Article

Postsecular Jewish Thought: Franz Rosenzweig, Alexander Altmann, Leo Strauss

Philipp von Wussow

Buber-Rosenzweig-Institut, Goethe University Frankfurt, 60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany; philippvonwussow@gmail.com

Abstract: This article traces the emergence of what is nowadays called "postsecular" religion from German-Jewish philosophy of the 1920s and 1930s. The three different cases of Franz Rosenzweig, Alexander Altmann, and Leo Strauss impel us to pay particular attention to a few recurring argumentative and rhetorical strategies. The emergence of postsecularism marks a shift in the epistemic foundations of Jewish religious thought, which had long been under pressure from secular European thought. Beginning with Rosenzweig, Jewish philosophy used secular categories of European philosophy to facilitate a return to the foundations of Judaism, eventually turning against what it sees as the epistemic weaknesses of secularism itself. This article traces the new phenomenon to Rosenzweig's evolving view of secularism, especially to his ridicule of Siegfried Kracauer's secular messianism, before examining a few key arguments in his book *The Star of Redemption* (1921). A brief discussion of Alexander Altmann's writings of the early 1930s provides that even modern Orthodox Jewish thought, which had never been "secular", used postsecular categories and arguments to make the philosophical case for orthodoxy. Leo Strauss's introduction to his *Philosophy and Law* (1935) provides a far more elaborated form of Rosenzweig's argument. As this article seeks to show, postsecular Jewish thought comes with a slight twist of epistemic relativism, particularly when it comes to the juxtaposition of the Biblical and scientific "world-views". But here it merely draws the full consequences of modern science, beating scientism with its own weapons. Furthermore, religious thought in the 20th century had no other option than to rebuild itself on postsecular grounds.

Keywords: postsecularism; Jewish philosophy; postcritical Judaism; posttraditional Jewish thought; secular messianism; phenomenology; orthodoxy; enlightenment

1. Introduction

The category of "postsecularism" is not entirely appropriate for 20th-century Jewish philosophy. To begin with, this is due to the unmistakable Christian connotations of the term. Also, the theory has been all about postsecular *societies* and little about the type of belief and the respective arguments in favor of this belief. What Habermas has described as a "shift from the traditional to a more reflexive form of religious consciousness" (Habermas 2008, p. 28) is one of the most fascinating phenomena in the field of contemporary religion; but the predominant sociological focus on the topic has not been overly helpful. This paper suggests a change of perspective by expanding the historical matrix *and* by examining more closely the actual arguments and rhetorical strategies.

The emergence of postsecularism is a by-product of the return to religion in 20th century Jewish thought—a return that was inaugurated, in different forms, by Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen, and in particular Franz Rosenzweig. However, returning to religion even in the sincerest manner comes with severe modifications of religion as it was traditionally understood. Postsecular religion first comes across as a curious mixture of premodern beliefs and postmodern sensibilities. But it also marks the future of religion in the 21st century, at least in secular Western societies.

This paper is not only about Franz Rosenzweig but, at least briefly, also about Alexander Altmann and Leo Strauss. One reason for this choice is that the case of Rosenzweig alone would be too obvious, with his personal story of growing up in an assimilated German-Jewish home, of his near-conversion to Christianity, and then his resolute return (or rather, turn) to Judaism. Rosenzweig quickly became a role model for secular Jews seeking to find a meaningful connection to Judaism. As he described the impact of his master work *The Star of Redemption*, it was *the* book for those young Jews who in various ways sought to find a path to the old Jewish law (Rosenzweig 1984, pp. 139–40). They could not understand Jewish law in the way it had traditionally been understood, so they understood it in a postsecular framework. Altmann and Strauss change this view, because they had never been "secular", and moreover, they had not been in two different ways. The variety in their intellectual biographies, then, bids us to see the similarities in the actual arguments and rhetorical strategies despite their different personal starting points. Altmann hailed from a long rabbinic family tradition and underwent the characteristic double education in rabbinic studies and philosophy, which he and others conceived as the two highest pursuits for a Jew. As he explained in a later talk at the University of Chicago, he lived "in two realms", without reducing one to the other: "I can afford to live in two realms. We have this sort of a split mind, in which people really believe that there might be a possibility of being a philosopher and a believer *without* trying to combine the two into a unity" (Altmann 2022, p. 841).

Leo Strauss, on the other hand, was not a typical "secularist", although he identified as an atheist. But the type of atheism he subscribed to was "Biblical atheism", which "rejects for reasons of conscience the belief in God" (Strauss 1995, pp. 37–38). According to Strauss, Friedrich Nietzsche was the forerunner of "an atheistic or . . . non-theistic religiosity" that only came to light after the death of God. The entire doctrine of *Beyond Good and Evil* was "in a manner a vindication of God" (Strauss 1983, pp. 179, 181).

Strauss later recalled growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home without much Jewish knowledge (Strauss 1997, pp. 459–60). He chose the life of philosophical inquiry against the life of obedience to God, but he always wondered whether the choice was justified. This nurtured his life-long quest to examine or "re-understand" the conflict between philosophy and Judaism, or reason and revelation. He concluded early on that the pillars of the tradition, namely, Plato and the prophets, have been torn down since Nietzsche, so that a new start is both necessary and possible. This new start, however, would necessarily entail a revision of the tradition: "The tradition has been shaken at its *roots* by Nietzsche. It has altogether forfeited its self-evidence. We stand in the world completely without authority, completely without orientation . . . We *can* begin entirely from the beginning: we lack any polemical passions against the tradition (we have, after all, nothing from where we could be polemical); and at the same time, the tradition has become completely estranged from us, completely questionable" (Strauss 2014, pp. 234–35). In 20th-century Jewish thought no tradition was simply given. Strauss concluded that the presuppositions of secularism were unfounded, and that a return to a transcendent God was possible on the same epistemic grounds.

2. Adjacent Terms

To add a few more terms and references that resemble the notion of postsecularism, this type of belief has been ridiculed by Theodor W. Adorno as religion *after* religion: "revelation is invoked . . . because supposedly it would be a good thing to have revelation . . . It seems to me that the religious renaissances of today are philosophy of religion, not religion" (Adorno 2005, pp. 136–37). The quotes are from the brief article "Reason and Revelation", written in the 1950s to educate a wider audience about the dangers of positive religion in modernity. What Adorno had in mind was the Patmos Circle, of which Rosenzweig was not a member but an ally. For Adorno, this type of religiosity was purely ideological, born out of despair over the crisis of rationalism in the wake of WWI. But he repeated the same arguments in the 1960s, most notably in the opening remarks of his book *Jargon of Authenticity* (1964)

(Adorno 1973, pp. 3–4). Adorno had first come across this phenomenon in the early 1920s through the influence of his private teacher, the critic Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer professed a rigorous secular messianism at the time, the quintessence of which was to reject all positive faith and rather wait for some true religion in the future: "Perhaps the only remaining attitude is one of *waiting* . . . One waits, and one's waiting is a *hesitant openness*, albeit of a sort that is difficult to explain". Kracauer explained that those who wait are "as hard as possible on themselves, so as not to be taken in by religious need", while their openness "consists of tense activity and engaged self-preparation" for the eventual "life in the religious sphere". Further details about this future life "cannot be conveyed in the form of knowledge" (Kracauer 1995, pp. 138–39). At the highpoint of this phase, when Kracauer argued with Rosenzweig and Buber on their new translation of the Hebrew Bible (Kracauer 1995, pp. 189–201), the weakness of his position also marked the downfall of his secular messianism.

Whereas Kracauer's critique of positive religion was bound to a specific moment, Adorno generalized this view, albeit he changed a few coordinates. He proceeded by maintaining a principal difference between the religion "of old" and the religious "mood" of the present. As he suggested, the religion of old came with a "richly and concretely developed religious imagination", whereas the new religion is based on "a desperate abstraction". This notion of a rich religious imagination "of old" is based on Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, which also had heavily impacted the secular messianism of Kracauer. The positive counter-image to the fragmented world of modernity is being located in medieval thought, in which all secular life received its meaning from one transcendent signifier. Adorno imagined premodern religion as a closed world unhinged by rationality—a fiction that serves to motivate a particular stance on the *modern* problem of religion and politics. For Adorno this fiction serves to explain away revelation in terms of social psychology. As he maintained, "revelation is invoked [. . .] because supposedly it would be a good thing to have revelation". From here on, all precaution has been given up by Adorno. As he continued: "In the best case . . . it is the desire that produces such an attitude: it is not the truth and authenticity of the revelation that are decisive but rather the need for guidance, the recourse to what is firmly established"[1]. The principal strategy here is to explain the return of religion as a matter of psychological instability. In retrospect, this strategy has not been successful: religion simply did not go away. It survived the psychopathology of religion virtually unscathed, only to rise again after the latter's demise.

Religion after religion is not necessarily inauthentic, but it often comes with at least a hint of epistemic relativism. This feature must not be understood in any negative sense: it is precisely what makes Rosenzweig and others insusceptible to the critique of religion as it had been shaped by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Postsecularism outsmarts the critics of religion by beating them with their own weapons.

For another reference, Steven Wasserstrom described the paradoxical endeavor of religion after religion as "a nonreligious religiosity, a secular antimodernism, a metarationalism operating within academic discourse" (Wasserstrom 1999, p. ix). These notions must be qualified to be helpful. Wasserstrom appears to share with Adorno the notion that religion after religion is not strictly religious. Furthermore, the reference to metarationalism points to the difficulty that secular and non-religious attitudes and beliefs largely operate on the same epistemic grounds as postsecular and religious ones. The term "religion after religion" may be helpful to describe the new type of religiosity, but it cannot refute it: it does not provide a compelling argument why religion after religion cannot be thoroughly religious.

It is common to refer to this phenomenon as "posttraditional", but this term can be misleading. After all, the vanguards of postsecularism constructed a new tradition. Furthermore, tradition had always been constructed in an ongoing process of inclusion and exclusion. Tradition has never been simply given. Postsecular Jewish thought may have turned against a particular, authoritative tradition, but not against tradition as such. Today the term "posttraditional" has come to designate all sorts of spiritual and cultural

engagement with Judaism beyond the ancestral model of observance of the Torah and God's commandments (Mendes-Flohr 2021).

We are getting closer to the matter by employing the term "postcritical", just as Leo Strauss spoke of "postcritical Judaism" in a late remark. One of the outstanding features of the postcritical condition is that it is insusceptible to the critique of religion by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud offered three—maybe *the* three—comprehensive posttraditional interpretations of religion in modernity. They represent the three options for a radical critique of religion to argue where religion stems from: class struggle, the will to power, or neurosis. Religion, then, is a sign either of injustice, mediocrity, or immaturity (von Wussow 2020, p. xxiii). Marx called it "the opium of the masses" (Marx and Engels 1975, p. 175), Nietzsche spoke of "alcohol and Christianity" as "the two great European narcotics" (Nietzsche 2005, p. 187), and Freud compared religion to "intoxicating substances" (Freud 1961, p. 75). They all expected that a future without religion would be blissful and bright.

But Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud did not account for the possibility that one could be thoroughly religious without falling back behind their critique. They presupposed that the religious interpretation of reality had been discredited and that the common man only held on to it for narcotic purposes. A new interpretation would successfully replace the religious interpretation. The one thing necessary for humanity was a new purpose—the classless society, the overman, or the man of unprejudiced science. These purposes were the core elements of a new, secular "belief", which was based on the idea of the perfectibility of man (von Wussow 2020, p. xxiii).

The term "postcritical" is also linked to post-Bible criticism. Postsecular Jewish thinkers were no longer bound by the limits of Bible criticism, which had been a major weapon for the critique of religion. But they needed not fall back behind the critical findings: they read the Bible *as if* it were a holy book (Rosenzweig 1984, pp. 747–48; Strauss 1997, p. 394). It is no wonder, then, that postsecular Jewish philosophy is immensely concerned with reason and revelation, or philosophy and Judaism, as if it were the most important and most obvious topic of philosophizing in the 20th century.

It is useful, then, to make a shift from sociological observations on religious beliefs to the study of the arguments and assertation made in favor of these beliefs. Habermas outlined how to see oneself as a member of a postsecular society and what to expect from others to safeguard that "social relations remain civil" *despite* the prevalence of religious world-views in the public sphere (Habermas 2008, p. 21). In other words, he urged religious people to act reasonably. Jewish postsecularism of the 1920s and 1930s urged secular reason to be more reasonable and not exclude the possibility of revelation, creation, and miracles. Postsecularism, then, is not only a return to religion. In the first place it is a critique of the critique of religion.

3. Rosenzweig, the Quintessential Thinker of Postsecularism

Rosenzweig is a major reference point for the return to Judaism in early-20th-century Jewish philosophy. To a certain degree the same can be said about Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Martin Buber (1878–1965), who both had a lasting impact on Rosenzweig. But they differ when it comes to their respective modes of returning. Buber devised the return to Judaism as a renaissance, a rebirth of the Jewish people's spiritual powers. Cohen sought to provide Judaism with a proper foundation in systematic philosophy. For Rosenzweig to return meant a full-fledged *teshuva*, a reversal and repentance. He thereby seems to anticipate much of the return to religion at the beginning of the 21st century.

But Rosenzweig could not simply return to the Jewish tradition as the Jewish tradition was traditionally understood. He fused theological and philosophical ideas to make sense of the tradition in a new and thoroughly modern way. In particular, he put great emphasis on experience, which had been of little concern for the Jewish tradition. Rosenzweig's master work, *The Star of Redemption* (1921), was devised as a system of experience, in which two conceptual triangles laid over one another—God, world, man and creation, revelation,

redemption—mimic the Star of David. None of the terms could be reduced to one another. It was this conceptual framework that allowed him to articulate the reality of Judaism that lived with him.

One of the most interesting aspects in the context of postsecularism is how, from the point of his near-conversion onward, Rosenzweig's view on secularism evolved. In particular, it is helpful to study a number of sneering remarks Rosenzweig made on his secular colleagues. Perhaps the best example is a remark in a letter to Buber on his upcoming seminar with Siegfried Kracauer at the Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt. For some context, the remark is part of a larger story, which has been well documented (Baumann 2011; Handelman 2011). While the failed seminar stands at the beginning of this story, Kracauer's scathing review of Rosenzweig and Buber's Bible translation and the ensuing polemics mark its end point.

At the time, Kracauer was under the strong influence of Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, which had been a hallmark of secular messianism. Lukács described a future resurrection of the meaningful times, in which the mortified world of things—the "second nature"—would receive their meaning from above: "This second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses—meanings—which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities; this second nature could only be brought to life—if this were possible—by the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it; it can never be animated by another interiority" (Lukács 1971, p. 64).

Kracauer subscribed to this view, and he held that the only appropriate response to this state of the world was to wait for this metaphysical act to happen. The heroism of waiting stood in a sharp contrast to all those who would not just wait. They were the "short-circuit people" (*Kurzschlussmenschen*): "what they all have in common is a tendency to flee headlong from the dreariness and the world outside in order to slip quickly into a sheltering abode" (Kracauer 1995, p. 136). Kracauer also included Buber and Rosenzweig among the "short-circuit people"[2].

Rosenzweig knew about these views, but he still wanted to bring Kracauer to the Lehrhaus to attract the urban secular bourgeoisie. However, he had no illusions about the theological prospects. In a letter to Buber, written in October 1922, he envisioned the outcome as follows: "And then we learn for the umpteenth time that 'we' live in a burst broken fragmented and chaotic 'time', from which a 'religious quest' yearnfully licks its fingers for that great pretty round unity cake, which a gracious medieval pastry cook home-delivered ready-made as a Weltanschauung-dessert to a mankind that was 'close to God'"[3].

This description fits Kracauer's negativistic crypto-theology extremely well. But even more interesting is the form of the argument, and especially the ridicule, against Kracauer. Ridicule had been the hallmark of Enlightenment thinkers against religion: they laughed the religious people out of their positions, even if they could not refute their actual beliefs (Strauss 1995, pp. 29–30). Postsecular religious thought turned the matter around, using the Enlightenment weapon against the Enlightenment. In the last Lehrhaus lecture, when Kracauer could not read his prepared remarks due to his speech impediment, he passed his manuscript over to Rosenzweig. As the latter recalled, he proceeded to deliver Kracauer's remarks, which became much funnier than the previous sessions due to his parenthetical comments (Rosenzweig 1979, p. 861). Neither the manuscript nor the remarks were preserved. One must imagine the event as a watershed moment in the quarrel between religious and antireligious beliefs and attitudes, in which the laughter of postsecularism drove secularism out of its pretension of epistemic superiority. To be sure, turning the matter around merely repeats the problems: it can laugh the secular messianists out of their positions, but it cannot refute them. The decisive discovery was that it does not need to refute secularism. It only needed to refute the pretension that secularism had refuted religion and to point out the poorness of secular beliefs and attitudes.

The theoretical foundation in *The Star of Redemption* is the chapter on miracles, and in particular the passage on the new theological rationalism. Rosenzweig started from the notion of a multitude of enlightenments, which successively represent knowledge as opposed to faith. In the last stage, in the 19th century, the belief in miracles was replaced by historicism with the corresponding belief in the "progress" of mankind. Rosenzweig repeatedly refers to this "new belief"[4]. The demonstration that science and historical progress rest on a belief, too, is a major strategy of postseculars.

At this point there is a major turnaround in the chapter. Rosenzweig had spelled out his critique of the critique of religion, but he needed a more thorough conceptual framework to explicate his new understanding of religion. But as he switched from criticism to this rather constructive role, he ran into a number of difficulties. As Rosenzweig claimed, nothing less than "a completely new building" for theology was needed (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 113; 2005, p. 122). For this task, philosophy and theology would need to work together. A thorough and close reading of these pages would need to analyze a variety of claims, including his ideas of a new temporal experience, but it must suffice to explicate the interrelation of philosophy and theology here. Rosenzweig's principal claim is that philosophy and theology *need* each other, but he did little to provide a proper argument in the chapter. It is at this point that Rosenzweig employed his full arsenal of philosophical rhetoric instead.

One rhetorical highlight is certainly the claim that philosophy needs theology for the sake of its systematic integrity and ultimately of its own scientific character. It feeds upon a problem in Hermann Cohen's system of philosophy, in which the three major parts cannot come into a unity unless they are being complemented by religion. Outside the specific systematic problems in neo-Kantian philosophy, however, the claim does little as a philosophical argument. Rosenzweig rather used it as a springboard into theology. His description of Cohen's trajectory explains more about Rosenzweig himself than about Cohen: "Cohen meant to add an annex to the old philosophy, a mere [. . .] addition to his own system, in particular to his ethics, and for all intents and purposes, he rediscovered the lost paradise of mankind" (Rosenzweig 1984, p. 240).

Hence Rosenzweig's figures of mutual need should not so much be taken for arguments but rather for rhetorical appeals. One outstanding feature of these appeals is their self-referential character: they all point to the "new type of philosopher or theologian, situated between theology and philosophy" (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 118; 2005, p. 116), which is none other than Rosenzweig himself. No German-Jewish philosopher in the 20th century could find a proper balance of philosophy and theology upon which the entire liberal model of German-Jewish thought was based (von Wussow 2023). But Rosenzweig increasingly believed he had found a new solid basis—the only possible basis—that even surpassed the Cohenian model. As he wrote to Gertrud Oppenheim in July 1924: "The liberal German-Jewish standpoint, on which for almost a hundred years almost the entire German Jewry found a place, has apparently become so small today that only one man, namely, I, can live on it" (Rosenzweig 1979, p. 980).

It should be noted that the passage can indeed be read systematically and not merely rhetorically. Rosenzweig's systematic idea in the chapter is to establish the connection between creation, revelation, and redemption from the vantage point of creation "In certain respects . . . both Revelation and Redemption are Creation" (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 114; 2005, p. 113). This is also the systematic starting point for his revaluation of the relationship between philosophy and theology: "And so here lies the point from where philosophy and construct anew the whole edifice of theology" (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 114; 2005, p. 113).

But despite and against this unmistakable systematic pretension, the guiding principles of these passages are of a rhetorical nature. I would therefore suggest a more modest approach that analyzes these passages *as a play*—a play between philosophy and theology, to be sure, but also between author and reader. Rosenzweig's principal game plan is to overwhelm the reader with a plethora of claims and references. This has much of a rhetorical shell game: Rosenzweig plays with the terms philosophy and theology until he

could make them mean whatever he wants, because the reader can no longer follow the argument and action of the text.

For two examples of Rosenzweig's subsidiary arguments, we may first refer to the repeated claims that philosophy and theology "call" for each other. Rosenzweig does not state why they call for each other, or how he managed to intercept the call. Second, and to back up the first, he wrote: "And already the weathervanes of the times are without a doubt turning unquestionably in this direction. We already hear theology's call to philosophy everywhere. A new theological rationalism is on the move" (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 113; 2005, p. 112). This is an odd mixture of claims about current trends pointing into the future. The common denominator is the appeal to the reader to ride on the wave of the future, seamlessly crossing over into a prohibition against even questioning the claim. Even the English translator was confused here, as one can see in the conjunction of "without a doubt" and "unquestionably", which both stand for the German word "durchweg". Needless to say, perhaps, the claim about an unmistakable current trend is at odds with the suggestion that both philosophy and theology have hitherto missed this point.

4. Altmann and Strauss

Alexander Altmann hailed from a longer family tradition of Jewish scholarship and service. He was trained in phenomenology and neo-Kantian philosophy at Berlin University (where he became friends with Joseph Soloveitchik) while also pursuing his rabbinical studies. In 1931 he both received his Ph.D. and was ordained as a rabbi. Henceforth he taught at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary and served as a rabbi until 1938, when he fled to England and eventually to the U.S. Altmann worked towards a "Jewish theology", which was meant to point the way for German Jews to have a share in the finite world of German culture and in the infinite world of Judaism. Living in two worlds, he never came to ditch the Biblical view for a share in contemporary culture.

But as his first published writing, "Metaphysics and Religion" (1930), shows, he was not the typical *Rabbinerdoktor*. He started from a contemporary philosophical issue, namely, Max Scheler's return to metaphysics[5]. The argument roughly runs as follows: If it is possible to return to metaphysics, why should it be impossible to return to religion? Moreover, the return to metaphysics is doomed to fail due to its inner contradictions, but this failure does not affect religion. At last, the return to religion is possible only on orthodox premises (Altmann 1991, pp. 1–15). This foundation of orthodoxy out of the aporias of European metaphysics is brilliant, but it comes with a slight postsecular smack.

Altmann's theological works show how he employed the tools of Schelerian phenomenology to elaborate on the core tenets of Judaism, hence using secular thought to foster the renewal. His writings provide a sense of how postsecular modes of argument "migrate" into Jewish theology, which is decidedly non-postsecular in its intentions. At last, phenomenology was also useful for Altmann to overcome the dualistic conception of secular and postsecular modes. As he sought to show in his article "What is Jewish Theology?" (1934), the interplay between finite and infinite, between temporal and eternal, marked the very meaning of Jewish existence (Altmann 1991, pp. 40–56). This endeavor also points to the lasting impact of Franz Rosenzweig across various branches of Jewish thought.

A more elaborated version of the postsecular argument can be found in Strauss's introduction to *Philosophy and Law* (1935), in a passage on the quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy. The two notions are somewhat generic, referring neither to an epoch nor to a specific religious community, but rather to the perennial quarrel between belief and unbelief.

As Strauss maintained, the Enlightenment has never addressed the ultimate premise of orthodoxy: "the irrefutable premise that God is omnipotent and His will unfathomable. If God is omnipotent, then miracles and revelations in general, and in particular the Biblical miracles and revelations, are possible" (Strauss 1995, p. 29). The Enlightenment refutation of orthodoxy, then, has never even been carried out, and orthodoxy survived the Enlightenment attack in hiding. Orthodoxy has not been refuted, and could not have

been refuted, because the entire system of orthodox belief is irrefutable. Since the orthodox premise that God is omnipotent and unfathomable cannot be refuted, "all individual assertions resting on this premise are unshakable" (Strauss 1995, p. 29).

The argument has both its strengths and its weaknesses. It is built upon the demonstration that the thesis of God's omnipotence cannot be refuted; but the price of this demonstration is that the thesis of God's omnipotence cannot be proven to be true. Even if the Enlightenment was wrong in its pretension that it had refuted orthodoxy, that did not make orthodoxy right. In other words, the argument refutes a refutation, but it cannot establish a position. Any principled judgment of right and wrong is impossible under the premise of a double negation. The argument in favor of religion comes at the price of a principal limitation. It can nevertheless be effective in the sphere of intellectual politics, where fundamental conflicts are not being settled in the orderly manner of a principled decision about right or wrong, but rather in the infinite clash of interpretations and rhetorical persuasions (von Wussow 2020, p. 70).

Strauss's argument is situated in a peculiar historical moment, which loosely resembles the situation today. The critique of religion employed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud had lost its traction, but the arguments in favor of a new type of religious faith had not yet been thoroughly articulated. Rosenzweig, Altmann, and Strauss set out the epistemic foundations for this articulation. They use the highest principles of the Enlightenment to criticize the Enlightenment. The perennial question is whether this utilization of the Enlightenment against the Enlightenment is possible without leaping into relativism. Is it possible to reap the benefits of relativism for a non-relativistic purpose?

A proper answer to these questions must take into account that, for the most part, postsecularism merely draws the opposing positions to their ultimate conclusion. Strauss demonstrated this in *Philosophy and Law* in a hidden swipe against Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms: if modern science is but one historically contingent form of world-construction among others, the scientific interpretation of the world is not in principle superior to the Biblical interpretation. Cassirer evaded this consequence, but Strauss noted it sharply. He concluded that the idealistic understanding of modern science "makes possible the rehabilitation of the 'natural world-view' on which the Bible depends"[6]. Modern science comes to be seen as but one of several possible "world-views", and the scientific "world-view" is not in principle superior to the Biblical world-view. The victory of scientism, as envisioned by Cassirer, inadvertently rehabilitates the Biblical world-view. It therefore marks the end of scientism.

The epistemic equivalence between the biblical world-view and the scientific world-view comes with a peculiar twist: the introduction of the Biblical world-view uses the relativistic starting point for its own purpose, but this purpose is antirelativistic in its intention. Biblical religion, with its center in the act of God revealing Himself to man, is meant to be more than just another "world-view"; it disrupts the infinite play of possible "world-views". For better or worse, this paradox defines postsecularism to a great extent.

In a last twist, Strauss claimed that the Enlightenment was "forced" to create the world of modern culture to cover up its own failure: "Was not the 'unique' 'world-construction' of modern natural science, according to which miracles are indeed unknowable, devised expressly for the very purpose that miracles *be* unknowable, in order to protect man against the grip of the omnipotent God?" (Strauss 1995, p. 34). After failing to refute orthodoxy, the Enlightenment invented modern science to protect itself against the possibility of miracles. Its attack against orthodoxy is born out of despair over its own weakness. Modern science, then, is not a spontaneous and free creation of man: it rests on an act of violence committed by the Enlightenment against orthodoxy. The subsequent development of the Enlightenment serves to cover up, and ultimately to forget, this act of violence.

There would be more to say about Strauss's introduction to *Philosophy and Law*, which is a masterpiece in its own right (von Wussow 2020, pp. 65–90). But this passage alone is worth studying closely at least for the fact that it clearly continues and radicalizes what Rosenzweig had written in the chapter on miracles. Strauss argued that Rosenzweig had

not gone far enough. But his own argument had also decisively been prepared by Rosenzweig. A clear link is provided by a phrase at the beginning of Rosenzweig's chapter, which shows both the continuation and the evolution of the argument *after* Rosenzweig: "For all practical purposes, [. . .] it amounts to the same thing whether everything is guided and determined by forces residing in things or by the influence of higher powers" (Rosenzweig 1988, p. 104; 2005, p. 104). The relativistic consequence, according to which the world could be guided by God as well as by laws that can be described by science, is a major philosophical presupposition of the return to Judaism. The obvious limitation of Rosenzweig's statement, though, made it inevitable that the epistemological argument became more refined *after* Rosenzweig.

5. Conclusions

Postsecular Jewish thought, then, was not just a "shift from the traditional to a more reflexive form of religious consciousness" (Habermas). Judaism had long, if not always, been both traditional and reflexive; and the tradition was constituted in the very act of reflection. Hence the category of "secularization" is so difficult to adapt to Jewish thought. And yet the terms can properly be employed to describe a variety of phenomena specific to German-Jewish philosophy of the interwar period. One important feature is how Jewish thought turned the weapons of the philosophical critique of religion against itself. While this reversal inevitably runs into difficulties when it comes to a more constructive formulation of critical insights, it is highly useful to open up a space for the renewal of Judaism—a space that is not necessarily to be filled by constructive theology but also by different forms of Jewish communal and individual life.

Another outstanding feature of the new understanding of religion is that it is immune to the critique of religion by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. It had become possible to be thoroughly religious *without* falling back behind the critique of religion. As indicated, Strauss referred to this possibility as "post-critical Judaism" (Strauss 1997, pp. 94, 344). To rephrase the critical insight somewhat differently: one can believe in miracles, in God's creation of the world, and His revealing Himself to man; and there is no decisive counter-argument as long as one believes in a thorough and sincere manner. It is of course possible to refute religion, but one can as well refute the refutation, and both are possible on the very same grounds. Religious or non-religious beliefs and attitudes are a matter of choice, an act of the will. Religious and anti-religious discourses are a matter of rhetoric persuasion.

Parallels to contemporary issues of religion and politics, such as the renewed argument between creationists and those who say they "believe in science", are all too obvious. But the quarrel between these two closed world-views—the Biblical view that runs into difficulties when facing modern science and the "belief" in science that mistakes science for a homogeneous, settled doctrine—is remarkably different from the postsecular condition of German-Jewish philosophy before World War II. Most notably, the latter pointed the way to the tension and possible reconciliation of reason and revelation, but it did not collapse one into the other. Postsecular Jewish thought defies a clear-cut alternative between religious and secular beliefs, showing how both can be inseparably intertwined. Postsecularism therefore bids us to rethink the basis of religious and secular attitudes alike. It is for this reason that we should look for German-Jewish philosophy of the interwar period to trace the origins of postsecularism.

Notes

[1]   (Adorno 2005, p. 137), translation altered.

[2]   Kracauer in a letter to Leo Löwenthal, 4 December 1921, in (Löwenthal and Kracauer 2002, p. 33).

[3]   "Und dann erfahren wir zum soundsovielten Male, daß 'wir' in einer zerborstenen zerbrochenen zersplitterten und chaotischen 'Zeit' leben, aus der ein 'religiöses Suchen' sehnsüchtig sich die Finger leckt nach jener großen schönen runden Einheitstorte, die im 'Mittelalter' ein gütiger Konditor einer 'gottnahen' Menschheit fertig ins Haus lieferte, zum Weltanschauungsnachtisch" (Rosenzweig 1979, p. 837).

[4]   Or "new faith" in Barbara Galli's translation: (Rosenzweig 2005, pp. 109–10).

[5]   Scheler's phenomenology was also the subject of Altmann's dissertation (*Die Grundlagen der Wertethik: Wesen, Wert, Person. Max Schelers Erkenntnis- und Seinslehre in kritischer Analyse*, 1931).

[6]   (Strauss 1995, p. 33). For particulars on the nexus of Strauss and Cassirer here, see (von Wussow 2020, pp. 19–29, 76–77).

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