

Review of Sandu Frunză, Dumnezeu și Holocaustul la Elie Wiesel: O etică a responsabilității (God and the Holocaust according to Elie Wiesel: An ethic of responsibility).

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Michael S. (2011) "Review of Sandu Frunză, Dumnezeu și Holocaustul la Elie Wiesel: O etică a responsabilității (God and the Holocaust according to Elie Wiesel: An ethic of responsibility).," *Mathal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.17077/2168-538X.1022

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/mathal/vol1/iss1/2>

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Review of Sandu Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul* la Elie Wiesel: O etică a responsabilității (God and the Holocaust according to Elie Wiesel: An ethic of responsibility).

Abstract

In *God and the Holocaust according to Elie Wiesel: An ethic of responsibility* Sandu Frunza, professor of philosophy at Babeș-Bolyai University, explores the philosophy of Elie Wiesel, a Jewish scholar and holocaust survivor. Despite his prison camp experiences, Wiesel retains his faith in God. His experiences lead him to advocate an ethic of memory and alterity. Frunza relates Wiesel's experiences, his approach to the problem of evil, and his ethic in conversation with contemporary philosophers and Jewish scholarship.

Keywords

Elie Wiesel, God, Jew, holocaust, theodicy, ethic, alterity, Romania

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This is a book about how to remain standing when your feet are swept out from under you. It is about the persistence of faith when the historical context is vastly altered, theological formulations become inadequate, expected results don't materialize, and the force of will is depleted. It is a book about a Romanian Jew whose faith was radically altered, but not destroyed, by the Holocaust.

Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in the town of Sighet in northwestern Romania. Sighet had a very large community of Hasidic Jews, and Wiesel's family was an active part of this community. He was raised to reverence and trust in God, and studied both classical and contemporary Jewish thought at the synagogue and Yeshiva. At the age of 15 he, along with the entire Jewish community, was deported to German concentration camps. Wiesel spent time in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and although most of his family died, he and his two older sisters survived. But *God and the Holocaust* is not a biography. It is, rather, a philosophical exploration of Wiesel's experiences and the impact that they had on his faith, on his understanding of certain theological issues, and how these experiences led Wiesel to a particular philosophy of life oriented around an ethic of alterity.

A famous scene from Wiesel's *Night* relates the type of experience that Wiesel and other inmates had in the Nazi death camps:

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. "Long live liberty!" cried the two adults. But the child was silent. "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. "Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. "Cover your heads!" Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive.... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?" and I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is he? Here He is-He is hanging here on this gallows...." That night the soup tasted of corpses. (*Night* 70-71)

Clearly such experiences will try the faith of even the most committed believer. They drive home the vexing questions of the problem of evil in a vivid and personal way.

Sandu Frunza, author of the current volume, discusses three possible responses (three theodicies) analyzed by Michael Berenbaum as being rejected by Wiesel on the basis of their inadequacy to explain why God would allow such experiences in the life of one of his children. There is what could be called the "hamartiological" theodicy: the holocaust and its evils are a result of the sins of

Israel. Wiesel doesn't reject Jewish sin as a cause of some of the evils that Jews have experienced in their history, but he argues that no sins committed by Jews are sufficiently terrible to cause the tortuous deaths of over a million Jewish children as happened in the holocaust. An "eschatological" theodicy would argue that the evils suffered by Israel during the holocaust will be set right when the Messiah comes. Wiesel rejects this approach because the Messiah failed to appear in any recognizable form when the millions of Jews who were massacred needed him most. As Frunza puts it, "Wiesel cannot accept a form of messianism in which the Messiah didn't come precisely at that time when there was the greatest need of him" (116). Finally, an "Irenean" theodicy would posit the holocaust as God's way of testing Israel's faith in order to make it stronger. According to this view, the holocaust was caused by God in order to bring about a much greater good, a stronger and purer faith. Frunza does not explain Wiesel's reason for rejecting this explanation, but mentions Berenbaum's contention that Wiesel rejected all three of these approaches as being merely theoretical and not speaking to a person's existential reality.

The problem of evil, made most vivid through the Holocaust, has perhaps been the most vexing question ever to face Jewish philosophy. Frunza places Wiesel's thought into play with biblical stories, Jewish scholars, and leading philosophers. He shows how Wiesel, having personally experienced these atrocities, having experience what it is like to be unable to resist and unable to help those around him, developed as his response an ethic of responsibility and a theodicy of memory.

It is not God alone who forgot the victims of Nazi Germany. They were forgotten – whether intentionally or unintentionally perhaps doesn't matter – by the world, by their captors (who forgot that they were humans just like themselves), and by each other (as Eliezer turned from his dying father in *Night*). Wiesel recognizes that the biggest obstacle to overcoming evils such as the holocaust is the apathy of those who do not actively oppose them. Hence his focus on alterity. The challenge is how to universalize this ethic: how to show that it applies not only to Jews, and not only to those who are already obligated to altruism by their own religion or philosophy. Wiesel's proposed ethic embraces all humans, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or any other variable, because all are imperiled by the vagaries and vicissitudes of history and circumstance. None can be sure that she will not be the next persecuted.

Wiesel finds the indifference to evil even more appalling than evil itself, but he has a strategy to move people from their indifference and to motivate them to act on behalf of others. His emphasis on alterity is a result of his experiences in the concentration camps. He recognizes that others will overcome their indifference and be aroused to compassion if they share the same sort of experiences. This explains Wiesel's approach to writing philosophy: unlike most philosophers, Wiesel writes fiction rather than non-fiction. He does this because reading his stories enables others to share his holocaust experiences, and through

sharing them, embrace his ethic. And perhaps this is the key to a 20th-century theodicy as well. Where was God during the holocaust? Why didn't God intervene to save those hanging on the gallows? First, Wiesel, through his mouthpiece Eliezer, may be pointing out that God is in the persecuted, suffering along with them. But an even more forceful response cries out through Wiesel's work: God acts through people. Hence for God to act, we must act. God's indifference is our indifference, and we only ask "Where is God?" because we ourselves have failed to act on behalf of others.

At first glance, Sandu Frunza seems like an unlikely author of a book about Elie Wiesel and the holocaust: he is neither Jewish, a historian, nor a theologian. Frunza is a Romanian, is Romanian Orthodox, and is a philosophy professor in the Faculty of Political Science at Babe-Bolyai University. A closer look, however, finds many commonalities between Wiesel and Frunza. Wiesel, too, was a Romanian: he was born and raised in the western Romanian (Transylvanian) village of Sighet, a town very close to where Frunza was born and raised. And Wiesel can surely be considered a philosopher. Frunza, for his part, has spent considerable effort becoming an expert on Jewish thought, having studied Jewish thought in Israel, various European centers, and in the United States. He teaches courses in Jewish thought at Babe-Bolyai University and has published articles on various aspects of Jewish thought in several Romanian journals. Frunza's area of work is philosophy of religion; this enables him to see in Wiesel's work potential responses to questions that have vexed both Jewish intellectuals and intellectuals from many other religious traditions. Both the questions and the responses that Frunza finds in Wiesel's work are of universal interest and application, having a relevance not limited to Jews or Romanians, but applicable to all people who believe in God.

Wiesel's experiences are moving, and because of this his ethic is compelling. Only the stoniest of hearts would not be touched by his narratives. And the philosophical underpinnings of his thought are fairly compelling as well: they complement the proposals of some of the greatest ethicists of the 20th century, thinkers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Frunza's exposition of Wiesel's thought is lucid and readable, while at the same time being academic and rigorous, and hence manages to satisfy the mind as well as the soul. It is unfortunate that this book has not been translated into languages of wider circulation, for it provides both a useful introduction to Wiesel's philosophy and furthers the discussion of Wiesel and of holocaust studies in general.