

## Article

# Secular Religiosity: Heretical Imperative, Jewish Imponderables<sup>†</sup>

Paul Robert Mendes-Flohr<sup>1,2</sup><sup>1</sup> Divinity School, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, USA; prmenes@uchicago.edu<sup>2</sup> Department of Jewish Thought, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel<sup>†</sup> R.J.Zwi Werblowsky im Memoriam. Professor R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1924–2015) was the founder of the Department of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of the phenomenon “religion” in all their diversity, among them rabbinic law (*halakhah*), Kabbalah, Jewish philosophy, Christian and Buddhist monasticism, the new religions of Japan, popular cults of China, and processes of modernization and secularization. My understanding of the issues discussed in this article is to no small measure inspired by his seminal scholarship and the collegial conversation we had over the years.

**Abstract:** The article develops a concept of “secular religiosity” to characterize “post-traditional” Jewish affiliation as an individual and private matter, which the sociologist Peter Berger casts as a “heretical imperative” to make autonomous, individual choices. The waning of the heteronomous authority of rabbinic Judaism, yielded theological and hermeneutic strategies to address the “secular religiosity” of individuals who sought to affirm distinctive Jewish spiritual and devotional practices. The article concludes by adumbrating two contrasting paradigmatic strategies exemplified by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber respectively.

**Keywords:** secular religiosity; post-traditional Judaism; heretical imperative; Peter Berger; Martin Buber; Franz Rosenzweig

The Venerable English Cardinal Newman once observed that the crisis of religion in the modern world may be succinctly stated as that of “authority and obedience”; see [Charlotte \(2011\)](#). The authority of religion has been eclipsed and, consequently, also obedience to its precepts and teachings. The process leading to this crisis is generally understood as that of secularization, the radical political, social and cultural change that, beginning with the eighteenth century, is one of the salient features of modernity, at least in the West.<sup>1</sup> It is as a cultural process, more specifically as a cognitive process, that secularization most profoundly affects and troubles religion.

Philology offers us a ready insight into the nature of the process. In Medieval Latin, the term *saecularisatio* was pre-eminently a legal concept denoting the transference of Church property to the laity. Our contemporary use of the term, which is said only to have evolved as a category of analysis in the late nineteenth century, may thus be viewed as a metaphorical extrapolation from the Medieval Latin: crucial areas of political, social and cultural life have been transferred from the domain of the “sacred” to that of the “profane”. With respect to cognitive culture, the authority to discern truth—moral, epistemological and ontological truth—has been transferred from the Church to the laity. Immanuel Kant placed the process under the rubric of autonomy: the ability and duty of the individual to use their own reason and experience to determine the *nomos* or laws governing truth, theoretical and practical.

The autonomous individual, as Kant himself tirelessly argued, is not necessarily ungodly or disrespectful of religious traditions. Indeed, the autonomous individual may have profoundly religious sentiments and concerns, but, and here is the rub, because of their autonomy or “secularity”, the authority of the Church—and the tradition embodied by the Church—is for them no longer intellectually self-evident; indeed, it is open to critique.<sup>2</sup> To characterize this tension between an abiding religious sensibility as, if not an utter rejection, at least a questioning of the Church and tradition as the mediators of truth (epistemic



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and existential truth), I should like to introduce the concept of “secular religiosity”<sup>3</sup>—a coincidentia oppositorum that I trust will serve to elucidate heuristically the cognitive and affective ambiguities of religious sensibilities that are not primarily mediated by normative teachings of historical religions.

A secular religiosity is implicit in much of our literary and philosophical discourse since the West embarked on the ambiguous adventure of modernity.<sup>4</sup> A secular religiosity certainly seems to inform Hegel’s dialectical reflections, the antinomian rantings of Nietzsche, the spiritual peregrinations of Hermann Hesse, the Angst of Heidegger, the tormented world of Franz Kafka and the iconoclastic mysticism of the Zionist pioneer A.D. Gordon. Modern theological discourse is also often prompted by agnostic musings on the normative authority of traditional religious teachings and doctrine. For much of nineteenth and twentieth century theology, tradition—even Scripture—is no longer the source of ultimate authority guiding the religious quest. Indicatively, divine revelation is all but removed from the theologian’s purview. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the emphasis is on the individual’s religious experience (*Innerlichkeit*) and consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalence to tradition is even more dramatically reflected in the so-called historical theology, which, through employing critical scholarship or Hegelian historiosophy, sought to free religion from the encumbrances of the past by illuminating the evolutionary character of religious consciousness. To be sure, these theologians often do relate to their respective traditions, but generally in a highly idiosyncratic fashion, and again, these traditions most often do not provide the fundamental ground for their theological reflections and religious quest.

For any historic religious community, however, a theology unmediated by tradition is most problematic. Indeed, it is questionable whether a theology sans tradition can serve a historic community. For in purely sociological terms, tradition is the symbolic and cognitive ground of a historic community: it is the matrix of the community’s shared memory, language and meaning structures. Hence, a “post-traditional” theology, grounded in a secular religiosity, entails the prospect of a cognitive disjunction—and the possible loss of a meaningful discourse—between the theologian and their historic community.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, a post-traditional theology presumably articulates the spiritual situation and predicament of other members of the theologian’s historic community. It, therefore, may be asked whether the theologian could serve as a spiritual guide to those members of their historic community who, like themselves, have gone through the “purgatory” of secularization and reject or at least doubt the authority of their tradition. Can a post-traditional theologian establish with these secularized, post-traditional coreligionists a theological discourse that while remaining alert to the promptings of a secular religiosity nonetheless preserves the historic community as a context for meaningful religious reflection and quest? The dilemma of a secular individual with an abiding religious sensibility—and implicitly that of the theologian faced with the challenge to relate secular religiosity to a specific religious tradition—is incisively summarized by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

Established connections between particular varieties of faith and the cluster of images and institutions which have classically nourished them are for certain people in certain circumstances coming unstuck. . . . The intriguing question for the anthropologist is, “How do men of religious sensibility react when the machinery of faith begins to wear out? What do they do when traditions falter?” . . . They do, of course, all sorts of things. They lose their sensibility. Or they channel it into ideological fervor. Or they adopt an imported creed. Or they turn worriedly in upon

themselves, or they cling even more intensely to the faltering traditions. Or they try to rework these traditions into more effective forms. Or they split themselves in half, living spiritually in the past and physically in the present. Or they try to express their religiousness in secular activities. And a few simply fail to notice their world is moving or, noticing, just collapse . . . Given the increasing diversification of individual experience, the dazzling multiformity of which is the hallmark of modern consciousness, the task of . . . any religious tradition to inform faith of particular men and to be informed *ff* by it is becoming ever more difficult. A religion which would be catholic these days has an extraordinary variety of mentalities to be catholic about; and the question, can it do this and still remain a specific and persuasive force with a shape and identity of its own, has a steadily more problematic ring.

(Geertz 1963)

Secular religiosity then inheres the prospect of a spiritual solipsism:<sup>7</sup> bereft of tradition, religious sensibility shares the individuation and privacy celebrated by the modern world; faith is increasingly isolated from the matrix of community and the cognitive universe that Peter Berger calls a “plausibility structure” of the established forms of the meaning and symbolizations of reality and experience (Berger 1967). The theologian who seeks to address the needs of a specific historic community is obviously charged with the daunting task of reversing this seemingly inexorable process.

The continuity with the community’s religious heritage implied by this type of discourse obviously requires more than the commonplace cultivation of heritage as merely a sort of ethnic folklore.<sup>8</sup> The challenge to the theologian would then seem to be to capture anew the cognitive and spiritual significance of their community’s religious tradition and to indicate how this tradition, unfettered by heteronomous authority, could allow the individual jealous of their intellectual and spiritual autonomy to give expression and even depth to his religious sensibilities.

The role of the theologian as a spiritual guide in this specific sense may be elucidated by the Jewish experience.<sup>9</sup> In classical Judaism, the pre-eminent type of religious teacher was the *talmid chacham*, the student of the Torah and Israel’s revered sages.<sup>10</sup> It was his “great task to pass on [the Torah] and develop its meaning for his generation” (Ibid., 11.). As a spiritual guide, the authority of the *talmid chacham* was, hence, not charismatic but hermeneutic. “He expounds the Word of God, but does not embody it” (Altmann 1936). The Word of God is pre-eminent. Even God, the rabbis tell us, studies the Torah.

The modern spiritual guide—if I may state my thesis somewhat apodictically—must also be a *talmid chacham*, a student of the Torah and the sacred traditions of Israel. But there is an important difference between the spiritual leader of classical Judaism and that required by post-traditional Judaism. In his study of the Torah, the *talmid chacham* of classical Judaism follows an apostolic hermeneutic: being grounded in an unambiguous conviction that the Torah is the Word of God, his study and interpretative endeavor ultimately serve to proclaim the Word. In contrast, post-traditional spiritual leaders, given

the epistemological agnosticism attendant to their secular religiosity, must, perforce, pursue a dialogical hermeneutic: they study the Torah (qua Scripture and sacred traditions) with an existential commitment to listen attentively, prepared to respond to it as *possibly* the direct, living address of God.

This approach was first expressly and systematically articulated by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.<sup>11</sup> They were, one may say, “theological Jews”. These two renowned twentieth-century German Jewish philosophers, both of whom affirmed Judaism from the midst of secular European culture, agree in their fundamental dialogical approach to the study of the Torah. Yet, as we shall see, they differed critically in their conception of Judaism, especially of Jewish tradition. Hence, they may be viewed as two alternative models for post-traditional Jewish theology, a theology that is marked by secular religiosity.<sup>12</sup>

Buber would undoubtedly endorse Rosenzweig’s statement that one whose “faith is based on authority is equal to an unbeliever” (*Autoritätsgläubige ist gleich dem Ungläubigen*) (Rosenzweig 1935). Faith meant, for both of them, a relationship with God—a relationship that had been facilitated for Jews of the past by their sacred traditions. If these traditions are to be once again meaningful for the modern Jew, then the relationship that these traditions nurtured and secured must, Buber and Rosenzweig concurred, somehow be re-established. Although this relationship is mutual, it is, they stressed, initiated by God, who is utterly beyond the world and enters a providential relationship with it. This founding belief and experience of theistic faith, according to Rosenzweig, explains the centrality of miracles in the respective religious traditions of the West (Hallo 1971). Phenomenologically understood, miracles are a prophetic sign of God’s involvement in the world. Hence, as Goethe’s Faust observed, “miracle is the favorite child of faith”.<sup>13</sup> But we moderns have lost our belief in miracles, and the consequence of this, Rosenzweig lamented, is a loss of our faith in God’s relationship with the world. Even theologians, he noted, are embarrassed by the notion of miracles. No wonder then that the concepts of Creation, Revelation and Redemption—if they are taken seriously and not simply as edifying metaphors—have become most uncongenial to many modern theologians. Each of these concepts seeks to clarify various aspects of God’s miraculous involvement in the world. The exigent task of theology, as Rosenzweig pursued it in his Hallo (1971), is to affirm the phenomenological and theological content of these concepts.

This is the point of departure for Rosenzweig’s encounter with theistic faith. His rejection of philosophical relativism and agnosticism was prompted by a decision to adopt what he called *Offenbarungsglaube*,<sup>14</sup> faith based on revelation, namely, divine revelation being the historic moment in the founding of theistic religion. Accordingly, he defined tradition as the living, continuously renewed witness to concrete, historic miracle.<sup>15</sup> Tradition is thus the context of faith. “The belief in miracle”, he writes in *The Star of Redemption*, “and not just the belief in decorative miracles, but that in the central miracle of revelation, is to this extent a completely historical belief. Even the Lutheran reformation altered nothing in this respect. It only moved the path of personal confirmation from the periphery of the tradition, where the present is located, directly into the center, where the tradition originated. Thereby it created a new believer, not a new belief. Belief remained historically anchored” (Ibid., 97).

Buber shared Rosenzweig’s *Offenbarungsglaube* and belief that Jewish tradition is the historical witness of God’s relationship with the world. They differed, however, fundamentally with respect to which facets of the Jewish tradition can still serve to quicken one’s relationship with God. This difference was most clearly evidenced in their famous exchange on Jewish Law.<sup>16</sup> Buber, as is known, assumed a meta-nomian position, declaiming Jewish Law as a heteronomous imposition that shackle the Jew’s spontaneous relationship with God. Rosenzweig concurred that the Law conceived simply as a legal construct is a heteronomous distortion of religious faith, but—Rosenzweig queried Buber—is this the Law actually lived by the Jew, caressed and sanctified by Him for millennia? Existentially, in the lived moment of its fulfillment, Rosenzweig affirmed, the Law may be for the Jew of faith not *Gesetz*, a heteronomous legalism, but *Gebot*, a divine commandment, which, in directly addressing the individual, evokes their spontaneous response. Qua commandment,

the Law quickens the Jew's relationship with God. Buber's "reply" to Rosenzweig was terse: The God of Revelation is not a *Gesetzgeber*. He is not a Law-giver (Ibid., 115).

In many respects, the exchange between Buber and Rosenzweig on the Law was typical of the German-Jewish heirs of Kant's moral philosophy. At the root of the issue, the difference between them, however, is their contrasting conceptions of Jewish tradition. Early in his career, Buber defined his task as identifying a "subterranean" Jewish tradition that modern Jews who were estranged from the "official" rabbinic Judaism could respond to with filial affection and devotion.<sup>17</sup> It would be quick, however, to judge Buber's conception of Judaism as wantonly arbitrary and tendentious. As a student of Wilhelm Dilthey, he read texts as a *Lebensphilosoph*, endeavoring to distill through a personal, empathic *Nacherleben* (re-experiencing) the lived moments that gave birth to the text. Using this method, Buber sought to identify the kerygmatic core of Judaism that he understood to be the ontological possibility, first proclaimed in the Hebrew Scripture, of a dialogical encounter between man and God.<sup>18</sup> In Buber's judgment, only certain texts within the literary corpus of Judaism bear witness to the founding and authenticating kerygma of Judaism. Due to its obsessive legalism, rabbinic Judaism, which set the normative contours of Jewish tradition, Buber held, obscured the primal Jewish attunement to the Biblical kerygma (Fishbane 2008). Judaism's primal spiritual sensibility, however, remained alive, leading, as it were, an underground existence, manifesting itself in select individuals and in movements such as the *Baal Shem Tov* and Hasidism. Without attempting to evaluate Buber's method or the validity of his understanding of Jewish spirituality, particularly rabbinic, we may note that by his own admission, his presentation of Judaism is highly selective; only certain aspects, and at times surprising aspects of Judaism, qualify as exemplifications of authentic Judaism. Hence, it may be asked whether Buber's conception of a counter-Jewish tradition, irrespective of its theological merits, has the inherent capacity to speak to all but a select number of Jews. For the community of Jews at large, even if they are ambivalent heirs to the rabbinic tradition, it is this tradition that provides their identity and self-recognition as a community.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the sacrality of a tradition, as Emile Durkheim noted, has a sociological dimension. Hence, inasmuch as a critically edited text is not the text of a historic community, except perhaps that of scholars (Ricoeur 1979, p. 271), so Buber's "counter-tradition" is not, indeed cannot be, the tradition of the historic Jewish community. Bereft of sociological sacrality, Buber's Judaism could only speak to select Jews, or perhaps rather to select aspects within the soul and spiritual imagination of many modern Jews. It could not, however, provide the basis of a communal identity. This is indeed ironic for one such as Buber who was so passionately devoted to the renewal of Jewish community.

Rosenzweig's attitude to and, ergo, conception of Jewish tradition is radically different from Buber's. His view of Judaism is summarized in his statement, "nothing Jewish is alien to me" (Rosenzweig 1998, p. 222). He included within the purview of this statement Jewish cuisine, gestures and, of course, more significantly, the oral, extra-scriptural traditions that filled and permeated the whole consciousness of the traditional Jewish community. The oral traditions, which animate the life and soul of the Jewish community, are, in Rosenzweig's view, prior to and more fundamental than Scripture and other sacred texts. To be sure, the oral traditions attest the sacred texts of Judaism. But it is more comprehensive than these texts, for the oral traditions embrace a mass of ritual and religious usage, of customs and rules, which are, at best, adumbrated in the sacred texts. The oral traditions articulate the sacred texts, rendering the written Word spoken and alive in the life of the Jew. Hence, the sacred texts of Judaism, according to Rosenzweig, must be read or rather lived from within the oral traditions of the Jewish community. To abstract them from this context is to deny them their extensive religious significance. The first steps in this existential journey into traditional Judaism (which followed his theological clarification and affirmation of the concepts of Creation, Revelation and Redemption, that is, after having completed *The Star of Redemption*) were to set-up a Jewish household—to keep a kosher kitchen and other sancta of traditional Jewish family life—but also to appropriate the religious gestures of everyday Jewish life, prayer and the fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. His initial focus was the traditional liturgy, wherein he discovered, as he states already

in *The Star of Redemption*, the fulcrum of Jewish spirituality. Not surprisingly, the extra-liturgical mitzvot were more difficult for him to comprehend and adopt, but gradually, he did so.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, his relationships with liturgy and the *mitzvot* remained dialogical; but it was a dialogue from within traditional Jewish praxis. Rosenzweig lived as a traditional Jew in order to appropriate the spiritual reality of the tradition, to know it, as he once put it, “hymnically”.<sup>21</sup>

The unheralded response of German Jewry (and today, throughout the Diaspora and in Israel) to Rosenzweig is an ample testimony of his abiding role as a spiritual guide. The response to him has little to do with his *Star of Redemption*—few read it and fewer understand it—nor can the response be explained by the charismatic, saintly quality of his life. Rather, we surmise, it is the nature of his return from the midst of secular European culture to traditional Judaism that is paradigmatic to a post-traditional Jewry seeking renewed Jewish community and spirituality. Rosenzweig, however, disappoints these Jews in one very serious way. He suggests that Jewish spirituality demands that the Jews withdraw from history and that they become meta-historic guardians of the promise of an absolute future, of a future beyond the wiles of history. It has thus been rightly observed that Rosenzweig is the last great Jewish philosopher of the Diaspora—but not simply in the sense that he did not witness the Jews’ return (as sovereign actors) into history through the establishment of the State of Israel. Prompted by his eagerness to accept the inner reality of the traditional Jewish community, Rosenzweig also affirmed its detachment, as it evolved in the Diaspora, from history. This indifference to history and the fate of the rest of humanity was a posture typical of the pre-modern world; it reflected the political and social reality of a stratified, insulated medieval world. With the rise of the modern order, this reality began to change rapidly. As Rosenzweig himself recognizes in his early writings, the modern world gave birth to a new sense of the *Qkumene*,<sup>22</sup> of a shared universe and the attendant demand for a responsible and active involvement in the shaping of the evolving *Qkumene*. Alongside this changed perception of history and politics, traditional Judaism seemed locked into a more parochial view of history. Thus, as many Jews entered the modern world and adopted its political ethos, often with a unique passion, traditional Judaism seemed ever so anachronistic. Rosenzweig, of course, was aware of this perplexity regarding the abiding particularity of traditional Judaism; indeed, he shared it, and he overcame it by celebrating the a-historical posture of “the Synagogue” as a metaphysical virtue: content with its unique relationship with the God of Eternity and standing beyond history—viz., politics and war. The Synagogue exemplifies the Messianic promise and thereby prods the Church, enmeshed in history, to lead history beyond itself to the eschaton. Meanwhile, the Synagogue is to look inward in blissful seclusion from the world (Altmann 1958). There is a compelling sublimity to this perception of Israel’s destiny, but it is also profoundly distressing. For it suggests that isolation from the world is an intrinsic quality of traditional Jewish spirituality. Notwithstanding his ascription of a dialectical, eschatological significance to the Synagogue’s seclusion, Rosenzweig’s celebration of an indifference to history is offensive to the modern Jew immersed in the urgencies of both Jewish and world history.

Buber was more alert to this aspect of the modern Jewish sensibility. As a Zionist, he appreciated the need to relieve the social and political distress of the Jews. He also understood the call of the “secular city”<sup>23</sup> and accordingly sought to free religious faith from its fear of the profane and to render it relevant to the political and social challenges of the modern world. Thus, his pan-sacramentalism and religious socialism with their demand that faith be extended beyond the confines of the ecclesia to our public and political activity—provinces of life that have hitherto been all too often abandoned to instrumental aims and cynicism. The true challenge of religious faith is to affirm God in the “broken” world of the everyday”. We can only work for the Kingdom of God”, Buber writes, “through working in all spheres allotted to us. . . . One cannot say we must work here and not there; this leads to the goal and that does not. . . . There is no legitimately messianic politics, but that does not exclude politics from the sphere of the hallowing”.<sup>24</sup> Buber unceasingly argued that this approach to the “secular city” and politics was consistent with the traditional Jewish refusal to acknowledge any intrinsically profane sphere and the concomitant commandment to sanctify all of life.

Buber's religious socialism acquired a specifically Jewish expression in his Zionism. The return to Zion, he taught, will restore to Israel the conditions enabling her to realize, under the conditions of autonomous Jewish existence, her vocation to exemplify the ideal of hallowing everyday life and the creation of a just and genuine community. "The supernatural task of the Jewish people", Buber stresses, "cannot be properly accomplished unless natural life is reconquered".<sup>25</sup> By attending to their own historic and social needs, the Jews, as a community, will be able to serve the rest of humanity. We do not want Palestine, Buber proclaimed, for the Jews alone, but rather for all of humanity.

Secular religiosity, as previously suggested, is a phenomenon inherent in the individuation of society and culture characteristic of modernity. As Peter Berger observes in *The Heretical Imperative*, the modern world beckons us all, including the religious individual, to "heresy"—to choose (as is denoted by the Greek verb *hairein*, to choose), to make select choices from the richness of universal human experience.<sup>26</sup> Open to a multiplicity of experiences and cultural options, the modern individual can no longer delimit their experience and culture to that of their primordial community. The heretical imperative, as Berger acknowledges, is thus hardly conducive to community, certainly not a community based on the considerations of historic continuity and tradition (*Ibid.*, pp. 66–87). With respect to religious experience and culture, the heretical imperative sunders—liberates, Berger would say—faith from the bonds of community. In the Jewish context, the implications of this tension between faith and community are already manifest with Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), "the first modern Jew". In his attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of Judaism with Deism—that is, the conviction that the intellect is in the universal, natural domain—Mendelssohn, in effect, rendered Judaism a confessional religion, solely bound by a unique body of ceremonial laws; the Jews, he insisted, have no special claim on truth and, by implication, on the shaping of history according to God's truth. The Jew was now free to be a European, to accept the culture and history, that is, the secular destiny of Europe. Although he would be loath to admit it, Mendelssohn's confessional God was no longer the God of Israel who had entered into a covenant with the Jewish People governing not only their mode of worship but also their destiny—and through them, ultimately, the destiny of humanity—in history. The Covenant, as the authenticating ground of Jewish community, entails more than confessional ritual and belief, but a sustained responsibility to creation and history.<sup>27</sup> However, to Mendelssohn and his heirs—as to all modern Jews to an extent—Jewish community has become theologically problematic.

The problem implicit in the separation of Jewish faith from the historical destiny of the Jewish people—a relationship traditionally provided by the concept of the Covenant—may be summarized in the following question: is Jewish community, bereft of its covenantal dimension, simply the source of the Jew's mode of worship and primary social identity? As a description of a social fact, this is undoubtedly an adequate characterization of the function of Jewish community. But if the issue is the spiritual and religious significance or purpose<sup>28</sup> of Jewish community, then the above characterization is not adequate. And should it be argued, as Mendelssohn would have, that the Jewish community is the social basis of the Jewish religion, one may legitimately query Why be Jewish? As citizens of the modern world, jealous of our autonomy and intellectual integrity, the modern Jew would have difficulty accepting the answer ultimately implied by Mendelssohn: because God commanded us. A Judaism compelled by obligation, even when accompanied by an appeal to filial and ethnic loyalty, has not worn well with the modern sensibility.

Surely the question of the modern individual's commitment to Judaism qua a community of faith has to be pursued existentially; that is, the individual has to discover within Jewish religious community a spiritual meaning relevant to their own existence. For the individual Jew who stands critically before their ancestral tradition, the spiritual and existential significance of Judaism must first be illuminated.

Notwithstanding their limitations, Buber and Rosenzweig serve these individuals as spiritual guides, for both recognized that the spiritual significance of Judaism as a personal faith is grounded in the communal experience of the covenantal relationship (although

each understands the Covenant and the nature of Jewish destiny rather differently). Both return the Biblical teaching, often obscured in modern Jewish thought, that the Jewish People were born of and the Covenant; Judaism is not simply the religion of the Jewish People, but rather it is the religious dimension of the Jewish People.<sup>29</sup> The Covenant, as viewed and lived by Buber and Rosenzweig, is the supreme dialogical moment in which God addressed the House of Israel and *pari passu* the individual Jew. Thus, existentially, the individual Jew discovers the spiritual meaning of their own existence in the spiritual purpose and vocation of the Jewish People. By conceiving the Covenant as primarily a dialogue, Buber and Rosenzweig helped illuminate the delicate spiritual fabric underlining the heteronomous structure of classical Judaism. They thus encouraged the renewal of a covenantal consciousness among modern Jews who otherwise feared that the Jewish religious existence involved a forfeiture of their autonomy and secular dignity.

Buber and Rosenzweig profoundly appreciated the predicament of the modern Jew caught between the imperatives of secular religiosity and a primordial urging to ground their spirituality in the religious community of their forefathers. Buber and Rosenzweig knew this predicament; each sought to resolve it with integrity, with full respect for the scruples and passions of the modern sensibility and to the nuanced meaning of Judaism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the applicability and limitations of “secularization” as transcultural analytical concept, see [Zwi Werblowsky \(1976\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Despite the corrosive effects of cognitive doubt, an affective, emotional attachment to one’s religious heritage may, of course, endure. Franz Rosenzweig tells of a Jew who passionately enjoyed the traditional East European manner of prayer—*davening*—but when called to read from the Torah, the attestation of faith in God and the Torah, he declined because he no longer believed. Simmel, however, uses the term in a much broader sense than deployed by me to refer to any attitude of devotion and fidelity, be it politics or stamp collecting. My use of the term is closer to Schleiermacher’s. But where for him “religiosity” denotes religious emotion *per sui*, I wish to designate the term to the abiding concern with religious and theological questions independent of one’s commitment, or lack thereof, to a particular historical religion. For stylistic reasons, I shall occasionally refer to secular religiosity as the “modern sensibility”, and correspondingly, the individual borne by secular sensibility as “the modern individual”. I am aware that the modern individual often entertains concerns far from those I am considering here. *Sub verbo*, “Religiosität”. *Histotisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Band 8: 774–778.
- <sup>3</sup> Coined by Schleiermacher, the term “religiosity” was systematically developed by the German sociologist Georg Simmel to designate attitude independent of formal institutional religion and its beliefs. See [Simmel \(1906\)](#), 2. Bd.
- <sup>4</sup> See the classic study on what might be termed the post-traditional condition by [Heller \(1952\)](#). While many of the authors discussed by Heller were “incidentally” Jewish, I consider the expressly Jewish “secular religiosity” in [Mendes-Flohr \(2021\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> In fact, in all his massive corpus, Schleiermacher makes reference to divine revelation only once, namely in a footnote in *Der christliche Glaube* (1887 ed., 1. Zusatz), paragraph 10, S. 57–63.
- <sup>6</sup> Leora Batnitzky explored the dialectical tensions characteristic of post-traditional Jewish thought from the perspective of adapting Judaism to the prevailing Protestant conception of religion as an individual and private matter of belief or faith ([Batnitzky 2011](#)). In the present essay, I consider the reconfiguration of Judaism as a “religion” as an “individual and private” matter as refracted through the concept of secular religiosity as inflected by the “heretical imperative”. So understood, secular religiosity is inherently idiosyncratic and selective. It is also often syncretistic, drawing for various traditions. This is especially true of what is known as New Age Judaism. See [Rachel \(2017\)](#), especially her concluding chapter: “New Age Judaism and the Politics of Authenticity”, pp. 137–55.
- <sup>7</sup> My argument is not normative; therefore, I deliberately say *prospect and* not danger. Peter Berger argued that the process described by Geertz is not only inevitable but also salutary: Berger, In [The Imperative \(1979\)](#). Although Berger might find the expression “religious solipsism” somewhat extravagant, it is meant only to highlight the process that he himself highlights, viz., that in the modern world religious sensibilities dislodged from their moorings in established religions are adrift without a communal grounding. One may also ponder, to use Berger’s terminology, whether the modern sensibility is adrift without a “plausibility structure”, indeed, destined to a cognitive solipsism.



- 8 Cf. “It has been said of nineteenth-century *Kulturprotestantismus* that what it cultivates is not Protestantism but a pious reverence for Protestantism’s past. A similar quip made be made, *mutatis mutandis*, with reference to modern Judaism. The name Ahad Ha’Am is the first to spring to mind when mention is made of modern secular “cultural Judaism”, but that of Mordecai Kaplan is no less significant from the sociological point of view. Kaplan’s Reconstructionism, which considers Judaism as a cultural-social totality, is perhaps not a major formative influence, but it is surely a symptomatic expression of much contemporary Jewish life. In fact, it could be argued that much of what is called Judaism both in Israel and the Diaspora is a series of variations in Kaplan’s theme, often coupled with a determined effort to dissimulate this fact. Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, 50. Charles Liebman advances a similar thesis in his detailed study of Reconstructionism (Liebman 1970), esp., pp. 90–97.
- 9 When one considers the spiritual and intellectual leadership appropriate to a post-traditional Jewry, it would be well to recall Max Scheler’s distinction between a *Führer* and a *Vorbild*: the executive who evokes obedience, and the model individual who inspires emulation. The *Führer*, be he a military commander or corporate director issues orders that his subordinates are to follow. The *Vorbild* embodies paradigmatic values and modes of conduct. When instrumental objectives are to be attained, then executive leadership is manifestly most appropriate; when the objectives are spiritual, and thus require not simply compliance to a given task, but the internalization of ideal values and attitudes—e.g., piety, righteousness, and faith, the guide to attain these spiritual objectives is the *Vorbild*. See Max Scheler, “Vorbild und Führer” (Scheler 1957).
- 10 In addition to the *talmid cham*, there are other ideal spiritual leaders in classical Judaism, foremostly the *Zaddik* and the *Hasid*. Each of these latter *Vorbilder* represent, according to Gershom Scholem, “what we would call ethical values, values of the heart and the deeds of men”. The *talmid chaham*, on the other hand, represents a spiritual-intellectual ideal. He is the ultimate teacher of his generation; he embodies “the highest aim of education which the Jews over course of two thousand years of their history” (Scholem 1973).
- 11 The reconstitution of Judaism beginning in nineteenth-century Germany into distinctive “denominations”—Reform and Conservative—was largely primed by strategies of acculturation and adapting Jewish religious practice to “modern” (that is, Liberal Protestant) axio-normative culture. See footnote 8, above. Although Reform and Conservative rabbis did provide Biblical and Talmudic interpretations to support their respective reconfiguration of Jewish religious practice, their “modernization” of Judaism was by-and-large not borne by theological considerations, certainly not as addressed to the Jewish laity.
- 12 Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s theological affirmation of Judaism may be cast as a “secondary conversion”: Having experienced—“converted”—to Protestant culture and religiosity, they re-converted, as it were, to Judaism. See my essay, [Entering the Synagogue through the Portals of the Church](#) (2004).
- 13 Goethe, *Faust*, Part Two, Night.
- 14 On “faith based on revelation”, see [Judaism Despite Christianity](#) (2011, p. 32).
- 15 *The Star of Redemption*, 96f.
- 16 Rosenzweig, “The Builders”, in idem, [Glatzer](#) (1965, pp. 72–92), and 115ff.
- 17 As he developed his philosophy of dialogue, Buber discarded his earlier typological distinction between “subterranean” and “official” (i.e., rabbinic) Judaism as contrived and superficial. Although he would then acknowledge the spiritual depth of rabbinic, normative Judaism, he nonetheless continued to speak of authentic and inauthentic expressions of Jewish piety (*devotio*).
- 18 See [Kepnes](#) (1992). In his exegesis of Biblical texts, Buber sought to identify its “inner truth”. “For only if ancient Israelites experienced themselves as actually living under divine rule—not as metaphor or ideal but as concrete cognitive and emotional fact—could something of this experience be conceptualized, recovered and repurposed [for the contemporary, post-traditional Jew]. Buber’s approach, therefore, is to peel back the layers of the text, to find concealed beneath strata of redaction, editorializing and ideological sediment, the ‘spontaneous forms, not dependent upon instructions, of a popular preservation by word of mouth of historical events’” ([Lesch](#) 2019).
- 19 For this reason, recurrent attempts to “establish an alternative Jewish tradition”, such as by Jewish socialists who celebrate the glories of exemplary Jewish revolutionaries of the past, would always be sectarian and ineluctably dissipate.
- 20 Rosenzweig hoped to write a comprehensive commentary on the *mitzvoth* as specified in the *halakhah*, but due to his illness, it was never realized. Cf. Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, 496f.
- 21 *Judaism Despite Christianity*, 133.
- 22 Rosenzweig, “Realpolitik”, in idem, [Kleinere Schriften](#) (1935).
- 23 See [Fox](#) (1965). Like Buber, in this now classic study, Fox argues that secularity has a positive effect on institutional religion as a hallmark of modernity, urbanization “secularized” religion as the grammar interpersonal life in which people of all faiths meet and challenges the hierarchies and arbitrary social divisions, and, above all, that between formal religious and everyday life, for God is also present in the secular realm
- 24 Buber, “Gandhi, Politics, and Us” (1930), in idem, [Pointing the Way. Collected Essays](#) (1957).
- 25 Buber, “Nationalism”, in idem, ([Israel and the World. Essays in a Time of Crisis](#) 1963).
- 26 *The Heretical Imperative* (see note 7, above).
- 27 To be sure, in his defense of his fidelity to the Law of Moses, *Jerusalem* (1783), Mendelssohn affirms the Covenant, but only as the Law of, as he put it, the “ceremonial laws”, which he argued convey universal, eternal religious (i.e., metaphysical) truths in a symbolic, performative acts. These truths are to be observed by Israel until the day that the rest of humanity will free itself from the allure of

pagan anthropotheism, and the confusion of religion with political power. The “priestly” role as custodians of the pristine religious truths courts a dialectical negation of the Covenant and justification as a “people apart”. The universal adoption of the ultimate truths of religion, Israel will have completed its divinely appointed mission. Mendelssohn, however, remained silent about the dialectical conditionality of the Covenant, nor did he consider the fact that as rational, the eternal truths of religion are accessible to all rational beings, including Mendelssohn’s fellow Jews, independent of any revealed faith. The implicit denial of the Torah’s exclusive claim to universal truth in effect deprives Judaism of its compelling cognitive force. Thus, Mendelssohn’s paradoxical legacy became emblematic of course of modern Jewry: one need not be bound to the Covenant of Moses in order to live a life in accord with universal rational truth. It may thus be noted that Mendelssohn implicitly opened the gateway to secularization and heresy. As Jacob Katz observed, once Mendelssohn and his fellow votaries of the Enlightenment gave a “green light” to seek truth and intellectual nurturance in none-Jewish writings (and art forms), they had, in effect, embraced the heretical imperative.

<sup>28</sup> *Purpose* is to be distinguished from *function*. The latter is an epiphenomenal and secondary consequence of purpose, which may not be primed by a practical intent, hence, the mantra “a family that prays together stays together”. The *purpose* of prayer is to address God; its sociological *function* may indeed be to keep a family together.

<sup>29</sup> Here, I follow the apt formulation of Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, p. 49.

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