WISDOM LOST, WISDOM FOUND:
SOPHIA’S PRESENCE IN THE CAMPS

“Where shall Wisdom be found,” asks Job (28:12), “and where is the place of understanding?” It is Divine Wisdom which is meant here, and understanding of that Wisdom. According to Biblical tradition, this question is the important one, much more so than the speculative question: What exactly is Divine Wisdom, or Sophia.1 In the book of Job it is stated that Wisdom cannot be bought – that “gold and crystal can’t equal it, neither shall it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. . . . The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold” (Job 28:17, 19) – and it is not to be found at any particular place, however remote or difficult to reach: “The deep says, ‘It isn’t in me.’ The sea says, ‘It isn’t with me’” (Job 28:14). But where is it, then, to be found?

In this article I argue that Wisdom can be found in bearing witness to and remembrance of major catastrophes in the history of mankind, in particular the Shoah. Bearing witness to the dehumanization of the death camps of Nazi Germany and life under the circumstances of humanization are in certain situations the only possible way to protest the dehumanization. Thus what seems to be the death of Sophia can be revealed as a hiding place of Sophia in a world reigned by the folly of evil.

Wisdom hiding in nothingness

Following St. Augustine, Western Christendom traditionally pointed to the interiority of the soul as its answer to the question, “Whence then comes Wisdom; where is the place of understanding?” (Job 28: 20). For as Augustine wrote, in what is probably the most famous passage of his Confessiones (10:27):

Late have I loved you, o beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you. For you were within me, and I was outside myself; and it was there that I sought you, ugly as I am I sought you in the beautiful things which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you.

Thus, according to Augustine, God is miraculously “more within me than I am to myself” (Confessiones 3:6.11). However, to Saint Augustine, the “integrity” wherein God’s presence is to be sought and possibly found – which is to say, where one is possibly found to be already in the presence of God – is not a psychological location. God’s presence is not met in a certain describable experience. Seeking the presence of God in a particular experience, spiritual as it may be or seem, would still mean for Augustine in the end: seeking God “outside.” Seeking Divine Wisdom in the psychological soul still comes down to mining the gold, crystal and gems which, according to the book of Job, cannot buy Sophia.2

The anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing is therefore paradoxically writing in the spirit of Augustine when he or she seemingly turns against him. The author writes that “where someone else would direct you to gather together all your powers and faculties within yourself, and worship God there,” he or she considers this kind of language dangerous.3 The author then offers their own “council” in response to Augustine, advising

. . . to take care that you are in no sense within yourself. To put it briefly, I would have you be neither outside yourself, above yourself, nor behind, nor on one side or the other. Where then, you will say, am I to be? According to your reckoning, nowhere! Now indeed you speak well, for it is there that I will have you. Because nowhere bodily is everywhere spiritually.

And he continues:

And though all your bodily faculties can find nothing there to feed on, because they think that what you are doing is nothing, carry on, then, with that nothing as long as you are doing it for God’s love. Do not leave off, but press on earnestly in that nothing with an alert desire in your will to have God, whom no man can know.4

According to the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, God can be met in the “nothing” in which people are carrying on despite everything. It is an amazing and mysterious statement: nowhere bodily is everywhere spiritually. In this

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