

# Christ's Agony and Faith's Wakefulness—Reflections on a Remark of Pascal

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## **Abstract:**

This essay reflects upon a remark of Blaise Pascal. His gloss upon the story of Christ in Gethsemane is punctuated with the arresting comment that 'Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world: during that time, we must not sleep' — 'Jesus sera en agonie jusqu'à las fin du monde: Il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce-temps-là' (Pascal, *Pensées* 736 in *Oeuvres Complete* (1954), p. 1312). In close conversation with the work of Lev Shestov, I explore the unsettling suggestion that for Christian faith the time before the eschaton is fundamentally 'gethesemanean' in quality, i.e., is marked by Christ's own saving agon and so also by faith's proper struggle to awaken to it and keep vigil with it. For Shestov, Pascal's disquieting vision demands that the Christian life 'seeks with lamentation' to resist the false consolation of trading the travail of discipleship for the confidence of clear understanding. To the agony of Christ there corresponds the agon of faith: it is the labour of discipleship to shake off the sleep of reason in the time that remains.

**Keywords:** Christ, Gethsemane, Pascal, Shestov, Fideism, Suffering

In this paper I venture some brief theological reflections on a single remark of Blaise Pascal, French mathematician and philosopher (1623-1662). That remark—sometimes collected amongst his posthumously published *Pensées* as part of a fragmentary sequence called ‘The Mystery of Jesus’—runs as follows: ‘Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world: during that time, we must not sleep.’<sup>1</sup> I myself first encountered the remark in a poem by David Gascoyne entitled *Ecce Homo* where it bridges the second and third stanzas:

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Lest the great scandal be no more disguised:

*He is in agony till the world’s end,*

*And we must never sleep during that time!*

He is suspended on the cross-tree now

And we are onlookers at the crime,

...<sup>2</sup>

Echoing Pascal’s own words very closely, Gascoyne’s poem names Christ’s abiding agony as ‘the great scandal’ which ever confronts us ‘now’ as its contemporaries, and avers that before its horror ‘we must never sleep’, for such is Christ’s reality ‘till the world’s end’ and such our situation ‘during that time’. The English poet’s use of Pascal’s remark suggests the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Jesus sera en agonie jusqu’à las fin du monde: Il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce-temps-là.*’—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* #736 in *Oeuvres Complete* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 1312. Counted among the fragments not passed on to the copyist and so not included in the ‘first copy’ of the *Pensées*, this section comprises fragments gathered in the ‘*Recueil Original*’ and is not always reproduced in all editions. It is rendered in the English version published as Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), #919 [553]: ‘Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. There must be no sleeping during that time.’ As Leszek Kolakowski remarks, Pascal had a ‘talent in using dramatic rhetorical cuts that lent traditional doctrine striking freshness. That Jesus Christ’s passion and humiliation opened up to us a liberating path to God has been a part of the established teaching of the Church; but it took special spiritual skill to phrase it in this way.’ – *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal’s Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> David Gascoyne, ‘*Ecce Homo*’ (1940) in *New Collected Poems 1929-1995*, edited by Roger Scott (London: Enitharmon Press, 2014), pp. 127-29, emphasis added.

overlapping christological, soteriological, and eschatological dimensions of the reality to which it points.

Gascoyne himself discovered these words of Pascal's by way of the work of another: namely, the Russian émigré thinker, Lev Shestov, to whose person and work he was introduced in Paris in 1937-38 by their mutual friend the Romanian Jewish poet, Benjamin Fondane.<sup>3</sup> Shestov had fled from Russia to Paris in 1920 and became an esteemed, if enigmatic, figure in Parisian intellectual circles. Originally published in 1923, Shestov's essay, *La Nuit de Gethsémani*, takes its title from Pascal's remark and styles itself a 'study in Pascal's philosophy'.<sup>4</sup> Shestov's own *oeuvre* constitutes a kind of *antiphilosophy*, i.e., an extended discursive effort to unsettle – and finally unseat – the self-evident competence of rationality in relation to the most important questions of human self-understanding and religion.<sup>5</sup> In Pascal, Shestov saw an archetype of his own anti-philosophical ambitions, i.e., one who also

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of their interrelation, see Robert Fraser, *Night Thoughts: The Surreal Life of the Poet David Gascoyne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 144-47 and Gascoyne's own essay, 'Léon Chestov' in *Selected Prose 1934-1996*, edited by Roger Scott (London: Enitharmon, 1998), pp. 79-93. Cf. Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982), as well as Matthew Beaumont, *Lev Shestov: Philosopher of the Sleepless Night* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 26 who describes Gascoyne as a 'passionate admirer' of Shestov and links this 1940 poem directly to Shestov's work on Pascal.

<sup>4</sup> Léon Chestov, *La Nuit de Gethsémani: Essai sur la philosophie de Pascal*, translated by J. Exempliersky (Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 2012). The English text is found as 'Gethsemane Night', in Lev Shestov, *In Job's Balances. On the Sources of Eternal Truth*, edited by Bernard Martin and translated by C. Coventry and C.A. Macartney, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1975), pp. 375-435. Both the subject matter and approach reflect the lecture series on 'Dostoevsky's and Pascal's Ideas' Shestov delivered in 1923/24 and again in 1924/25 at the Sorbonne, see Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, second edition, edited by R. Fotiade and translated by Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), p. 339.

<sup>5</sup> See Boris Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, translated by D. Fernbach (London: Verso, 2012), especially the extended discussion of Shestov himself, pp. 33-50, as well as Ghislain Deslandes, *Antiphilosophy of Christianity* (Cham: Springer, 2021) in which Pascal features (in parallel with Kierkegaard) as an exemplary figure of the genre. José R. Maia Neto argues that 'The title of Shestov's book on Pascal indicates that the 'Mystery of Jesus' is what most appeals to Shestov in the *Pensées*. . . Shestov takes the *results* of Pascal's Christianization of Pyrrhonism. . . intensifies these results, and leaves aside or rejects what is left of Pyrrhonism in Pascal' – *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard and Shestov* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), pp. 108-9.

discerned that when ‘confronted with what really matters in life, our salvation, [reason] simply brings little profit’.<sup>6</sup> More than this, one must actually endeavour ‘to rid oneself of reason and its arguments as Pascal did: “humble yourself, impotent reason” . . .’ for illegitimate investment in reason in these regions of life ‘appears to Pascal an *enchantment et assoupissement surnatural* [‘an incomprehensible spell, a supernatural torpor’] into which our thirst for knowledge has plunged us’.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he compares hypertrophied reason to the deity Styx – seemingly ‘invincible’ and ultimately ‘death-dealing’.<sup>8</sup> Shestov traces a genealogy of anti-philosophical resistance to this rationally induced spiritual lethargy—insight funded as it must be, by revelation from beyond reason—which runs from Tertullian, through Luther, to Pascal, Kierkegaard, and beyond. Common to this lineage is the view that, as Shestov puts it, ‘Only the foolishness of faith. . . can awaken [us] from that torpor into which [we] sank after tasting the fruits of the tree of knowledge’.<sup>9</sup> Such ‘faith thinking’ is not ‘the search for the eternal structure and order of immutable being’, neither is it coolly rational ‘reflection’ concerning spiritual affairs; rather, it is simply the mind’s involvement in ‘the final and supreme struggle’ of the soul on the threshold of death; it is a thinking which, confronted with the limits of reason on one hand, but even more with the eruption of divine revelation on the other, is driven to acknowledge that ‘the time has come for a *different* consideration of truth’.<sup>10</sup> For both Pascal and Shestov, it is chiefly the quality of our

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<sup>6</sup> Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 157. The original reads ‘science’ for ‘reason’. This sentiment comes to expression famously in Pascal’s claim that ‘The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing’, Pascal, *Pensées*, #423. As Andrea Oppo writes, ‘In Shestov’s interpretation, Pascal’s thought is nearly a manifesto of that ‘misology’ that, albeit incognito, had always permeated Western philosophy’ – Andrea Oppo, *Lev Shestov: The Philosophy and Works of a Tragic Thinker* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020), p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 247, citing Pascal, *Pensées*, #427.

<sup>8</sup> Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 279 where Shestov associates this assessment with ‘Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*’ and ‘Pascal’s *enchantment et assoupissement surnatural*’ which both, in their own way, aver that ‘knowledge does not free man but enslaves him by handing him over to the power of truths as invincible as the Styx . . .’.

<sup>9</sup> Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 270.

<sup>10</sup> Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, pp 66-67; Oppo, *Lev Shestov*, p. 143. Relatedly, Shestov has been characterised as a ‘private thinker’ over against the ‘public professor’, i.e., one who pitches thought against instrument and legislative reason – see Bruce Baugh, ‘Private Thinkers, untimely thoughts: Deleuze, Shestov and Fondane’, *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015), pp. 313-339. The language of ‘private thinker’ itself derives from Shestov, see his ‘*Sine Effusione Sanguinis: On Philosophical Honesty*’, in *Speculation and Revelation*,

confrontation with the truth of divine revelation calls into question the competence and reach of human reason as an organ of truth. Existentially overrun by the event of revelation—i.e., by the advent of a holy transcendence that mercifully draws near in Christ to give itself the sake of us who must die unto judgment—reason itself is actually shown to conspire against true acknowledgement of our catastrophe *and* salvation alike. On such a view, faith by its very nature must blaspheme the sanctity and sufficiency of reason.

Now, Pascal himself is preoccupied precisely with the reality of death and the question of the ultimate meaning and destiny of human existence: his scientific and mathematical studies confront him with the insignificance of human life measured against the ‘eternal silence of these infinite spaces’ and suspended between the ‘two abysses of infinity and nothingness’; his own debilitating chronic illness with the fragility and travail of human life; his Jansenist theology with the hopelessness of humans enthralled and captive to sin apart from their sovereign seizure by divine grace.<sup>11</sup> As Shestov observes, Pascal embraces the thought—‘monstrous’ within an immanent frame—of a final judgment rendered ‘in heaven and not on earth’.<sup>12</sup> All his thinking is set firmly against this horizon of intense personal eschatology: ‘Between us and heaven or hell there is only life half-way, the most fragile thing in the world’.<sup>13</sup>

But Pascal’s thinking is also marked by a striking *christological concentration*. Sometimes this concentration finds formal expression: ‘Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre towards which all things tend’; sometimes it is set forth with vivid narrative concreteness as in the serial fragments on the ‘Mystery of Christ’.<sup>14</sup> In the latter case, Pascal contemplates the

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translated by Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), pp. 171-202, where Job is spoken of in these terms.

<sup>11</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #201, #199.

<sup>12</sup> Shestov, ‘Gethsemane Night’, p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #152. Or again, as Pascal writes: ‘The last act is always bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished forever’ – Pascal, *Pensées*, #165.

<sup>14</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #449. Or more vividly, ‘But for Christ the world would not go on existing, for it would either have to be destroyed or be a kind of hell’. #449. Kolakowski suggests that this ‘christocentric religiosity’ is a crucial part of Pascal’s ‘radical separation of faith from knowledge’, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p.150. Lucien Goldmann contends that paradox and fragment are forms of thought and expression best fitted to express Pascal’s ‘tragic vision’ of

figure of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: he sees him there afflicted, distressed, and universally abandoned ‘in the horror of the night’; weary and seeking companionship in his travail, he finds none: ‘Jesus asked of men and was not heard’ he concludes. And so, ‘seeing all his friends asleep and all his enemies watchful’, Christ can only ‘commend himself utterly to his Father’.<sup>15</sup> If, as Jan Miel observes, ‘incarnation and the awaited second coming are for Pascal more important and enlightening than any philosophical system known or possible’, then christological discourse (both formal and narrational) takes on an decisive, absolute, and thus eschatological, quality.<sup>16</sup> It is in this light that we must approach the remark with which we are especially concerned here, namely: *‘Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world: during that time, we must not sleep.’*

The axiomatic form and force of the claim—at once dogmatic and existential—is striking, with its dreadful christological indicative and intolerable paraenetic imperative. Here Gethsemane figures the world as such and in some sense Christ and us with it; the terrible garden is somehow exemplary, perhaps parabolic, of the whole of the time that remains in the dispensation of the church. Yet, what Pascal expresses so poetically is just so meant to be taken plainly and with the utmost realism. In this sense, Gethsemane *just is* our world; it is the site of Jesus’s *agon*, the world in which the Saviour labours in the difficult freedom of his salutary vocation while those he has befriended fail him and sleep on. Crucially, for Pascal, it is good and salutary that faith should know and be caught up in the difficult outworking of Christ’s holy and saving agony, for, as he writes, ‘The cruellest war that God can wage on people in this life is to leave them without the war he came to bring.’<sup>17</sup>

Of the many implications that might be drawn out from such an understanding of Pascal’s remark, let me venture briefly to trace but three explicitly theological lines.

### **1/ Christ Jesus Agonistes—**

Pascal suggests that what primarily determines the present is a christological fact, namely that of Jesus’s agony until the eschaton. At issue is our understanding of the quality of Christ’s

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life before God – see *The Hidden God: A Study of the Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #919.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Miel, *Pascal and Theology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #924 in *Oeuvres Complete* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954).

work, his *agon*, in this age. It seems to me important that Pascal should stress the specifically *gethsemanian* quality of Christ's continued toil. Not generic struggle or suffering, but this *specific* struggle of Christ to own and enact his vocation, to drink the cup given to him, to suffer to do the will of the One who sent him, and to do so alone even and especially while the church sleeps—this is what Pascal recommends to us as the 'centre towards which all things [now] tend'.

Pascal offers here an imaginative gloss upon the terse creedal shorthand which comprise the whole of Christ's saving exercise into the word *passus* / παθόντα / suffered. He compresses it even further into the image of Gethsemane, while simultaneously extending it, making it the single form of the whole. In this way he emphasises that the quality of Christ's *agon* always has the form of struggling to discharge his vocation *qua* saviour precisely with and for those who are anaesthetized to it, bearing too their unresponsiveness and indifference. By appeal to Gethsemane, Pascal fills out the meaning of what Calvin tersely called 'the whole course of his obedience', agreeing with the Genevan theologian that Christ's saving work is *kenotic* 'from beginning to end: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ...and was obedient to the Father unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7)'.<sup>18</sup> This agony is what continues even 'at the right hand of the Father', as it were, being taken up into the divine life.<sup>19</sup>

One could elaborate this claim further along the lines of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of the ongoing self-humbling of Christ as the One present in our all-too-human preaching and sacramental practice and church community, i.e., by reflecting on how Christ suffers to be present *for us* 'who sleep on' in these ways.<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, like Pascal and Shestov, sets talk of Christ's humiliation in the exercise of his presence *pro me* firmly in an *ontological* register: the humiliated One *is* for me until the end; his agony is simply his being for 'those

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<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 volumes (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), II.16.5.

<sup>19</sup> Something of the force of this claim might find expression in another idiom when Eberhard Jüngel, for example, writes of the work of God in Christ as the saving enactment of 'the unity of life and death to the benefit of life'—see 'My Theology', in *Theological Essays II*, edited and translated by John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', *DBWE* 12, pp. 313-14, 319-20; cf. p. 46 for editorial discussion of the terminology and translation questions.

who yet sleep', his patient seeking and summoning and serving of these somnolent ones in which he lovingly embraces the *status humilitatis* which he suffers in the hiddenness and ambiguity and fragility of the threefold form of his present presence in word, sacrament and Christian community.

This suggests that, rather than merely being a transient or accidental quality which adheres to him but for a time, humility is rather an essential mark of Christ's very person and saving office.<sup>21</sup> Thinking of Christ's present work as a self-humbling *agon* also suggests that it is *contested* or *opposed* work. This leads to my second comment.

## **2/The weight of opposition—**

Shestov at one point asks, rhetorically: 'Is not the account of the picture that Ippolit saw at Rogozhin's really a development of this thought of Pascal's?'.<sup>22</sup> Here, Shestov invokes a passage from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Shaken by an encounter with a copy of Holbein's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521)* hung over the doorway of 'one of the gloomiest of [Rogozin's] rooms', Ippolit Terentiev reflects:

At the sight of this picture nature appears as a huge, implacable and mute monster, or, more accurately, much more accurately, and strange as it may sound, as some enormous machine of the very latest construction, which had grabbed, crushed and devoured – mindlessly and brutally – an exquisite and priceless Being, a Being which of itself was worth the whole of nature and all its laws put together, and of the whole world, which had probably been created for naught other than the advent of this Being! This picture appears to represent the

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<sup>21</sup> Such an instinct is developed dogmatically by Karl Barth in the *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. W. Bromiley, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–1975), IV/1 §59 under the rubric of 'The Humiliation of the Son of God'.

<sup>22</sup> Shestov does not claim direct influence here, but rather discerns a most intense resonance as he observes: 'To be sure Dostoevsky almost never speaks of Pascal and apparently know him little, but Pascal is very closely related to him spiritually. Pascal wrote: *'Jesus sera en agonie jusqu'à las fin du monde: Il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce-temps-là.'* Is not the account of the picture that Ippolit saw at Rogozhin's really a development of this thought of Pascal's?' – Lev Shestov, 'On the "Regeneration of Convictions" in Dostoevsky', in *Speculation and Revelation*, translated by Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), pp. 164-65.



idea of that dark, menacing, mindlessly timeless force which holds sway over everything and pervades us insidiously.<sup>23</sup>

If on Shestov's advice we take these lines as a further gloss upon Pascal's remark, where are we led? Let me suggest that here we are reminded forcefully that the quality of Christ's saving work is thoroughly agonistic and conflictual, pitching the Christ who comes 'in the form of a servant' of the One who sent him, into a contest against an 'enormous machine'. Jesus found 'all his enemies watchful' (as Pascal himself put it) and so they remain, we might think, in this time before the end. Perhaps—glossed by Dostoevsky in this way—Pascal's thinking leads to recollect afresh how persistently the New Testament witness operates according to a soteriological grammar in which *three* rather than only two agents are on the scene: namely, God, the human, and those antithetical powers (e.g., sin, death, the devil, 'the darkness') which hurl themselves against both God and God's creatures to no good end. Ippolit's troubled musings about 'that dark, menacing, mindlessly timeless force' readily and rightly call to mind scriptural talk of the 'god of this world/age' (2 Cor 4:4), the 'prince of this world' (John 12:31; 16:11), and that 'death which exercises dominion' (Rom 5:17). We do well to remember in this connection that Gethsemane in fact culminates the earlier wilderness temptations and confrontation with Satan.<sup>24</sup>

This suggests that Christ's *gethsemanean* agony can and must be understood in close connection with other agonistic representations of Christ's saving work which also manifest the 'three agent drama of salvation'. One thinks especially in this regard of a passage like this one from Paul: 'Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor 15:24-26) or the Johannine declaration that 'the Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). Perhaps such passages are mutually interpreting,

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<sup>23</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, translated by Ignat Avsey (Richmond, UK: Alma Classics, 2010), pp. 426-27.

<sup>24</sup> 'When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time' – Luke 4:13. I have explored this in relation to Bonhoeffer's striking essay on the theme of Christ's temptations in an essay, "'Tempted for Our Sake"—Bonhoeffer on Christ's Temptation', in *Polyphonie der Theologie: Verantwortung und Widerstand in Kirche und Politik*, edited by Matthias Grebe (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), pp. 259-276.

changing our theological understanding of both the quality of Christ's 'purpose' and his present 'reign' on the one hand, and the nature and *telos* of his agony on the other. By invoking that 'dark, menacing, mindlessly timeless force which holds sway over everything and pervades us insidiously' in relation to Pascal's vision of Gethsemane, Shestov suggests that it is confrontation with *this* opposition, *this* antithetical nothingness which concerns faith fundamentally. Much more worrying than the remote immensity of the interstellar void, then, is the surging 'bottomlessness' of our existence as oppressed by this force, the nihilating abyss that presses upon us both from within and from without.<sup>25</sup>

### 3/ A Wakeful Discipleship—

Third and finally, Pascal demands something quite definite from those who would keep faith and company with Jesus *agonistes*, namely that they 'must not sleep' during the time that remains. Shestov for his part connects this firmly to Pascal's critique of reason. It is for the sake of reason that, Pascal writes, 'we burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity,' yet in the effort 'our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss. Let us then seek neither assurance nor stability. . .'.<sup>26</sup> The assurances and stabilities of reason Shestov identifies with the faithless and unfeeling sleep of Christ's disciples in Gethsemane, and so he takes Pascal's injunction as a call to the rigors of anti-philosophy: like Macbeth, Shestov writes, Pascal would 'murder sleep', i.e., put off the numbing 'consolations of reason' in order to keep faith with Christ over the abyss.<sup>27</sup>

Put positively, such wakefulness enjoins what Michael Finkenthal has called 'participatory thinking' [*pensée de participation*] which, because awake to Christ's agony, is always the practice of what Pascal himself called a 'seeking with lamentation' [*chercher en gémissant*].<sup>28</sup> Wakefulness here names a quality of attention, thought, and reflection which

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<sup>25</sup> Gascoyne was fascinated by reports that late in life Pascal 'is said to have referred continually to what he described as an "abyss" on his left side and to have had always to protest himself from giddiness by holding onto a chair placed on that side of his body', and ruminated upon the meaning of such experience in the context of the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the atomic age—Fraser, *Night Thoughts*, pp. 216-17.

<sup>26</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #199. Cf. Shestov, 'Gethsemane Night', pp. 386-87.

<sup>27</sup> Shestov, 'Gethsemane Night', pp. 380, 392. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, II.2 line 695.

<sup>28</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #405. Shestov calls this Pascal's 'strange methodological rule: seek with lamentation' – 'Gethsemane Night', p. 409. Cf. Michael Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existential*

is always alert to Christ's ongoing *agon*, in some sense 'shares in' its labour as disciples, and so is fundamentally shaped by it, refusing to see and or conceive of anything in isolation from it. Such thinking holds fast to the 'not yet' of redemption and mourns all that entails in the present. At the same time and for the same reason, such thinking radically questions the self-evidence and rectitude of the way things are, knowing them and the world bent under them to be the object of Christ's continued saving work. Marked and determined in this way, Christian thought and discourse and manner of life themselves become a persistent and agonistic witness to Christ's death till he comes (1 Cor 11:26). Such life and thought represents the performance precisely of that '*different* consideration of truth' of which Shestov dreamed.

We might associate all this with the apostle Paul's repeated injunction that Christians must in all things seek to 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5), and place it under the rubric of his word to the Christians in Rome: 'You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.' (Rom 13:11).

#### **4/ In Lieu of a Conclusion—**

I have briefly explored the unsettling suggestion, raised by a remark of Blaise Pascal, that the time before the eschaton is fundamentally *gethsemane* in quality, i.e., is marked by Christ's own saving *agon* and so also by faith's proper struggle to awaken to it and keep vigil with it. Shestov contends that Pascal's disquieting vision demands from Christian life a quite specific kind of thought, namely a 'seeking with lamentation' that resists the false consolations and restful confidence of rational understanding. To the humble agony of Christ until the end there corresponds the vigilant *agon* of faith, together with the agonistic and engaged mode of thinking and living proper to it.

The American poet, Emily Dickinson, once wrote:

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*Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 120-21 speaks of a '*pensée de participation*' set over against 'abstract reflection'.

‘Gethsemane – Is but a Province – in the Being’s Centre –’.<sup>29</sup>

Pascal, we have argued, enjoins us to acknowledge that it is in just this province around the axial centre of all things that Christian faith, life, and thought is and must be exercised in the time that remains. To trust, live, and think in that ‘Gethsemane Night’ and not elsewhere is the sleepless *agon* of Christian discipleship to which Pascal summons his readers in the hope that—as he prayed in the wake of his fiery vision of 23 November 1654—they may keep awake with him so *be with him*: ‘Let me not be cut off from him for ever!’.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Emily Dickinson, ‘One Crucifixion is recorded – only –’, #553 in *The Complete Poems*, edited by T.H. Johnson (London: Faber & Faber, 1970 [2016]), p. 269.

<sup>30</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #913.