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REASON BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL OF FAITH

The main foundations of the European culture are – as it is usually considered – Athens (philosophy), Jerusalem (religion) and Rome (law). The spiritual history of Europe – and by analogy the history of mankind – can be described (at least partially) as the *history of reason* looking for the essence of being and seeking to unveil mysteries (E. Husserl), or, as the *history of faith* as the dialogue between man and God, dialogue supported and saved by the infinite and providential Creator's love (St. Augustine), or finally, as the *history of freedom* in its different dimensions and manifestations (G. W. Hegel). In each of these perspectives the history of Europe appears as the field of struggle for man, and precisely – as the struggle *for saving his dignity and humanity*.

This is the way in which Leo Shestov, the author of the book presented¹, interprets the history (and the spiritual foundations) of Europe. The main subject of his analysis is the problem of the conflict between the realm of necessity and constraint (in Shestov's language – reason) and the realm of freedom (faith). According to Shestov, the main purpose of his book “is to research the claims of human reason or the speculative philosophy to the truth” (p. 82). Even more, the matter is to “rouse oneself from the au-

thority of soulless and indifferent truths, into which the fruit of the forbidden tree are transformed” (p. 83), that is – to put it another way – to free oneself from the tyranny of knowledge and reason. In Shestov's own terms – the matter is to release oneself from the bondage of Athens and to return to Jerusalem.

The sources of the problem “Athens or Jerusalem” (reason or faith) go back to the early stages of Christianity (St. Paul, St. Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria), but the problem is still alive and fundamental, not only to Christianity but also to every other religion. The question is whether reason can be useful for the man who, by the grace of faith, has come to the supra-natural and redeeming truth. What is more, it asks whether it is suitable to judge the truths and mysteries of faith by purely rational and natural principles.

But man rises against blind faith, against blind obedience to authority (even God's authority). Man wants not only to believe, but also to *understand* the contents of his belief. What is more, he wants to be sure that his faith is justified and true. According to Shestov, this attitude follows from a prejudice deeply rooted in European spirituality, the prejudice that reason is the essence of man. That prejudice, according to Shestov, arises from Greek philosophy which was supported by two principles formulated by Plato. The first one (from the dialogue *Phaedo*) proclaims that there is no worse misfortune for a man than to be the en-

¹ L. S z e s t o w, *Ateny i Jerozolima* (Athens and Jerusalem). Translation with introduction and comments by C. Wodziński, Wydawnictwo Znak, Cracow 1993, 484 pp.

emy of reason. And the second principle (from the dialogue *Eutyphro*) proclaims that something is holy not because of being the subject of a god's love, but conversely, gods love something because something is holy.

All attempts (for instance by Socrates and Plato) to go beyond the plane of reason to another, higher knowledge – in Shestov's opinion – failed. The Greek worship of reason is so deeply rooted in the human mind that even *faith* is conceived as a kind of knowledge. For Celsus, for example, the greatest danger (and even evil) of faith is the lack of its justification by reason. In Scholasticism, the central principles of thinking are: *Credo ut intelligam* and *Fides querens intellectum* (which resulted in the sentence by Matthew of Aquasparta, quoted by Shestov: “It is blameworthy to believe against reason”). The God of reason, the God of philosophy, is not the Living Person known from the Scripture, but a dead *letter*, the absolute set in his perfection and plenitude, the absolute directing of the world according to secular, necessary and invariable principles. In Shestov's opinion, Tertullian has already shown that it is impossible to reconcile Athens and Jerusalem, and furthermore, to understand and justify Revelation by reason.

Faith is the only way to God (and the only way of redemption), faith which – as S. Kierkegaard wrote – “starts just where thinking is finishing.” Faith does not look for proofs, it rather excludes them. It is not a kind of knowledge, but the avoiding of knowledge. Knowledge is the realm of necessary, infallible and compelling principles (starting with the law of contradiction as the foundation of thinking). “Truth does not know differences, compels everybody similarly: both the great Parmenides and a simple worker” (p. 105). Revealing the truth,

reason reveals what is possible and impossible, that there are the boundaries of human (and even divine) freedom; and what is impossible can never be realized. What is more, necessary, secular and invariable truths cannot be conciliated, they demand – as Shestov emphasizes – the complete agreement of man with his lot, the acknowledgement of one's defeat. “In the world ruled by reason, the struggle with the «data» is an evident madness. Man can cry, can curse the truth known from experience, but nobody – and he knows it well – can overcome it; it must be accepted” (p. 275).

In Shestov's opinion, Scripture brings the invalidity of “the realm of necessity.” God, revealing to Adam the vastness of misfortunes proceeding from the tree of knowledge, gives in history the only, genuine and consequent “critique of pure reason.” “According to the Scriptures, knowledge – which excludes faith itself – is the *kat'eksochen* (*par excellence*) sin, or the original sin” (p. 281). The essence of this sin is to accept what there is, it is human reason's discovery and reading of “the necessity of being.” In other words, the essence of this sin is the reduction of freedom, and the restriction of ability – which flows from the faith – of “doing what is impossible.” Faith is not a source of knowledge – emphasises Shestov – but a source of life, not a confidence in authority, but an “inconceivable creative power, a great, the greatest, incomparable gift” (p. 352). The logic of faith is the logic of freedom, the breaking of all boundaries and impossibilities. God *can do everything* (and this should be understood as literally as possible). He is not an invariable mechanism, blindly observing determined rules, but the omnipotent and free Creator, the Source of laws and principles. “However [...] terrible it may

seem to us, God of the scriptures is not restricted by any rules, any principles: He is the source of all rules, all principles, He is their Ruler" (p. 370). In Shestov's opinion, this truth was noticed by few, and those to whom it was obvious were either were not understood at all (as Tertullian or St. Peter Damian,) or were not able to grasp the full sense of it (as Descartes).

It is difficult or even dramatic for man to know these truths. Man – as Shestov shows – is frightened (simply by instinct) by freedom flowing from the faith, and he draws some boundaries for God Himself (even Duns Scotus and S. Kierkegaard claimed that God could not create a contradictory being). "Freedom [...] is not in contrast to what we think today – the possibility of choosing between good and evil. Freedom is the power and the might which does not allow evil to come into the world. God, who is the freest Being, does not choose between good and evil" (p. 282).

The return to this primary freedom is possible only by radical questioning, radical "criticism" of the claims of reason, and by the release from the illusion that knowledge can save. "«Your eyes will open» – said the snake. «You will die» – said God. [...] If God spoke truly, then death would come from knowledge; if the snake spoke the truth, knowledge would make man equal with the gods. The first man was in such a dilemma, and we are in such a dilemma now" (p. 306). But the Promised Land – Shestov says – is not for the man who follows the Socratic way, blinded by the longing for knowledge, but for the man who will follow Abraham's footsteps, who will go in the darkness of faith. The way to God does not lead through Athens, but through Jerusalem.

The title and problem of Shestov's book has had two different solutions in history. Shestov, like Tertullian, St. Peter Damian, Luther or Pascal, thinks that the act of faith cannot be justified in any purely rational way. Others, like Clement of Alexandria, St. Augustine, St. Anselm or St. Thomas Aquinas, thought that reason should prepare, justify or even strengthen faith in Revelation. Both solutions, though extremely different, stem from the same tendency to preserve the truth about Christ as God and Saviour. We should interpret the two stances in such a context, even if we do not consider one (or both) of them as fully justified. Shestov's book should be interpreted favourably as an attempt to preserve faith, faith which is not a *conviction* concerning states of affairs or propositions, but the *freedom* and power of "making impossible things."

We can disagree with Shestov that truths of reason, necessary and invariable, subjugate man. And we can really be afraid of the practical consequences of a religion which stresses first of all God's Omnipotence, and not His Love for people. But we should notice and appreciate the great effort by the author of *Athens and Jerusalem* to rescue *God's transcendence*; the transcendence which cannot be expressed in any *human language*. "«The most important» is beyond the boundaries of the intercourse admissible by the use of language and word" (p. 419). Shestov warns against idolatry, against the worship of "rational distortions" of the true God. "The philosophers' mortal sin is not their seeking the absolute, but when they are convinced that they have not found the absolute – their agreement to accept as the absolute anything created by people – science, State, ethics, religion, etc." (p. 416).

Shestov, the penetrating observer of human history, notices the progressive paralysis of the European spirit by the increasingly more predominant failure to recognize the dimension of *Mystery*. Not simply knowledge and reason are the subject of Shestov's attacks, but also the blind faith that reason is the *sole* mark of human dignity. Man strives to replace all mysteries by clarity and certainty. But Shestov asks rhetorically: "Should not one, quite on the contrary, try to prove that even where everything seems clear and understandable, everything is, as a matter of fact, mysterious and enigmatic?" (p. 464). "But people" – Shestov points out sarcastically – "need the metaphysics which consoles and fortifies, and religion which consoles and fortifies. And nobody needs the truth which one cannot know in advance and what it brings, and nobody needs religion which uncovers so far unknown areas before us" (p. 439).

We can only see that Shestov, similarly to Husserl, criticizes the European spirit ("European humanity"). Shestov, however, demands first of all respect for

the dimension of mystery and faith, while Husserl reminded us of the particular dignity of reason as the light of truth. There is no need here to make a synthesis of these two visions of Europe and its spiritual illnesses. (The ground for such a synthesis could be the concept of freedom, the concept valued by both authors, though defined differently by them.) We should, however, emphasise that both faith and reason, both inaccessible mystery and bare truth are decisive for the *full and final* face of Europe. In this context – in the context of the *fullness of humanity* – we should see the contemporary visions of Europe, and among them particularly, the vision represented by John Paul II. It seems that in the future the latter may bring about not only a "philosophy of Europe" which, like any philosophy, explains certain aspects of reality (like the models proposed by Shestov or Husserl), but will succeed in providing something we have needed for a very long time – a complete and consistent *theology* of Europe.

Translated by *Renata Ziemińska*