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New Martyrs and New Paradigm of Martyrdom: Jasenovac

*Dedicated to Metropolitan Paul of Aleppo
and Assyrian bishop Gregory Yohanna Ibrahim,
kidnapped in Syria on 22nd of April, 2013*

*«But if one were to ask, 'Why is it only at this time
that these great and ineffable gifts are granted?
we should reply: because at this time more than all others
a man is prepared and collected
so as to give his attention to God,
and he yearns for and awaits mercy from Him».*

St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily Twenty-Three*¹

Hardly an authority besides St. Isaac is there to be consulted on the nature of Divine vision of a kind that was bestowed upon the Patron Saint of this lecture, St. Constantine the Great: «Divine vision is a non-sensory revelation of the mind. Divine revelation consists in the mind's being moved by spiritual insights concerning the Divinity. Yet the power to be moved at will [*by insights concerning*] the Divinity, without having received revelation from divine grace, is not even implanted in the nature of angels”.²

Yet there is much more recent source on Constantine's vision to be quoted here, though of a quite different origin and with a quite different view of Divine revelations modus operandi. American poet and singer Patti Smith wrote and performed ten-minutes meditation song named *Constantine's Dream* and included it into her album

¹ St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011, p. 243

² St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily Twenty-Two*, op. cit., p. 236.

Banga. (The album was named after Pontius Pilate's dog – a biblical fact given in an recent apocrypha as *Master and Margarita*.)³ *Banga* with *Constantine's Dream* on it was released in 2012 – right on time to serve as a prequel to the row of ceremonies marking 1700th anniversary of the Milan's Edict, being crowned with the liturgy served by the Orthodox Patriarchs gathered in the Serbian city of Niš which was called Naissus at the time when Helen there gave birth to the future Emperor Constantine on 27th of February, 272 AD.

The song references four dreams: Smith's dream of St. Francesco of Assisi, Piero della Francesca's - who died on October 12, 1492, the day on which Columbus discovered the New World - dream of Constantine the Great, Emperor's own dream of the True Cross and Columbus' dream upon arrival to America. For Patti Smith, all four of them are narcoleptic dreams hardly distinguished from reality in which she is meditating in front of fresco of Constantine's dream in St. Francis' basilica in Arezzo, painted by della Francesca.⁴

The poem/song *Constantine's Dream* is a juxtaposition of utopian visions of St. Francesco, della Francesca, Constantine and Columbus and the apocalyptic "terrible end of man" at the foot of the XXI century. Even the angel who came to Constantine "and showed to him / The sign of the true cross in heaven / And upon it was written / In this sign shall thou conquer" turned to be also Columbus' guide to "the apocalyptic night" - "And Columbus saw all of nature aflame" - but surely was not a messenger of a "genuine vision" that comes only "with purification of the mind", as described by St. Isaac the Syrian.⁵

When Patti Smith stepped up the podium in Stockholm on Saturday morning, 10th of December, 2016 AD, in order to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in the name of Alan Robert Zimmerman, we were one step deeper into a vision. Compared to *Revelation* of St. John Divine, in Mr. Zimmerman's poems "the first visions are present,

³ Patti Smith, *Banga*, Columbia Records, 2012.

⁴ In similar narcoleptic way Patti Smith is conferring with a bust of Serbian-American scientist and "the patron saint of alternating current" Nikola Tesla, as described in her autobiography *M Train* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), p. 76. The bust stood in front of the Serbian Church of St. Sava in New York, 25th Street until the Church – former Episcopal Trinity Chapel, purchased by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1942 - burned down on Easter 2016.

⁵ St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily Twenty-Two*, op. cit., p. 237.

brought down to the ground and into the everyday, but the seventh seal is missing”.⁶ Short of the final knowledge, the singer knows only one thing: “I’ve traveled through East Texas / Where many martyrs fell / And no one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.”⁷

From this song, from his two Nobel Prize speeches – first read by Patti Smith on December 10, 2016 and second given by Dylan himself on June 5, 2017 – and finally from his poem *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall* that Patti Smith sang in Stockholm on December 10, we may in fact know several things about revelation.

First we encounter the fact that war is the father of all visions. All three favourite books of Bob Dylan, that influenced his poetic vision, are about the war: *Moby Dick* is a seafaring tale about the will to go to war; *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a book about being sucked up into a mysterious whirlpool of death and pain of war; and finally *The Odyssey* is a strange, adventurous tale of a grown man trying to get home after fighting in a war.⁸

Secondly, as it was obvious already in 1963, from both songs written “in same apocalyptic language” - *Masters of War* and in the song that Dylan and Smith offered at Stockholm ceremony, wars of our generation are apocalyptic wars and should be expressed in apocalyptic terms. The poet “heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world”⁹ in his “Armageddon”¹⁰ and the Masters of war lie and deceive “like Judas of old” and have “thrown the worst fear / That can ever be hurled / Fear to bring children / Into the world”. Therefore, ours is the time of the Judgement Day, and “even Jesus would never / Forgive what you do”.¹¹

Third, this “apocalyptic language” is often wrapped in unexpected forms: it is blues in the case of Blind Willie McTell, the bard of the land “condemned

⁶ Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan*, New York: Public Affairs, 2010., p. 157.

⁷ Bob Dylan, *Blind Willie McTell*, from the album *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1–3 (Rare & Unreleased) 1961–1991*, Columbia Records, 1991.

⁸ Bob Dylan – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2018. Sun. 21 Oct 2018. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/lecture/>.

⁹ Bob Dylan, *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*, from the album *Freewheelin’*, Columbia Records, 1963.

¹⁰ That is how Greil Marcus describes *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall* in his article for *Village Voice* in 1989; reprinte din Marcus' book *Bob Dylan*, op. cit., p. 148. *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*, he says in 1981, “has always been associated with the Cuban missile crisis of 1962”. Ibid., p. 102.

¹¹ Bob Dylan, *Masters of War*, from the album *Freewheelin’*, op. cit.

all the way from New Orleans to Jerusalem," where "many martyrs fell".¹² And blindness is as well sign of a vision of Christ bestowed upon Saul on the road to Damascus (*Acts* 9:3-9); blind was the singer of *The Odyssey* and many of his Balkan successors; and it was in a dark cave at island Patmos that the beloved disciple of Christ – and the patron of this sacred place - was given the revelation and saw innumerable martyrs before the Throne of God and before the Lamb: "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (*Revelation* 7:14).

Thus, martyrdom is the formative element in Dylan's cosmos, place where war meets vision. Although he is using this term rarely and with subtlety, its symbolic weight stands out, as "a trope of conflict of spirit, covenant, and faith animating these songs and Dylan's work as a whole".¹³ It is epitomized in the song *I Dreamed I saw St. Augustine* where – again in narcoleptic vision - the Saint is complaining to the leaders of his generation that "No martyr is among ye now / Whom you can call your own".¹⁴

In such understanding of the importance of martyrdom, Bob Dylan goes into very depth of the Judeo-Christian world, into its mystical spring: the cult of martyrs was – according to Daniel Boyarin – "fundamental constituent in the making of the 'new' religions of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, and we observe an eminent structural and theological parallelism between the developing genres of Christian and Jewish martyrdom of the second, third, and fourth centuries."¹⁵

Bob Dylan is obviously capable to recognize martyrdom, but he is looking deeper: by seeing the suffering of the righteous slaves in the American South or "that hollow place where martyrs weep and angels play with sin"¹⁶ and confirming "he himself can register their sacrifices with his own senses, then he is essentially admitting that he is no longer a mere bystander, but touching the very golden thread between heaven and earth

¹² Bob Dylan, *Blind Willie McTell*, op. cit.

¹³ Stephen Hazan Arnoff, *No Martyr Among Ye Now: Bob Dylan and Religion*, in: Nick Smart & Nina Goss (eds.), *Dylan at Play*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p. 25. In his precious essay, Arnoff notes that Dylan uses term "martyr" only four times in his cannon.

¹⁴ Bob Dylan, *I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine*, from the album *John Wesley Harding*, Columbia Records, 1967.

¹⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999., p. 109.

¹⁶ Bob Dylan, *Dirge*, from the album *Planet Waves*, Asylum, 1974.

he could not reach in the dream.”¹⁷

In 2012, Bob Dylan not only touched but also elaborated upon that “golden thread”. On the occasion of the half of century of his work – beginning with his first album *Bob Dylan* in 1962 – he gave an *gesamt-interview* for the French Edition of “The Rolling Stone” magazine. The interviewer goes deep back, into Dylan’s root subject - slavery, and Dylan admits that he does not have any hopes in the power of politics to change deep rooted prejudices and hatreds and states that only change of heart can really change a person and society. Then, he goes even deeper and says that long-suffering develops in the heart of a victim a sense to read heart of its tormentor, even if does not behave like one: “If you got a slave master or Klan in your blood, blacks can sense that. That stuff lingers to this day. Just like Jews can sense Nazi blood and the Serbs can sense Croatian blood.”¹⁸

What kind of blood it should be? Here we are facing a different dimension of the martyrdom that we rarely encounter in ancient martyrologies: be it Rabbi Akiva or St. Polycarp, at the centre of the old narratives there is always a martyr as the bride of God, in his transformed eros, almost actively seeking martyrdom “as the only possible fulfillment of a spiritual need”.¹⁹

Here, besides equaling Croatsians with their version of the Nazi regime with Ustaše party at its helm in the years 1941-1945 (“Ustaše” neither for Dylan nor for “The Rolling Stone” readers wouldn’t mean much),²⁰ Dylan describes fascination with deeply seated hate that turned wartime Independent State of Croatia into a bloodbath: “The Ustasha regime was notorious in postwar Yugoslavia for the orchestrated campaign of extermination and terror it instigated against Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies. [...] With the exception of the Nazi camps in Eastern Europe, it erected the largest concentration camp on the continent. The sadism and cruelty of the movement shocked even hardened

¹⁷ Stephen Hazan Arnoff, *No Martyr Among Ye Now: Bob Dylan and Religion*, op. cit., p. 37.

¹⁸ Mikal Gilmore, *Bob Dylan Unleashed* <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-unleashed-189723/>. Published on September 27, 2012; downloaded on October 31, 2018.

¹⁹ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, op. cit., p. 114.

²⁰ The interview was followed with a controversy among Croatsians; a Croatian association in France filed a suit against Dylan and the editor “The Rolling Stone” but the French court dismissed both cases. Jay Michaelson, *In Pursuit Bob Dylan for Hate Speech, Croatian Group Denies Holocaust*, “Forward; December 5, 2013. On Internet: <https://forward.com/culture/188725/in-pursuing-bob-dylan-for-hate-speech-croatian-gro/>; downloaded on November 1, 2018.

Nazi commanders, who wrote of it with contempt. Months before the Wannsee Conference was even convened, the regime in Croatia had already inaugurated its own self-willed Holocaust.”²¹

The camp Yeomans wrote about, Jasenovac²², became already much more than the local symbol: even the doyen of the Holocaust research Yehuda Bauer felt compelled to say that - in a most morbid competition in human history - “Jasenovac was, if anything, more horrible than its Nazi counterparts”.²³ While Ustaše violence in the Second World War claimed hundreds of thousands of lives of women, elderly and children, we have ninety thousand names of Jasenovac camp victims only (24.000 of them children under age of 14), which is far from the final account. Though, it is the way of killing that propelled Jasenovac into an apocalyptic symbol: specially designed knives, hammers, beating, cold, starving, torture and murderous labour – those were ways of extermination. Jasenovac was not a “factory of death”: death in Jasenovac was personal, the victim – be it a Serb, Jew, Gypsy or anybody that Ustaše perceived as their enemy - had to face the hate of its murderer. And hardly that Dylans’ verse “I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleeding”²⁴ can be about anything else than about the murderers of Jasenovac.

But one important circumstance distinguished Ustaši from their Nazi and Fascist masters: while Nazis were staunch anti-Christians, and Italian Fascists made their compromise with the Church, Ustaši had Roman-Catholicism as the very essence of their ideology. Archbishop of Zagreb “Stepinac rejoiced at the prospect of a Catholic Croatia that would replace the religiously and ethnically diverse creation of the Treaty of Paris that was the Yugoslav state”²⁵ but soon enough he found himself in consternation above crimes done by the new Croatian state. When he denounced its crimes in letters to Ustaše leadership, “he found that not a few bishops and priests in his homeland

²¹ Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburg University Press, 2013, p. VII.

²² It existed from late August 1941 until 22nd of April, 1945 on the swampy ground at the confluence of rivers Una and Sava.

²³ Yehuda Bauer, *Re-Thinking the Holocaust*, London-New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001; p. 50.

²⁴ Bob Dylan, *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*, op. cit.

²⁵ Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 32

disregarded his authority”;²⁶ Many clergymen were involved in genocide both directly and indirectly, and also Archbishop of Sarajevo Ivan Šarić: “In the midst of the initial Ustasha terror against Jews, his diocesan newspaper carried the message that ‘there is a limit to love. The movement of liberation of the world from the Jews is a movement for the renewal of human dignity. Omniscient and omnipotent God stands behind this movement.’”²⁷

But, the most murderous was Franciscan Miroslav Filipović Majstorović, known as “fra-Satan” who became the commander of Jasenovac; “In 1942, when he ran the infamous Jasenovac concentration camp, 40,000 Jewish and Serbian prisoners perished there. Among the captives were 24,000 children, half of whom were murdered”²⁸

Back in Vatican, “Cardinal Eugene Tisserant had smelled genocide in the air at the beginning of World War II and had suggested to Pius at that time that he addresses the issue in an encyclical. Rather, it was because the Holy See preferred to bring diplomatic pressure on the Ustasha government instead of challenging the fascists publicly on the immorality of genocide.”²⁹ Archbishop Stepinac followed the suit, and the heavy silence covered the Independent State of Croatia.

While obviously there was no love lost between two Christian Churches, a reverse and surely not planned process was going in-between the Orthodox Serbs and Jews in the lowest circles of the mutually shared hell. In the ancient times, the destruction of Temple in 70 AD gave birth to both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. The martyrdom that both communities endured mostly at the hands of Romans in the first few centuries afterwards was the *topos* where their identities were created and where they competed, as well. “The Gentiles cannot understand who this God is for whom the Jews are willing to be killed all day. [...] And when the Nations of the World hear all of this praise, they say to Israel, Let us go along with you, as it is said, ‘Whither is thy Beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy Beloved turned, that we may seek Him with

²⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

thee? (Cant. 6:1)”³⁰

In Jasenovac – and here it is understood in the fullness of its symbolical realm – there was no competition anymore. “The earliest total genocide to be attempted during the Second World War”³¹ throw the victims into an apocalyptic whirlwind, where messianic hopes were buried under the pile of corpses steadily filling fields of Donja Gradina, Jasenovac’ subcamp and its killing and burial grounds. The perpetrators – Hitler and Ustaši leader Ante Pavelić – were unlike many tyrants Jews and Orthodox Christians met throughout the history; it was not either Babylonian or Ottoman slavery. It was best described in the dark, LSD-induced visions of Auschwitz survivor Yehiel De-Nur in his autobiographical book, *Shivitti: A Vision*:³² it was kingdom of Asmodeus and Titus; for Christians, it was Neron and Antichrist – and for both it had a form of Inquisition.

From this hell, a new kind of martyrdom emerged: not anymore only *Kiddush HaShem* – “Glorifying of the Name” – being prepared to sacrifice the life rather than transgress any of God’s three cardinal laws as given in the archetypal tale of Maccabees, but *Kiddush HaHayim*: importance to survive the attempt to eradicate God’s people, to persevere and to allow God’s *domostroy* to be fulfilled by the (Second, in the Christian case) coming of Messiah: “This struggle for aspiration and longing for life is a mitzvah [religious imperative] [to be realized by means of] *nekamah* [vengeance], *mesirat nefesh* [extreme dedication], and the sanctification of the mind and will.”³³

So, when we hear stories like this: “I recalled how a martyr-cleric in Mosul was murdered by a Muslim gunman who asked him why he did not close his church as he was ordered to do. The Christian said that he could not close the house of God. And he

³⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, op. cit., p. 110.

³¹ Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 39.

³² The book's title is derived from David’s Psalm 16, "טַז תְּהִלִּים: תַּמִּיד לִנְגִדִי ה' שְׂוִיִּתִי", more accurately translated in Acts 2:25: "I **saw** the Lord always before me", or "I was always **beholding** the Lord in my presence".

³³ Rabbi Menachem Zemba’s plea for resistance prior to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in April 1943; quoted from Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought*, Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1990, p. 65

was shot, along with two of his fellow clerics.”³⁴ – it is obvious that the will to survive of an ordinary Christian of Mosul, Homs or the Mount of Lebanon, is as much defined by the newly defined *Kiddush HaHayim* as with the ancient deep seated confidence that the dream of the troubled King born in Naissus will dissolve into the Uncreated Light: “here let every mouth, every tongue become silent, and let the heart, and the mind, and their every device be still; for the Master of the house has come.”³⁵

³⁴ Robert Fisk, *Can Christians stay in the Middle East now that they are being persecuted for their ancient religion?*, “Independent”, 12 October 2017; on Internet: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/christians-middle-east-persecution-lebanon-syria-can-they-stay-a7996921.html>; downloaded on November 3, 2018.

³⁵ St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily Twenty-Three*, op. cit., p. 239.