who wants to suffer emerges clearly: "Suffering is proper to God: *divinum est pati* [...]. He is prepared for this by that kenotic element inherent in creation, in which he has withdrawn into Himself, voluntarily limited and restricted Himself to make room for man and his freedom. Human freedom began with a conscious and voluntary sacrifice on the part of God [...]. The sole root of evil and pain, which is the mystery of suffering whose veil only religion can lift, lies in this divine will to suffer for man." These arguments undoubtedly open the horizon of tragic thought. In any case, for both Jonas and Pareyson, philosophical thought does not appear to be so interested in the problem of foundation or in the elaboration of an all-encompassing system; rather, attentive to understanding the authentic meaning of existential destabilization, it is concerned with penetrating the irreducibility of the world's pain without composing the divisions in an ideal order. Perhaps it is precisely the awareness that in "human and divine suffering, pain reveals itself as the only force capable of overcoming evil," that "between man and God there is no collaboration in grace if there has not first been one in suffering; that without pain the world appears enigmatic and life absurd; that without suffering, evil remains unredeemed and joy inaccessible"—perhaps it is precisely this awareness that constitutes Ariadne's magical thread for penetrating Job's question? Perhaps the Judeo-Christian paradigm of guilt, with its inexhaustible problematics, needs to be rethought once again starting from these unusual hermeneutical horizons.