

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). **The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations** was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

## **“Political Monotheism”<sup>1</sup>: Levinas on Politics, Ethics and Religion**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an original conception of a just politics based on a moral sociality grounded in religious transcendence. Guided by the “ethical metaphysics” of Emmanuel Levinas, it rehabilitates the notions of utopianism and messianism, and rejects as narrow minded the theocratic conception of religion supported by religious fundamentalists and opposed by secular humanists. It shows how religion, through the separation and conjunction of holiness and ethics, is required to play a positive role in a liberal, pluralist and democratic politics.

### **Preliminary “Definitions”**

*Morality*: priority of “good” over “evil” in social relations.

*Religion*: human organization oriented by and subordinate to relationship with the divine.

*Society*: individual, family and community relations between humans.

*Politics*: rule over society and resources ultimately sanctioned by coercion.

*Justice*: equitable law, equal access, fair play apropos politics.

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “political monotheism” is Levinas’s, found in “The State of Caesar and the State of David” (1971), in Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 186.

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## I. Machiavellian or Utopian Politics

There are only two kinds of politics. *Machiavellian* politics uses and justifies sovereign authority for its own sake. *Utopian* politics uses and justifies sovereign authority for the sake of one or many supra-political ends.

I am deliberately using the term "utopian" not in its pejorative sense, to mean "impractical," "impossible" or "featherbrained," but rather as Martin Buber used this term in his book of 1949, *Paths in Utopia*, and even more broadly, to refer to the transcendence that drives non-machiavellian politics.<sup>2</sup> It does not imply, therefore, that the utopia, literally the "non-place" relative to today's placement of power relations, toward which utopian politics aims has been tried out in miniature or fully worked out in detail. It was Karl Marx, more than anyone else, who, in competition against his fellow social theorists, gave to the term "utopia" its present bad name. We must remember, however, that he did so on the basis of a theory, "scientific socialism," that has been thoroughly discredited in that intertwining of theory and historical practice that it took for its own criteria. It is only fair, then, that we rethink, if not rehabilitate what such an erroneous outlook disdained. So, along with Buber and Levinas also, I am returning to this fine term, "utopia," with its rich religious and political heritage.

That a politics is utopian means, simply, that its values and aims lie beyond the state. There is, to invoke the title of one of Levinas's last "Talmudic Readings," a "beyond the state in the state."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this beyond is not irrelevant to politics but rather and precisely provides its ultimate legitimization. Thus for a utopian politics the actions of a state, both internally and internationally, cannot be justified, ultimately, on the basis of what are called "reasons of state." The grounds and legitimizing language of the state's regulatory activities, whether executive, legislative, judicial, financial, professional, diplomatic, military and the like, are not immanent or tautological, power used to preserve power, but rather transcendent: means or instruments to attain one or many supra-political aims.

The politics of Levinas is of course utopian. This is a non-controversial point, and Levinas uses the very term "utopian" in this positive sense. The issue of this paper, however, will be to specify as precisely as possible what it means to say that Levinas's politics are utopian. For the moment, without specifying its aims and values, this means no more than (1) Utopian politics is not

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), pp. 00-00. This Talmudic Reading, "Beyond the State in the State," was originally given as a lecture in 1988.

Machiavellian, and (2) The legitimizing justification of utopian politics transcends the state. Regarding the first point, Levinas equates the Machiavellian state with the "pagan State," and describes and evaluates it as "jealous of its sovereignty, the State in search of hegemony, the conquering, imperialist, totalitarian, oppressive State, attached to realist egoism. Incapable of being without self-adoration," and as such, "it is idolatry itself."<sup>4</sup> Levinas obviously does not mince his words on this score. But his harsh indictment of Machiavellian politics must not be mistaken, as some commentators seem to suggest, with a personal vendetta. No doubt, and no doubt quite painfully, Levinas endured the callous oppression and murder of his own family, millions of his fellow Jews and even more of his fellow Europeans by the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. Levinas's opposition to totalitarian politics is certainly personal, visceral, existential, as it should be, but it is not simply personal, as it should not be. Rather, as we shall see, it is based in philosophical conviction that is ethical, political and metaphysical.<sup>5</sup>

Levinas's stern words should remind us that in our imperfect world, the world monotheism calls "unredeemed," a world embracing both good and evil, justice and injustice, decency and indecency, there is a *need* for politics, that is to say, a proper call for coercive force. It means, also, that utopian politics, which uses force but is not justified by the force it uses, lives a fragile and cautious existence, one continually threatened by, under guard against and in the temptation of Machiavellian politics. In *this* world no person is immune from evil and no state is immune from injustice. The utopian use of power for reasons beyond power is therefore an enterprise fraught with internal difficulties and external dangers. It is based neither in clear and distinct ideas nor in simple slogans. Indeed, it is a politics of maturity, and like all maturity, based in experience, it tempers its foresight with its hindsight.

Furthermore, its inherent difficulties and dangers are exacerbated by the fact that Machiavellian politics, where power is used for its own sake, at the same time takes advantage of the rhetoric of utopian politics. Lenin and Stalin, for instance, glossed their unending and merciless pursuit of state power in the

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas, *Beyond the Subject*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> No one would suggest that Gandhi, say, opposed Hitler merely because Gandhi was a citizen of the British Commonwealth upon which Hitler declared war; and I think no one should make the same mistake regarding Levinas's opposition to tyranny. Whether one personally suffered injury or not, morality and justice demanded that Hitler and Stalin be opposed because they were evil and the Nazi Reich and the Soviet Union were unjust. It is *because* Machiavellian regimes are unjust and promote evil that Levinas opposes them, *and* that they perpetrate murder and suffering.

language of economic and social justice.<sup>6</sup> Hitler claimed to speak for a higher, better, greater humanity. If such propaganda, brilliantly labeled “double-speak” by George Orwell, were found only in Machiavellian regimes, it might not be so difficult distinguishing rhetoric from truth. Indeed, those who live in oppressive regimes become quite good at distinguishing lies from truth, and develop codes and an entire humor of cynicism to keep alert to the hypocrisy within which they must live. But because no part of our world is perfect, because the sincerest efforts at human improvement are many and have many varying levels of success, propaganda is also found in utopian regimes. Nevertheless, the distinction between truth and lie must be made, for though relative it remains essential to the very character and possibility of utopian politics. Where might does not equal right, one is under an even greater obligation to measure and judge the rhetoric of transcendence, in politics as in social communication, by comparing it to actual practices, to what has been done in the face of what remains to be done.

## II. Revolutionary or Evolutionary Politics

Before turning to specify and distinguish the goals that characterize and distinguish various forms of utopian politics, let us first distinguish utopian politics according to whether it is *revolutionary* or *evolutionary*. The former demands an abrupt, radical and *discontinuous* overturn of the current political order for the sake of a politics different in kind or no politics at all. For instance, Karl Marx, in *The Germany Ideology*, advocates that the class of proletarians “conquer for itself political power” and initiate “the communist regulation of production,” for the sake of “the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself.”<sup>7</sup> Evolutionary politics, in contrast, requires a

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<sup>6</sup> No doubt it was to avoid the widespread social and political perversions that are produced by (and that require) propaganda that Confucius, in his *Analects*, propounded his doctrine of the “rectification of names”: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. Therefore a superior person considers it necessary that the names he uses may be spoken appropriately, and also that what he speaks may be carried out appropriately. What the superior person requires is just that in his words there may be nothing incorrect.” Cited in Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), pp. 169-170. As Smith points out in his commentary, Confucius’ call for a careful attention to words is not merely a linguistic fussiness, but rather refers to the clarity, straightforwardness and authority of public norms. The ruler should truly be a “ruler,” i.e., a good ruler, an exemplary ruler; the mother should truly be a “mother,” i.e., a good mother, an exemplary mother; etc.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 170.

more or less continuous revision of current politics for the sake of a changed politics or the far distant eventuality of no politics at all. Both sorts of politics may be either *regressive*, aiming to return to a prior real or imagined politics or pre-politics, or *progressive*, aiming for an improvement of the present politics for a better never yet tried politics or a post-politics, a “beyond politics.” For now, let us simply state that the politics of Levinas is *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary*, and *progressive* rather than *regressive*. Levinas envisions politics engaged in the long journey, without guarantees, notwithstanding extraordinary advances and lapses, from the slavery and idolatry of “Pharaoh” to the freedom and justice of the “Promised Land.” Of course, the Promised Land is not equivalent to the geography of any state.

By contrast, Machiavellian politics can be neither revolutionary nor evolutionary. To the extent that it does seem to change, it is characterized by its increasing or decreasing success in opposing both, that is to say, its success or failure in totalizing its homeostatic self-control. Instead of revolution or evolution its development is imperialistic, the effort to extend the same power in all directions. Whether its perspective is turned within or without, it recognizes and tolerates only itself and opposes everything and everyone else as “enemies of the state.” No politics is more leveling or “globalizing,” as one might say today, than totalitarian politics because, as its name suggests, it can be satisfied with nothing less than a totality, which is to say, the reduction of everything other to the same. Its principle of change, pure unopposed power, leads to conformity, uniformity, and ultimately identity. Thus in practice, in our variegated world, it necessarily becomes a politics of violence for the sake of violence, a politics of pure cynicism, whatever its rhetoric.

We will return later to see in what sense the evolutionary and progressive politics of Levinas is oriented by a “beyond politics.” Before we can do this, however, we must first specify the particular goals for the sake of which Levinas’s politics aims. This we will do in two steps. First by distinguishing the utopian goal of justice, which is Levinas’s aim, from other mundane utopian goals. And second by distinguishing an ethical-religious justice, the manner in which Levinas understands justice, from other forms of justice.

### **III. Mundane and Justice Utopianism**

Because there are many ends of human life, there are many forms of utopian politics. Underlying differences regarding means (revolution, evolution) or chronological self-interpretations (progressive, regressive), are the more

fundamental differences regarding the supra-political goals or ends toward which such politics aims. One can differentiate and classify these ends in a variety of ways, according to a variety of different schemata. For our purposes, however, I will first distinguish between politics aiming for justice and politics aiming for what I call mundane ends. The one sort, *justice* politics, pursues ends that are moral, aiming for the good. The other sort, *mundane* politics, pursues pragmatic ends, such as secure private property, reliable commercial relations, safety from crime or war, and the like, ends that are not directly moral themselves. Such ends, however, are very often presented in moral terms as if they were the pre-eminent moral ends. And it is in fact no easy matter, and there are no simple or hard and fast rules for distinguishing moral ends from moral means in this regard. What we can say is that the politics of Levinas is a justice utopian politics. The goal of politics, as Levinas says in too many places to require citation, is justice. While we cannot rest with this broad claim, and we must and will provide further specification of what Levinas means by "justice," there can be no ambiguity whatsoever that for Levinas justice is the primary and highest goal of politics.<sup>8</sup>

But we must also be clear from the start that the utopian politics of justice *includes* the pragmatic goals that rule mundane utopian politics, though obviously they are included as subordinate ends, subordinate to justice. Pragmatic concerns for economic prosperity, national security, minimum standards of living, scientific and technical progress, coordinated systems of transportation and communication, educational opportunities, health care and ecological standards, for instance, are included in and are regulated according to the values of justice. Without including these real and basic concerns as integral parts of its own interest, justice would be an empty word, mere rhetoric. Still, we must not forget that the satisfaction of such needs, however real and basic, is not by itself equivalent to justice. While we must all, minimally, eat to live, we do not, as the saying goes, live to eat. One dies from lack of bread, to be sure, but one also dies for the justice that would make bread available to the starving, or that would eliminate starvation from the earth. The distinction between mundane and justice politics, difficult to make in practice, is nevertheless important to make because the language of all utopian politics, in contrast to the usurpation of

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<sup>8</sup> Only a reading perverted by unexamined political assumptions, an overwrought sophistication and the usual textual irresponsibility that are by now the very hallmark of "deconstruction," could possibly muddy this point. But that is exactly what Howard Caygill, Professor of Cultural History at the University of London, has done in his recent book, *Levinas & the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002; in the "Thinking the Political" series edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and Simon Critchley). Although it is apparently too late for Professors Jay Bernstein and Robert Bernasconi, who have already warmly endorsed this political pamphlet on its back cover, I mention this book and its sort of reading only to steer readers away from it.

such language by Machiavellian politics, must essentially utilize the language of morality and justice. All partisans will call the “beyond” of their brand of utopian politics “justice.” It is intuitively clear, I think, that such political goals as security against crime and war, or universal health care, or full employment, while certainly worthy aims, cannot by themselves be the sole or even the primary aims of a just government. This is a point that Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World*, has made quite clear regarding the twin goals of full employment and a pleasurable life. Perhaps an even clearer example can be taken from the so-called “Green” parties. While environmental protection and ecological responsibility are certainly valuable and worthy goals, I think few people would be prepared to say that by themselves they constitute all that is meant by the struggle for political justice. Rather, such mundane interests, each with its own relative legitimacy, must be subordinated to and coordinated by a politics aiming at justice.

For Levinas the primary aim of politics, and the more specific meaning of justice - including its necessary concerns regarding work, pleasure, knowledge, health, security, the environment, etc. - lies in its service to the moral improvement of each individual as a social being. That is to say, quite simply, politics must be regulated according to justice but justice must serve morality. Humanity, or what Levinas calls “the humanity of the human,” is determined neither by the state, in contrast to a “state of nature” which would be essentially brutal and violent, nor by a state of nature, in contrast to the state which would be essentially brutal and violent. Rather and foremost, moral character – individual and social at once – determines the humanity or the morality of the human.

Clearly, then, what Levinas is defending, namely, a state regulated by justice, and justice guided by morality, and morality understood as that of independent individuals in social relation, is what has been known in modern political theory as *liberal* politics, “liberal” in the classic sense first articulated by John Locke. Contrary to the totalitarian politics of a Spinoza or a Hegel, the state, though regulated by justice does not establish what is just or what is good. Rather, the state institutionalizes and promotes justice to the extent that it ensures and promotes the moral independence of individuals in their social relations. “The capacity to guarantee ... that independence,” Levinas writes, “defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible.”<sup>9</sup> One must never lose sight of this

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<sup>9</sup> Levinas, “The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other” (1985), in Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 123.

vision of the liberal state when attempting to understand Levinas’s conception of the proper relation between politics and ethics.

The justice utopian politics of the liberal state is neither self-serving nor does it mistake mundane values for the justice that ensures individuals a moral life in their social relations, however mundane those social relations may be. The utopian politics of the liberal state defended by Levinas aims beyond the state toward, and is guided by, a justice that is itself subordinate to, and ultimately derived from, the moral life of its citizens. The liberal state is that noble effort that at once uses power and regulates power according to the strictures of justice. It must be said, too, that the fact that Levinas supports the liberal state cannot be psychologized as a personal reaction to the terrible harm that he personally suffered at the hands of totalitarian and fascist states, though no doubt these very real experiences contributed powerfully to his convictions. Rather and more profoundly, his vision is based in the positivity of his ethical metaphysics and the deeply religious life that is consistent –at least for Levinas and his co-religionists - with those ethics.

Having determined the nature of Levinas’s politics, having provided a clear formula for it: a politics regulated by justice guided by morality, our analysis is nevertheless far from finished. In fact, with this formulation established we are now able to broach the central issue of Levinas’s politics, namely, the relation not only between politics and ethics, but between both politics and ethics and religion. Having reached the source and authority of political justice, that is, moral individuals in social relations, how *precisely* does Levinas define the human in ethical and religious terms? What role, if any, is it legitimate for religion to play, according to its own demands, in politics? What are the consequences, the imperatives, both theoretical and practical, for a just politics derived from an ethics which itself has a religious ground? Only by clearly grasping the answers to these sort of questions, by properly understanding the relations between politics, ethics and religion, can we understand how the justice of justice utopian politics is shaped and justified. Only by clearly grasping the answers to these questions can we understand specifically what kind of liberal state Levinas defends.

#### **IV. Theocracy and Secular Humanism**

To be sure, these questions have for many centuries been central issues in liberal political theory and practice. In the West they go under the heading of “Church and State” relations, even if the “church” in question is a synagogue,



mosque or ashram. It is clear that Levinas's qualified utopian support for state power depends upon that power being regulated by justice that is itself regulated by morality. But it is also clear to all but his most deliberately obtuse readers, that for Levinas the morality upon which the just state is built, what Levinas calls the "face-to-face" or "proximity," is an ethical-*religious* morality. In our effort to specify Levinas's politics, and joining a long tradition of liberal political thinking, we must now sort out the precise way in which the ethics of proximity is, first, both a moral and a religious relation and, second, how, as such, it plays out in politics. In other words, we must elaborate more precisely the manner in which religion and politics - Church and State - intersect in a way that is fully legitimate for both.

Logically there are four possible ways, two of disjunction and two of conjunction, in which ethics (and hence a state guided by ethics) and religion can be related to one another. Accordingly, we must determine which of these ways is Levinas's. The two disjunctive relations are (1) religion independent from and superior to ethics and (2) ethics independent from and superior to religion. The two conjunctive relations are (3) religion bound to but served by ethics and (4) ethics bound to but served by religion. Neat as this schema appears, these four options are in no way merely logical possibilities. They are very real, quite concrete positions lived existentially by individuals and promoted socially by political parties and regimes. When discussing ethics and religion it is clear by their very nature that neither is a limited compartment of life, like playing tennis or attending school. Rather, whatever they are, ethics and religion are fundamental dimensions of signification. What this means is that they permeate all other more limited registers of human signification such as work, play, dining or study. When a person is religious and/or ethical, then that person's time of work, play or study, for instance, must at the same time also conform to the demands of an ethical and/or religious worldview. I do not believe that this is a controversial point. With it in mind, let us now consider some of the political ramifications of the four possible interactions between ethics and religion.

The first case of disjunction, religion taken to be independent from and superior to ethics, is the ground of *theocratic* utopianism. Religion in this sense, beyond ethics, is all and absorbs all. It is all absorbing, all embracing, alpha and omega, but in an exclusionary sense. Its universality comes not simply from its own fundamental character, permeating all life, but also at the expense of other sources of value by eliminating them. Its political expression, theocracy, thus aims to extend religious values everywhere to the exclusion of the value of alternative sources of value. Theocracy would thus aim to supercede and eliminate its primary competitor, namely, independent or purely secular self-

interpretations of ethics. Positively it would aim to create an all embracing state or society – the two would be indistinguishable - based upon and ordered by a direct or unmediated divine revelation. Such is the ostensibly inspired goal of *theocratic* justice utopianism. Obviously, in such a project the term “justice” takes on a unique supra-ethical sense, meaning exclusively divine justice, the direct will of God ordaining and ordering human affairs, as defined by or “revealed to” each particular religion, or religious faction, that aims for theocratic political control. If it obvious, too, that the stumbling block to all *theocratic* politics, obvious to all but its most fanatic (or indifferent) believers, is that *human* interpretations and practices, however oracular or majestically garbed, *in fact* mediate all allegedly direct divine orders. The theocratic state is directed by prophets, priests or clerics who, for all their sincerity, devotion or inspiration, remain finite human beings, speaking finite human languages, and responding to finite human needs, desires and frailties.

In the second case of disjunction ethics is taken to be independent from and superior to religion. This is the ground of *secular humanist* utopianism. Mirroring theocratic politics, one of its negative political aims is to supercede and eliminate the political influence of religion. Positively it aims at a state solely based on and ordered by an exclusively human, fully transparent sense of justice and morality. All religious claims to justice, in contrast, whether theocratic or otherwise, because based in transcendence, are dismissed and opposed as “unreasonable” obstacles to the achievement of a just state and a moral humanity. Here too, however, there is stumbling block obvious to all but the most fanatic (or indifferent) believers in secular humanism, namely, that morality has yet to find a fully reasonable, fully transparent self-justification. While religion is explicit about the “unreasonable” or the transcendence essential to ethics, humanism claims to have overcome or, more precisely, to be in the (always as yet unfinished) process of overcoming that “unreason” or transcendence. The denigrating rhetorical stratagems of such overcoming are familiar: the unreason of religion is a primitive, ignorant, infantile, cowardly, prudent, immature, frightened, ideological, etc., “stage” to be overcome in humanity’s ongoing struggle for full self-development. Ahead lies the brave new world of human clairvoyance, self-reliance and autonomy.

Because for Levinas ethics and religion exist in an integral unity, he subscribes to neither of these disjunctive forms of justice utopian politics, and even sees a link between them in their mutual immoderation. Nevertheless, beyond their broad failure to appreciate religion in ethics and ethics in religion, his criticisms are specific to each. Theocracy, losing sight of human dignity, is criticized for being an immature or mythological form of religion. It does not

appreciate the irrevocable partnership or covenant between God and humanity, an association that requires of humans piety as well as kind deeds and judicious legislation for its fulfillment. The pious intentions that guide theocracy are by themselves insufficient and hence harmful when translated into political aspirations. Just laws do not fall from the sky, are not written in the clouds. The grace of personal piety and the imperatives social redemption while bound to one another are not synonymous. “Inspired by love of one’s fellowman,” Levinas writes, “reasonable justice is bound by legal strictures and cannot equal the kindness that solicits and inspires it.”<sup>10</sup> Religion, ethics and justice are linked but they are also distinct. Theocracy, by absorbing ethics and justice into religion distorts their true character and genuine demands. Secular humanism, for its part, is criticized for its irrepressible egoist tendencies, its propensity to become totalitarian. It does not and cannot appreciate the transcendence, the irreducible alterity of the ethical, its religious dimension. It absorbs the religious into the ethical and judicial. Hence, rather than responding to the inalienable and unforeseeable humanity of individuals, it ends up speaking for each by speaking for everyone in their stead. Where transcendence and the humility proper to it are lost, egoism steps in to fill the gap. Thus, Levinas writes, “in the eventuality of a totalitarian state, the human is repressed and a mockery made of ‘the rights of man,’ and the promise of an ultimate return to ‘the rights of man’ is postponed indefinitely.”<sup>11</sup> In sum, theocracy would strip transcendence of its humanity, and secular humanism would strip humanity of its transcendence.

### **V. Levinas: Ethical-Religious Justice Utopianism – Messianism**

Levinas’s politics are supported by a morality conceived in integral conjunction with religion, and hence can be defined as a justice utopianism with moral-religious aims. The ultimate respect it accords to the individual as a moral agent, the one who is “for-the-other,” locates it within the classical liberal tradition, but a liberalism no longer based in the individualism of monadic subjectivity. In today’s political environment, Levinas’s thought would thus be on the side of democracy in contrast to the world’s more numerous dictatorial and totalitarian regimes. Levinas calls his own ethical-religious justice utopian politics a “monotheist politics” or, using a simpler but more controversial term,

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<sup>10</sup> Levinas, “The Other, Utopia, and Justice” (1988), in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, p. 123.

"messianic" politics. To clear away a basic controversy that surrounds this term, let us note straightaway that for Levinas *messianic* politics is in no way equivalent to the *theocratic* politics with which the term "messianic" is usually associated. In fact, as we have already seen, messianic politics is firmly opposed to theocratic politics. Rather, what Levinas calls monotheistic or messianic politics continues the line of Christian-political thought of the revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini during 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy's struggle for Risorgimento (so admired by the German Jewish socialist Moses Hess in Europe, and by orthodox Rabbi Sabato Morais, founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, in America) and leads to the "Liberation Theology" of Central and South America in the late twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

Having said this, we still have not answered the more pressing question regarding which of the two conjunctive relations between morality and religion is the one favored by Levinas. In the liberal politics Levinas calls messianic, where morality and religion are integrally bound to one another, does morality have priority over religion or does religion have priority over morality? Or, perhaps a better way of phrasing this same question is as follows. For a messianic politics what role does religion play in the morality that guides the justice that orders the political use of coercive force? However formulated, the question of the relation between morality and religion is more difficult to answer than those questions that we have thus far met and resolved. It is not an abstract theoretical question. It is the question that was raised in American political life during the 1960 presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy. If elected president, would Kennedy's first loyalty be to the United States Constitution and the American people or to the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope in Rome? Levinas's position is the same as that taken by Kennedy, whose loyalty as president was first to the United States Constitution and the American people. In political life, in other words, ethics has primacy over religion without thereby contradicting religion or detaching itself from religion. How is this so?

What is the relation of religion to morality and hence to justice and politics? Let us be attentive here to nuances of great consequence. Given the

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<sup>12</sup> On the influence of Mazzini on Morais (and Elia Benamozegh), see Arthur Kiron, "Livornese Traces in American Jewish History," in *Per Elia Benamozegh*, ed. Alessandro Guetta (Milan: Edizioni Thalassa De Paz, 2000), pp. 45-66. What "Morais wrote in 1952, only a year after he had arrived in Philadelphia," could easily have been written by Levinas: "For the American people to be virtuous, she [America] must be religious; for virtue disconnected from religion is a word void of sense; it is but a mask to conceal ambition or avarice. [The Republic] must be religious by exercising those virtues which the Bible inculcates." Kiron, "Livornese Traces," p. 55. For the influence of Mazzini's Christian messianic politics on Moses Hess, see the latter's *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862). On Levinas's influence on "Liberation Theology," see the writings of Gustavo Gutierrez especially.

priority of ethics over religion in the political sphere it does not follow that religion has no voice in politics or that it is reduced to a political voice. Either move would actually untie the knot that binds morality and religion. The truth is precisely contrary, and here lies the genius of liberal politics. From the side of religion, *it is only by giving primacy to ethics – to morality first and a justice built on morality - in the political sphere that the various ethical-religions are validated and legitimized in the **autonomy** of their own proper sphere.* They are not “established,” are not state religions, but neither are they escapist and hence collaborationist by default. From the side of liberal politics, *it is only by giving autonomy to the ethical-religions that the morality upon which a just politics depends can be secured* (as much as morality can be secured). By guaranteeing *religious liberty* liberal politics recognizes the fundamental or inalienable independence of the moral agents for the sake of whom its actions, laws and institutions are justified. Unlike members of the hegemonic state, the citizen is not defined by citizenship alone. An individual’s “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” or “pursuit of property,” while certainly regulated by the messianic state in the name of justice (which in extreme instances may be required to take life, constrain liberty and deprive individuals of happiness and property), nevertheless also exceed the state.

To be sure, enemies of the liberal state who want to abolish the limits of its sovereignty, whether in the name of God, humanity, truth or the nation (*volk*), refuse to see in the transcendence guaranteed by religious liberty anything other than a threat to the political totality they wish to install. On this point they are certainly right. The alleged tyranny (of religion) that they claim to oppose, however, is exactly what they themselves intend to impose – now in the name of the state. The religion they oppose, therefore, is always a caricature, a bogeyman, religion reduced to the intolerance of a few abstract theocratic beliefs, regardless of all nuance and regardless of the actual outlook and situation of religion in our world today. No doubt, too, there has been sufficient blood spilled in the name of religious tyranny to rally such anti-clerical opponents. No doubt, too, there are still religious proponents of theocracy – especially in the Islamic world today - who provide the fossil fuel for these fiery criticisms of the liberal state and the freedoms it grants to religion. But it is no doubt even truer that today only a narrow-minded anti-clerical blindness would reduce religion to its stunted theocratic caricature.

With this final specification – the priority of ethics over religion in the political sphere - we have at last defined Levinas’s politics. In a nutshell: politics regulated by a justice serving integral moral-religious ends, where these moral-religious ends remain moral rather than religious to the limit of any political

involvement with them. Just as the justice promulgated by the state is not a function of the state but rather of morality, so, too, morality, which is certainly not a function of the state, is also not simply a function of civil society alone but depends in its very essence on religion. Whatever may occur in fact, such politics cannot in principle form a totality. It resists totalitarianism for three reasons. First, it aims for an as yet unachieved or utopian justice. Second, its justice is guided by and serves morality. Third, that morality is bound to ethical-religions that transcend politics altogether.

What is meant by the term “ethical-religion”? Does this hyphenation disguise a circular and self-fulfilling position? First of all, this term does not refer to imaginative, theological or ideological constructs but to the concrete historically differentiated religions with which we are all familiar. It refers to Judaism, Christianity, Mormonism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and others concrete religions with their specific beliefs, practices, rituals, sacred texts and the like. Second and again factually and historically, it refers to the mainstream manifestations of these religions, the central practices, teachings and imperatives that emphasize ethical ways of behaving. To be sure, each of these religions includes sincere believers and influential sects that espouse and attempt to enforce non-ethical self-interpretations. These have been particularly influential in Christianity, with its emphasis on salvation through correct doctrinal faith rather than good works, and in Islam, with its theological emphasis on its own perfection or supersessionist completion. We will return to this point with regard to Christianity later when we discuss Kierkegaard’s perspective. Nevertheless, it remains true that Christianity, Islam and the rest are all ethical-religions insofar as for the vast majority of their followers they promulgate morality and justice as religious injunctions. All of them, each in its own way, advocate human goodness and social justice. The fact that religions, like governments, businesses, schools and families, are made up of human beings and are therefore imperfect does not mitigate their basic ethical thrust. Except in those dark and terrible periods of the extended triumph of imperfection – such as the Christian Inquisition and Crusades or the Islam of

(lesser) *jihad*, *fatwahs*<sup>13</sup> and terrorism – religions cannot be fairly judged if they are judged by their aberrations alone.<sup>14</sup>

The point at hand, however, has to do not with religious failures, but with religious freedom and pluralism in messianic politics. And the point here is that the liberalism of messianic politics, which secures religious freedom and pluralism, comes not merely as a luxury, grace or extravagance. Rather and more profoundly, religious liberty – the freedom to assemble and worship in a manner beyond the orbit of the state - is essential to the existence and mission of the messianic state itself. This truth must not be obscured, as it unfortunately too often is, by the historical fact that the founding theorists of liberal politics were more afraid (and rightfully so) of religious tyranny than they were of state tyranny. Our situation today is no longer theirs. In the aftermath of the twentieth century, we are far more aware of the dangers of state tyranny. We are therefore also in a better position to appreciate the positive contribution of religious liberty and plurality to politics. It is in precisely this light, too, that we can best appreciate Levinas's contribution to liberal political thought. No doubt, religion can still be tyrannical, as we are seeing today in the Islamic world.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the experience of state tyranny in the twentieth century, and the trenchant resistance that ethical religions have in several instances mustered against such tyranny, no longer authorizes a knee jerk anti-clericalism today that would prolong what was once a legitimate anti-clericalism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Only an ideologically blinded mind can ignore the noble resistance of the Polish Roman Catholic Church to the state power of the Polish Communist regime. Or the heroic resistance and martyrdom of Catholic liberation theologians against dictatorial oppression in late twentieth century Central and South America. One thinks also of the courageous leadership of Martin Luther

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<sup>13</sup> On February 17, 2003, as I write this article, the Iranian Ayatollahs have once again reaffirmed their long-standing offer to reward with three million dollars whomever will murder Mr. Salman Rushdie, celebrated author and fellow Muslim, whom they have condemned for heresy. Islam today, through this criminal Iranian *fatwah* and no less through the resounding silence and complicity, almost without exception, of the entire Islamic religious world globally, has, I believe, succumbed to a debilitating non-ethical religious self-interpretation. Is it genuine peace (*salam*), respect for others, God's creatures all, that is brought into the world by murdering those who pacifically express alternative opinions, or is it not rather the peace of the graveyard?

<sup>14</sup> Mahatma Gandhi spoke to this point when, in an article entitled "I Am But a Seeker After Truth," he wrote: "And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation. Progress toward Truth, toward God, is possible only because of such evolution." In *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Ragavan Iyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> For a glimpse at an alternative Islam see the recent book by Professor Lenn Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (2003).

King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, two leaders who held no official political positions but who, motivated by their strong ethical-religious convictions, wielded enormous ethical power against state oppression.

As inspired and inspiring as are these high points of overt political activism, the essential and positive contribution of religion to politics nonetheless lies still deeper. It has to do with the *value of values*. Levinas's claim, like the claim of all religious persons, is that the ethical ground of politics lies neither in the state nor in society but in society in its relation to the ethical religions. The ground of the ethical values that constitute liberal politics lies in a relation to transcendence, irreducible to human personality or sociality, which the ethical-religions express in terms of relationship to God. Lacking this, given the inner resources, inclinations and motivations that drive a humanity deprived of transcendence, the ethical goals of liberal politics eventually would give way to self-serving egoist tendencies, the cult of personality, the totalitarian politics that is the ultimate expression of that egoism. One can bemoan these tendencies, but one ignores them to one's peril. One can yearn intensely for justice, but one cannot leave its political accomplishment to an ostensive natural or conventional goodness. Not only is no person above the law, no person is the law. A subjective maxim can only be universalized with legitimacy – rather than through brute force - based on a standard or principle. Aristotle long ago understood that political rule by the best, whether an individual, the few or the many, easily transforms into political rule by the worst. Genuine political liberty is protected not by good laws backed by good will, but by good laws backed by good will backed by religious conviction. "Monotheist politics": neither religion alone (theocracy) nor no religion at all (secular humanism) but ethical religion.

Despite the wide publicity it receives in the media of the democratic world, it is not secular humanism alone that would destroy the accomplishments and hopes of messianic politics.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, all the other forms of politics that we

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<sup>16</sup> For an instance of militant and vehement secular humanism, witness the rise of the *Shinui* party in Israel, with its simplistic fundamentalist interpretation of the values of religious-Zionist politics. The danger from ethical-humanism in those societies that do enjoy messianic politics, e.g., the United States of America, is greatest for two reasons. First, on the surface they appear to support the very same ethical values. And on the surface they do support the very same values: individual liberty, freedom from religious persecution, liberty of thought and press, etc. – the classical liberal politics virtues. Second, the religion the secular humanists oppose is the very same form of religion that messianic politics opposes: mythological religion, theocratic fundamentalist religion. But for these secular humanists, blind to nuances, only a very simple but rather drastic solution and slogan is offered: throw out the baby with the bath water, oppose all religion indiscriminately. But if the thesis of this paper is correct, then secular humanism is, by opposing all religion, ultimately shooting itself in the foot. It undermines the genuine foundation of its own values, unable or unwilling to share with messianic politics the difficult burden and vigilance that such values require. Like two cobblers disputing, but only one knowing where the



have considered would in the political pursuit of their ends also aim to undermine the difficult freedoms of messianic politics. In attacking the value of the ethical as such, Machiavellians would also be attacking religious ethics. Mundane utopians would challenge the validity of messianic justice and morality in the name of economic, epicurean, scientific, ecological or other intra-mundane constructions of value. From the side of religion, defending allegedly unmediated divinely revealed values, theocrats would denigrate messianic liberalism as lukewarm, compromised, and ultimately secular. Secular humanist, as we have seen, would attack the entire religious dimension of messianic ethics in the name of exclusively human values. Politics involves struggle as well as risk. In today’s world, as in the past, all of the above alternative points of view energize very real political parties and regimes. The defense of freedom as well as its promotion is part of the difficulty of the difficult freedoms of liberal politics.

## VI. Holiness and the Ethical-Religious

One must distinguish the *holy* from the ethical. Building on a long line of traditional readings of the Hebrew Bible, Levinas envisions Judaism as a pious morality integrally aligned to just politics as one of its irreducible expressions.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, in a no less important sense, the piety of Jewish morality is not reducible to its political expression. It is this distinction that is crucial to our current concern. While nothing holy is meant to be immoral or unjust, nevertheless certain dimensions of the holy seem not – directly, proximately or apparently – to be concerned with morality or justice. For example, to refrain from eating pork or a mixture of milk and meat, as the *Halakah* requires of Jews, is not on the face of it a moral or political activity. When non-Jews eat pepperoni pizza, for example, they do not, as far as Judaism is concerned, commit any moral trespass. Neither, furthermore, is any such activity by Gentiles in the least an abrogation of the will of God. Nor, in most of today’s states, as far as I know,

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good leather comes from, it is because they are so close in this way, so it seems to me, that the threat to messianic politics from secular humanism is greatest.

<sup>17</sup> A host of authorities from the Jewish tradition, from Moses to Maimonides to Mendelssohn, could be cited to support this thesis. I will cite only Elie (Elijah) Benamozegh, from his book of 1867, *Jewish Morality and Christian Morality*: “Without doubt Judaism is one. Without doubt its politics is allied in a thousand ways to its morality, sometimes borrowing its language, sometimes adopting its unction and grandeur. Without doubt also its morality labors to mold not merely pure, enlightened and content consciences, not merely good citizens of the celestial Jerusalem, but also good patriots, good Israelites and good citizens of the terrestrial Jerusalem. Without doubt, finally, there is between Judaism’s morality and its politics an endless exchange of forces, services and influence, in a reciprocity highly advantageous for both.”; Elie Benamozegh, *Morale juive et morale chretienne* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2000), p. 27 (my translation).

are they in violation of any civil law. In other words, certain practices that are holy for members of one religion when performed by members of another religion are neither immoral nor unholy for either. No Muslim requires Christians to pray five times a day toward Mecca. No Hindu requires Muslims to venerate Krishna. And no fault, moral, spiritual or otherwise, lies in such non-observance.

Certainly the biblical prophets, conveying the word of God in human language, have unequivocally urged that there is indeed a relationship between holiness and ethics. It is this relationship that the entire Jewish tradition, in its practices and beliefs, has endorsed. There is, as Isaiah teaches, both circumcision of the body and “circumcision of the heart.” To be sure, Jews are enjoined to obey the *Halakah*, the will of God on earth; that is not in question. The heart by itself, however good its intentions, is not enough.<sup>18</sup> *Halakah* must be obeyed whether its significance is understood or not; again that is not in question. In the same way, in American law, one must pay income taxes whether one grasps or understands the benefits of such taxes or not. The point the prophets are making is a point valid for the ethical-religions, namely, that there is *more* to holiness than mechanical, formal or rote obedience. This is perhaps the defining characteristic of prophecy, its continuing and continual influence: that a “more” must be integrated into what could easily otherwise become an empty formality.

But we must now raise our question again at a deeper level: Is this “more” still more holiness, a more concentrated intention, a greater sense of clinging dependence on God, perhaps, or is it the ethical? The answer for the biblical prophets is obvious and I defer again to Isaiah to relay God’s perspective: “God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness” (*Isaiah* 5:16). Or perhaps even more forcefully, Isaiah: “Bring me no more vain offerings; incense of abomination they are to me; as for the New Moons and Sabbaths and the calling of Assemblies, I cannot bear iniquity along with solemn meeting. Your New Moons and your Appointed Feasts my soul hates, they are a trouble to me; I am weary of enduring them. And when you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even when you make many prayers, I will not hear; your

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<sup>18</sup> Accusing Christianity of a sentimentalism of the heart, neglectful of the law, is a recurrent theme in Jewish interpretations of Christianity. In modern times, for example, Benamozegh (especially in the book cited in the previous endnote), Leo Baeck (see esp., *Judaism and Christianity: Essays by Leo Baeck*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1958), and Levinas, especially, have leveled this charge. While there is a certain truth to this charge, nevertheless, mainstream Christianity, for all the asceticism of its theology, has always been positively engaged in the world and in politics. I am not thinking merely of the “Holy Roman Empire,” the Papal States, or the present day Vatican, but rather of the fact that almost all of the hospitals and universities of Europe were founded (and many remain) as Christian institutions.

hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come and let us reason together, says the Lord... " (*Isaiah* 1:13-19). For Judaism, prayer, the holy festivals, the Temple sacrifices, even the holy Sabbath itself, though obligatory, are vain and abominable if they are not accompanied by righteousness, the cessation of evil and the doing of good. The word of God, and the entire Jewish tradition, is quite clear regarding the nature of the "more" that true holiness bears: relation to God is only possible through righteousness. And this, the Jews insist, is a human and not only a Jewish requirement.<sup>19</sup>

Although the holy is not equivalent to the ethical it is not considered to be contrary to the ethical. Holy acts in relation to God are also, in themselves, also moral. This is an important point and must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that rituals, prayers, dietary restrictions, and the like, must eventually be transformed according to the universality appropriate to ethical maxims such as those prohibiting murder, theft and false witness. The ethical-religions are not engaged in the historical project of shedding their particularism, as if they were only provisionally bearing Hegel's *Geist* struggling through nature and history to free itself for the pure Concept. In fact the rituals, prayers, etc., remain particularistic. Nor, conversely, does it mean that the whole world must conform to the particularities of one ethical-religion to become ethical. Each religion has its own peculiar acts of holiness and what is holy for one is not holy for another. Perhaps this is the most distinguishing feature of the different religions. Nevertheless, in their very specificity, incumbent on adherents only, acts of holiness are also ethical acts.

The ethical universality of religious particularism is really not so difficult grasp if one is not blinded by prejudice. The Jewish dietary laws, for instance, seemingly a nitpicking matter of "pots and pans," in fact contain many moral dimensions that are neither far-fetched nor remote. Even a short list of the ethical teachings they suggest include: respect for animal life, suffering and death; humanization of the animal act of eating; appreciation and thankfulness for food; regular remembrance of communal affiliations and the presence of the divine; respect and reserve toward nature; and so on. No doubt reverence for the cow in India has similar ethical implications, as do the dietary laws of Islam, or the prayers and good manners of Protestant dining. No doubt, too, looked at from the outside these rites of holiness appear arbitrary, accidents of history or the impositions of strong personalities. But for those who follow them, these

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<sup>19</sup> For the laws of human righteousness, the so-called seven "Noachide" laws, see *Genesis* 9:1-7 and *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Sanhedrin* 56a-60a.

parochial conventions are intimately bound to ethical teachings, teachings that the Hebrew prophets insist are essential and not merely supplementary to such behaviors.<sup>20</sup> Because the stipulations of holiness are particular to each religion, they are by no means equivalent or interchangeable with moral imperatives or rules of justice. Forgetting this is precisely the error of theocrats. One person’s holiness is another’s nuisance or straightjacket. Nevertheless, and this is the point I am after, for those members of specific religions who are bound by the claims of holiness, these claims need not oppose, and in the case of Judaism – and certainly of other religions - they essentially teach and support a universal morality and justice. At the same time and here is the second point I want to make, the rules and rituals of holiness also accomplish *more*.

What they do more is of the greatest importance, and it is precisely this that secular humanism does not grasp about the essential importance of ethical-religion for politics. For to grasp this surplus is to see the *sui generis* role of the *religious* aspect, in its relation to the moral aspect, of the ethical-religious underpinnings of the morality toward which the justice of messianic politics aims. To understand the nature and significance of this religious surplus for Levinas, I turn first, by way of contrast, to Soren Kierkegaard’s alternative conception of relationship to God, that is to say, to his conception of holiness, and more specifically to his conception of Christianity.

## VII. Kierkegaard: Faith and Obedience

For Kierkegaard, morality is not an irreducible expression of religion. Kierkegaard elaborates this view in *Fear and Trembling* (1823), through an interpretation of the biblical story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac (*Genesis*, 22:1-19). The story seems heaven sent to deal with the very question that concerns us, namely, the relation of the ethical and the holy. Nothing is more certain than that human sacrifice is a non-moral act. Like all murder it is an evil,

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<sup>20</sup> Having said this, it must also be said that there remains sharp disagreement amongst practitioners who interpret “orthodox” Judaism regarding the moral significance of the rules of holiness. Formalist interpreters, such as Maimonides and, in our day, Y. Leibowitz, argue that all the divinely ordained rules - including those that appear to have obvious moral signification, for instance, “Thou shall not murder,” “Thou shall not steal,” etc. - are to be obeyed strictly on non-moral grounds. One obeys the laws of God not for moral reasons but in obedience to the will of God *simpliciter*. But this does not ultimately alter the thesis of this paper, since obedience to divine law – for whatever conscious reason or non-reason - still retains its moral signification. Non-formalist interpreters, however, such as Samson Raphael Hirsch and Levinas, argue that while the laws of God must indeed be obeyed, obedience to them is nevertheless *always* a moral activity precisely because they are the will of a God who is never other than Benevolent. “Covenant” guarantees the moral intent of both parties to the agreement.

and in this case an especially heinous one. What the story of Abraham’s apparent willingness to sacrifice his son at God’s behest teaches, according to Kierkegaard, is the radical difference and superiority of religious faith over moral obedience – the disjunction of the holy from the ethical. When faced with a choice between obedience to morality and faithful but non-moral obedience to God, a truly religious person should choose the latter. Such is the holiness of Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith,” who “suspends” morality and “leaps” into a higher obedience to God.<sup>21</sup>

We should not imagine that this reading is bound to the contingency of a particular story in a particular sacred text in a particular religious tradition. Beyond the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, one can easily find in Judaism and in all the world’s religions similar sources that permit the interpretation of holiness such that it would surpass and leave behind the moral domain of good and evil. One could point to the Buddhist and Hindu ideal of complete “enlightenment,” the figures of the *sanyassin* or *arahat*, the “fully enlightened” one, beyond all dualities and hence beyond the dualities of good and evil, and justice and injustice. Such a supra-moral ideal, while far from the practical intent of most of the world’s more than a billion Buddhists and Hindus, nevertheless serves as the ideal goal of their most spiritually inclined practitioners. Let us be clear, too, that, barring certain egregious and well-publicized exceptions,<sup>22</sup> when we find religions suggesting such supra-moral ideals, they also insist on respect for conformity to ethical values as far as they go. Only a fully moral person can become an enlightened one. Nevertheless, however couched in qualifications and propaedeutic restrictions, in its ultimate sense, one comparable to the exigency that emerges from Abraham’s trial according to Kierkegaard’s reading, the religious ideal of absolute union with the Godhead or God – found in all the so-called mystical traditions - entails a dismissal of all dualities, including ethical hierarchies, as relative and obstructive.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Whether Kierkegaard concomitantly envisions morality to be independent of religion, that is to say, *secular*, is another matter that I will put aside for the moment. However, his famous expression, at least in its English translation: “teleological suspension of the ethical,” does not portend well.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, Jim Korash of Waco cult infamy committed adultery with the wives of his married followers. James Jones of Jonestown infamy did the same, and compounded his immorality with mass murder. The religion of Brigham Young, in contrast, like that of the kings of ancient Israel, sanctioned polygamy.

<sup>23</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, in his penetrating and erudite book, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1940), strives with great resourcefulness to deny precisely this claim. And one can certainly affirm of even the most “enlightened” forms of spiritual life proposed by Hinduism and Buddhism that morality is, if not their ultimate nature, then their precondition. The same can be said for kabalistic Judaism, which is why the rabbis surround it with so many moral precautions. Perhaps one should say only that the spiritual aim of complete union with God does not propound but nevertheless contains the *danger* of practical

### VIII. Levinas: Distance and Covenant

Faithful to the ethical-religious character of mainstream Judaism, Levinas has quite a different reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac. This reading, with its critique of Kierkegaard, goes to the heart of what we are now trying to clarify, namely, the properly *religious* aspect – the *surplus* of the holy – involved in the Levinasian conception of messianic politics. For this reason I will cite Levinas's brief commentary in full.

The ethical means the general, for Kierkegaard. The singularity of the *I* would be lost, in his view, under a rule valid for all. ... Now it is not at all certain that ethics is where he sees it. Ethics as consciousness of responsibility toward others (...), far from losing you in generality, singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as *I*. ... In his [Kierkegaard's] evocation of Abraham, he describes the encounter with God at the point where subjectivity rises to the level of the religious, that is to say, above ethics. But one could think the opposite: Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, *is the highest point in the drama* [my italics]. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice – this is the essential. Moreover, why does Kierkegaard never speak of the dialogue in which Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of the just who may be present there?<sup>24</sup>

Succinct and to the point, this is a very rich commentary. First of all, Levinas quite obviously does not separate ethics from holiness. According to Kierkegaard, for the existent individual ethics is general and depersonalizing while holiness is specific and singularizing. This distinction, between the general and the existent (influenced no doubt by Hegel's distinction between abstract duty, *Moralitat*, and historically concrete duty, *Sittlichkeit*), remains within the orbit of a Kantian reading that Levinas rejects.

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antinomianism, a danger that has on occasion unfortunately become real, as with the Frankist cult in seventeenth century European Judaism.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "A Propos of 'Kierkegaard vivant'," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 76-77.

For Kant, the practical or transcendently free will, the free will of a rational agent, binds itself to moral determinations only by submitting to a formality borrowed from the abstract universality of propositional logic. Only agents whose free activity conforms to practical maxims that can be universalized without contradiction live under the rule of moral imperatives. Personal inclination can play no role in such a rational ethics. Without such purely rational self-determination or autonomy, so Kant reasons, the agent would be completely bound to an ironclad series of heteronomous causes, would be unfree, and hence would in no way be morally accountable. It was through an unqualified affirmation of this necessity, both causal and deductive, that Spinoza gave up on human freedom altogether. Excluded by science and morality, Kant leaves to the domain of *aesthetics*, the realm of the sensible as such, whether expressed as art or athletics, the significance of the particular as particular, the singular. Thus for Kant and Kierkegaard the ethical remains general, the conformity of the particular to the universal, regardless of personal inclination. For the Kierkegaard of *Either/Or* (also 1843), the ethical is superior to the aesthetic for precisely this reason: it harnesses the arbitrariness of particularity to the universally human. In his account of religion in *Fear and Trembling*, however, holiness is accorded superiority to the ethical precisely because it surpasses the general, which is now seen to be merely abstract, for the absolutely singularity of the knight of faith's extra-moral relation to God. Kierkegaard would thus have us distinguish three types or "stages" of human development: arbitrary aesthetic particularity, humanist ethical generality, and authentic religious singularity.

The troubling problem, however, is that the authenticity of religious singularity is not so easily distinguished from the arbitrariness of aesthetic particularity. Kant, unlike Kierkegaard, quite clearly puts the religious – as hope and as the teleological sublime – in the domain of the aesthetic. Despite the sincerity, intensity or authenticity of Kierkegaard's pious intentions, what he calls the religious cannot be regarded otherwise than in the same light. His conception of religion as absolutized inwardness is, like Schleiermacher's conception a few decades later, indistinguishable from the aesthetic and non-absolute subjectivism of inclination or sentiment. Just as for Kant a moral action is moral not because it follows or opposes personal inclination but because it is rationally self-determined according to the law of non-contradiction, so, too, Kierkegaard's conception of the religious cannot achieve validation as faith or piety, rather than unfaith or impiety, simply because, as in the case of Abraham who loves his son, it goes against personal inclination. An act of piety, like a moral act, could just as well *also* follow personal inclination. In the end, having

rejected any standard as merely "general," the faith of Kierkegaard is indistinguishable from personal inclination, which means it is indistinguishable from unfaith or impiety. What, after all, authorizes distinguishing clearly or even sufficiently between the eccentric particularity of a strong sentiment (whether consistent or inconsistent with one's own inclinations) and the divinely legitimized intensity of inwardly experienced singularity? Or, to put this question somewhat differently, having transcended the ethical, how does the "singular one" distinguish between the divine voice of God from the satanic voice of Satan? Did not New York City's infamous "Son of Sam" believe, as Abraham believed, that God Himself was commanding him? Has not Kafka woven artful webs of ambiguity ample enough to cloud the alleged clarity of God's command to Abraham? If, as Plato already pointed out in the *Phaedrus*, religious ecstasy is a kind of madness, how can one be certain of which kind of madness it is? Sentiment, however intense, is simply an inadequate guide or warrant for claims of divine contact.

Fine, the point is well taken, but is not Levinas, like anyone who claims a relationship to God, caught in the same dilemma? Certainly Levinas, like Kierkegaard, has also given up the mediating universality of Kantian morality. Nevertheless, Levinas does not rely on aesthetic sentiment, however intense or religiously glossed, to avoid generality and to account for the singularization of an authentically human subjectivity. Rather, for Levinas nothing is more singularizing than the ethical. In contrast to both Kant and Kierkegaard, however, the singularity of moral selfhood is not a function of individuality alone, but of sociality. By conceiving the absolute singularization of moral selfhood in conjunction with the absolute alterity of the other person Levinas cuts the Gordian knot of autonomy and heteronomy that distorted the practical and religious theorizing of Kant and Kierkegaard and of much if not most of modern philosophy. "Self and other person" constitute a relation in no way equivalent to the relation of "same and other" conceived abstractly. Neither "self" nor "other person" can be conceived from the exterior. The other person facing the self is other immediately as a moral imperative, as an obligating other obligating the responsible self – me, myself, in the first person singular. Such an alterity coming from the other is precisely what Levinas means by "the face" – the other as an immediate non-contractual obligation. Across an unbridgeable relation of "diachrony" – the irreducibly non-simultaneous - it calls forth the self as *my* responsibility. The closeness and interiority of this relation recalls the love poetry of the *Song of Songs* ("My Beloved is mine and I am my Beloved's") and the prophet Hosea's metaphor of marriage, but the obligations and responsibilities it calls forth inaugurate an ethical proximity – and the basis of



covenant - rather than an erotic intimacy. The social relation, in other words, experienced from within, is immediately an ethical relation, a relation that overburdens the very continuity of the self’s “experience,” understood as personal or objective experience, with obligations and responsibilities to and for the other.

For Levinas, then, goodness is not limited to and does not derive from obedience to a non-contradictory maxim of action, a categorical imperative or any other imperative generated as a generality, whether autonomous or heteronomous. Nor, in his view, do general imperatives become moral through appropriation via the deep internalization that Kierkegaard describes and recommends with great literary skill in his characterization of the ethical as existential duty in *Either/Or*. Certainly internalization and habit formation are important for character development, but they do not first determine the ethical significance of the ethical. And certainly, as both Levinas and Kierkegaard would agree, the ethical is lost entirely when it is suspended in the name of faith, as Kierkegaard recommends in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard is no doubt right, in *Either/Or*, in his desire to singularize the generality of the ethical, but for Levinas the ethical does not arise as a generality in the first place. Rather, goodness – the entire dimension of moral significance – first emerges as an inescapable *responsibility for the neighbor* in the proximity of the other person who nonetheless remains other even while in relation.

What Kant and Kierkegaard failed to grasp, though for different reasons, was the full significance of the *inter-subjective* character of morality. By binding moral command to the proximity of the other person, Levinas is no longer trapped in the irresolvable dilemma of having to choose between the inevitable egoism of an ethics of autonomy and the no less inevitable subservience of an ethics of heteronomy.<sup>25</sup> Precisely this dilemma, the heritage of a long rationalist tradition beginning with Plato’s *Euthyphro*, and then exacerbated in the modern period by Cartesian dualism, is the ruination of the ethical accounts of both Kant and Kierkegaard, as well as many others, including the fundamentalist theocratic interpretations of religion. It is not only ethical evaluation, ascribing praise and

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<sup>25</sup> Of Heidegger’s effort to reverse, by a “turn” to a “listening” to the “gift giving” of being, what Heidegger took to be the debilitating subjectivism of the modern technological worldview, Levinas writes the following. “Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the other person to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. Tyranny is not the pure and simple extension of technology to reified humans. Its origin lies back in the pagan ‘moods,’ in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved humans can devote to their masters.”; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 47. Levinas first gave this warning in 1934, in an article – unheeded, alas - entitled “Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” (*Esprit*, 1934).

blame, that is social but the very origination of the sphere of the ethical as such. Morality begins in responsibility for the other, a responsibility that transpires across the extraordinary "non-relating relation"<sup>26</sup> between the singularity of the morally obligating other and the singularity of the morally obliged self. To say that the sphere of the ethical as such arises socially means, therefore, that the self does not somehow originate morality on its own, but it also does not mean, and this is crucial, that the moral self is absorbed by or ecstatically lost in its social relations. The moral self at once social, fissured by the other-in-me, and asocial, as elected to its own responsibility. Precisely this unique conjunction of terms, rather, of human beings – the obligating other and the responsible self - who are asymmetrically both in relation and out of relation, produces the very upsurge of the ethical.

Returning to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. It is precisely to this extraordinary non-relating relation that Levinas refers when he applauds the "sufficient distance" of Abraham. Let us recall what Levinas has written: "That he [Abraham] obeyed the first voice is astonishing, that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice – this is the essential." Certainly, that someone obeys a voice that commands murder is astonishing. We are astonished – morally aghast - that a moral person, especially Abraham, – who, according to the *Midrash*, taught that human sacrifice specifically is evil and forbidden – would reject the most fundamental imperative of morality: Thou shall not murder. Nothing could be more outrageous, and not only because it shreds Abraham's love for his son Isaac as well as God's promise that through Isaac the Jewish people will be blessed and flourish. Both Socrates and the Talmud teach that one should chose to be murdered rather than to commit murder ("dreading murder more than death" – Levinas's expression<sup>27</sup>). But such a prospect is also astonishing in another sense altogether. An impression such as astonishment is an appropriate response to an aesthetic experience, especially the overwhelming experience of the sublime. A spectacular sunrise or sunset, a handsome man or a beautiful woman is or can be astonishing, astounding and breathtaking. As aesthetic phenomena they are appreciated in wonder and exhilaration. These are the feelings that Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement* distinguishes as aesthetic insofar as they are

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 295: "The interlocutor can have no place in an inwardness; he is forever outside. The relationship between separated beings does not totalize them; it is a 'non-relating relation,' which no one can encompass or thematize. Or more exactly, he who would think it, who would totalize it, would by this 'reflection' mark a new scission in being, since he would still tell this total to someone. The relation between the 'fragments' of separated being is a face to face, the irreducible and ultimate relation."

<sup>27</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 246.

"disinterested," not because they are uninteresting, but rather because they are so interesting that they transport the self beyond its ordinary self-interests. Nevertheless, in the story of Abraham and Isaac, and this is the point, the transport and exhilaration of aesthetic *wonder*, however dignified, solemnized or uplifting it may be, remains a far cry from the more pressing demands of genuine *reverence*.<sup>28</sup> Reverence for the humanity of Isaac trumps any aesthetic astonishment. "It is not I who resist the system," Levinas writes, "as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other."<sup>29</sup> But neither is it my *respect* for the law in the other that resists the system; "it is the other" – the other's ethical height and destitution and the reverence manifest as my ethical response.

Our fellow human beings are not simply aesthetic spectacles, more or less fascinating masks of the manifestation of being. Although they can certainly be taken this way, and in the arts and athletics (and apparently also in "fundamental ontology"), that is how they are taken – but only up to a point. The game stops when an athlete is injured. The play stops when an actor suffers a heart attack. Our fellow human beings, unlike aesthetic phenomena, are from the first persons who are mortal and suffer, who are vulnerable, in need of food, clothing, shelter, medication, education, comfort, good humor, compassion and justice. That Mercutio, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is stabbed, bleeding and dying "for real," is of a completely different order, and exerts a completely different exigency upon his friends and enemies, than were he merely stabbed, bleeding and dying as theatrical artifice. It is this difference that makes for all the poignancy of his misunderstood dying words. And in fact he is only stabbed, bleeding and dying in Shakespeare's play, as one sees again and again with each theatrical production - and not, thank God, for real! Human beings are human – real, singular, demanding - because they are morally demanding. The face of the other is not first a mask or spectacle to be enjoyed or recorded. The desperate people who jumped to their deaths from the World Trade Center on September 11th were not play-acting or performing. Our hearts went out to them and broke because forced only to watch, whether there on the streets of lower Manhattan or on television, we could not save them or help them. The first relation of a human I to another human I, you and me, in other words, is not astonishment or wonder, but *responsibility*. Even to refuse the other person, Levinas notes, to treat the other instrumentally or as an aesthetic spectacle, to remain indifferent or even

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<sup>28</sup> On the distinction between wonder and reverence, see the challenging book by Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1947), originally published in 1919.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 40. I have previously written on "reverence" in my book, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xiv.

amused by their peril and pain, is possible precisely because the human I is first and foremost a responsibility for others. It is precisely this responsibility that singularizes each person, such that no one else but the moral self – me, uniquely – can be the one, the one and only, here and now, who is called upon to respond to the other who faces. Furthermore, such responsibility, the singularization effected through self-sacrifice, has no internal limit, goes all the way, in life’s most extreme trials – God forbid - to dying for another. Or, less dramatically, it means living for a future that is not one’s own but others’.

Here lies the meaning of Abraham’s “sufficient distance.” The human self is singularized not in the self-protection and self-reference of a fortress ego, even if the significance of that self-referral were to be rooted in and to issue from the very bowels of being or the height of an ostensive divine intervention. For the human self there is no escape from responsibility for the other person and for all others, only giving or refusal. One cannot bury oneself deep enough in being or its poetry to be deaf to – to be unaccountable for - the cries of those who suffer, even if one ignores them. The *human* self is the ego “turned inside out,” as Levinas writes, “for the other” before itself. No voice, divine, natural or human, can – or should - override and overrule the appeal of the neighbor.<sup>30</sup> It is to precisely this priority of the neighbor that Isaiah points in conveying God’s own rejection of prayer offered at the expense of morality. The “humanity of the human” – morality - arises in this priority, this *non-indifference* to the moral “height and destitution” of the other person. It is to this non-indifference, turning the self inside out for the other, so Levinas suggests, that the Bible refers when it says “And an angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham” (*Genesis*, 22:11). From “out of heaven” would refer to the height of morality and the “angelic will” that never, unlike the human will, refuses the other in any circumstances. But more to the point is the double name, “Abraham, Abraham.” The same name twice for one person - this *emphasis* marks the distance and unity of the moral singularity of a self non-indifferent to the other. The real sacrifice is not Isaac, but Abraham as self-sacrifice, as moral subjectivity. Abraham passes his test – the test of *emunah* (“faith,” “trust,” “steadfastness”) in God - when by not murdering Isaac he comes to his true self, the self for the other before itself. Such is the true self, the singular self to which Abraham rises: self as completely turned inside out for the other. “To love the neighbor as thyself” is equivalent to becoming “Abraham, Abraham,” self as

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<sup>30</sup> Precisely this is the rabbinical gloss on *Genesis* 18:1-2, where Abraham (Abraham again!), himself convalescing, breaks off his direct relationship with God Himself, “raises his eyes,” and runs to help three completely unknown strangers who approach from the desert, perhaps in need of water, food and shelter from the hot sun.

love of the neighbor. Invisible to the external eye, visible to God alone, the Bible, by its right as sacred text in this way signifies the "fission" or "diachrony" – "scission in being" - of the true self.

This distance, the self as a subversion of the very distinction between inner and outer, the self-for-the-other-before-itself, and not some dazed and blinded faith, is the true "fear of God" (*Genesis 22:12*) to which Abraham rises. Between the natural self and the human self there is an irrecoverable rupture, the enigmatic intervention or excellence of transcendence. Superior to the ontological difference, to the seductive murmuring of the being of beings, there is traced in ethical difference "God who comes to mind" ("*Dieu qui vient a l'idee*").<sup>31</sup> Abraham "has not withheld" (*Genesis 22:12*) his only son from God not because he would, like an abject slave, "do anything," even murder, but precisely because – in a higher obedience to God - Abraham will *not* murder his fellow human being. Only in this way does he obey God and pass the ultimate test, rising to his proper humanity. Contrary to Kierkegaard, and despite all his literary indirection, we spectators can never know and will never know Abraham's true plan of action. We cannot read minds and hearts. The interiority of Abraham's inwardness, his separation, his independence, remains impervious to mere human understanding. But we do know, as the narration informs us, that he did not kill his son. Nothing would be more animal and less human than to murder, and we know, from his actions, here and elsewhere, that Abraham is a man of kindness, compassion, love of the neighbor. Only God can see this inward glory, this surplus, and - such is the unique privilege of a Holy Scripture – only God can announce such a claim publicly through the mouth of an angel. Abraham in rising to his moral self has momentarily achieved an "angelic will," the self turned inside out for the other.<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, in contrast, builds his alternative interpretation on an insight that he cannot possibly have unless he *usurps* the place of God, which is precisely what his interpretation – following a long tradition of philosophical hubris - ultimately requires.

Not only is Abraham's act morally good and in obedience to the will of a benevolent God, it is also just. For as far as we know Isaac has committed no capital offense and, regardless of his possible crimes and his possible guilt or innocence, Isaac certainly has not been tried, convicted and sentenced by a duly constituted court of law – a judicial procedure which God Himself requires. For this, too, as the Bible makes perfectly clear and as Kierkegaard conveniently

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<sup>31</sup> See, Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> On the "angelic will," selfhood completely for-the-other, see the perceptive article of Georges Hansel, "*Nous le ferons et nous écouterons*," in Georges Hansel, *Explorations talmudiques* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1998), pp. 89-96.

ignores, is an unsurpassable prerequisite of justice. Here, then, is justice based in morality, and morality based in religious conscience and conscientiousness, in an invisible yet manifest relation – a “trace,” or what the rabbis called a “hint” - to transcendence, to an absolute God who “absolves” Himself, as Levinas says, from the very relation He commands. All three dimensions – justice, morality and piety - are summed up by the prophet Micah (*Micah*, 6:8): “What does the Lord require of you: only to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.” The whole of Levinas’s philosophy – and perhaps the whole of Judaism - is but a commentary to this verse.

Because the purely religious aspect of the ethical, its piety, is inward, as Kierkegaard rightly saw but interpreted arrogantly, because it is hidden, invisible, the inner and underlying “miracle” of conscience, it can always be dismissed and written off *from the outside*. Self-sacrifice can always appear selfish, or be made to appear selfish. Kant, too, in a remarkable insight, understood that the whole of morality is invisible to empirical judgement “through the ambiguity into which it easily falls.”<sup>33</sup> What Levinas calls “holy history” – traced, hinted at, revealed in the intimations of sacred and literary renderings - is the inner invisible history of humanity whose “glory” is invariably diminished if not lost entirely in an exclusive reliance on the verifiable documented history of the historiographers. We see Isaac bound. We see Abraham’s uplifted arm. We see the knife in his hand. God alone sees Abraham’s heart. The genuine impact of conscience, the guiding influence of Socrates’ “*daemon*,”<sup>34</sup> for instance, and the irreducible transcendence to which it responds, is always subject to reductive naturalization. The Bible is fully aware of such secularization, in what Levinas will call the “risk of atheism” essential to religion. One could attribute Abraham’s morality and justice to the convenient appearance of “a ram caught in the thicket by his horns” (*Exodus*, 22:13). Or, to take the most famous biblical instance, one can if one wishes attribute the splitting of the Sea of Reeds to the “strong east wind” (*Exodus*, 14:21) that the Bible itself does not neglect to mention - rather than to the God to whom the Jews immediately afterwards gratefully sing praises, to Him who is

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<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), Section Two. “In fact there is absolutely no possibility by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action that may in other respects conform to duty has rested solely on moral grounds and on the representation of one’s duty. ... There cannot with certainty be at all inferred from this that some secret impulse of self-love, merely appearing as the idea of duty, was not the actual determining cause of the will. We like to flatter ourselves with the false claim to a more noble motive; but in fact we can never, even by the strictest examination, completely plumb the depths of the secret incentives of our actions.” (p. 407).

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 39e-40c.

simultaneously "glorious in power" (*Exodus*, 15:6) and "glorious in holiness" (*Exodus*, 15: 11). Morality and even more, if it is possible to speak this way, the revelation that is its ultimate source, cannot be videotaped. One can neither be forced to be moral nor can one be forced to acknowledge morality. In the eyes of humanity, therefore, virtue is its own reward, just as vice, too, is its own punishment, for the egoist must live in an egoist world.<sup>35</sup>

These considerations bring us to Levinas's final observation, cited above, that Kierkegaard nowhere considers the biblical story (*Genesis*, 18:17-33) of Abraham's dialogue with God in which he "intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of the just who may be present there." Morality demands mercy – or what Aristotle calls "decency"<sup>36</sup> - from justice, to prevent justice from losing sight of the human face of the other, of the vulnerability and suffering of the other for whom one and all are responsible. The self can be moral toward the other, but that very morality demands also morality for all others, demands justice, that is to say, for the one who is near and for those who are far. Just as society is hardly constituted by the intimacy of the erotic, neither is it constituted solely by the proximity of morality. The society of two is not the society of many or of all. Human relations are proximate and distant, multiple and many layered. Again one can deny the claim of humanity, of justice, on Abraham. One can argue that Abraham's defense of Sodom and Gomorrah is mere special pleading for his nephew Lot who resides there. One can be blind to morality and justice, attributing selfishness and ideology where there is selflessness and objectivity. But it is for the righteous who may be in those doomed cities that Abraham pleads and for whom God responds – no mention is made of Lot. Justice calls for measure, for equity and equality, for the order of law, not for oneself, not for one's neighbor alone, but for all others. In the larger human world, and in the various communities that make up that world, good and evil cannot be left to the determinations of the individual conscience. Perhaps in a perfect world, in another world ruled directly by the One God, a world to come (*olam ha'bah*), but not in this world (*olam ha'zeh*) under God is morality equivalent to justice.

Justice, as we have indicated, demands equity, quantification, impersonal law, compensation, judicial appeal, discretion and sanctions. Judges, bound by law, must decide in each case what, for instance, is the monetary compensation

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<sup>35</sup> See, my article, "To Love God for Nothing: Levinas and Spinoza," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2 – Vol. 21, No. 1, 1998, pp. 339-352.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 5, ch. 10. "The decent is just, but is not legally just, but a rectification of it. This is because all law is universal, but in some areas no universal rule can be correct. ... And this is the nature of the decent – rectification of law insofar as the universality of law makes it deficient." 1137b13-1137b28, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

for a wrongly lost eye, tooth or hand.<sup>37</sup> Precisely how many righteous individuals make a city of wickedness worth preserving? Is it fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty or perhaps only ten? Here is Abraham's famous and courageous defense of Sodom and Gomorrah. To each appeal of Abraham, made in the name of justice, God answers in the affirmative: yes, these would be enough, fifty, forty-five... even only ten. But there are not even ten righteous individuals in Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham finally no longer challenges God's decree in the name of God's own justice. Perhaps God would have preserved these wicked cities for the sake of only one righteous individual? We do not know, for the Bible provides no final number. The vision of a directly divine justice remains essentially hidden from human view. The demand for precise numbers, however, the specification and refinement of the laws of justice, is the great task of humanity in its long march toward the establishment of real freedom in an imperfect world. It is clear that even in the case of divine judgement the scales of justice are tempered with a considerable weight of mercy. Mercy or compassion is the concern that justice must have for the singular individual as a moral agent in a social context requiring regulation.

How much more precision and how many more precautions, therefore, does mercy require of merely *human* justice! Justice is a human and not merely a Jewish matter. Or, one could equally say, it is a Jewish matter because it is a human matter. Justice always includes "the stranger." The Bible in its holy audacity goes even further: it is the non-Jewish monotheist Jethro who instructs his son-in-law Moses, in the latter's capacity as judge of Israel, of the need for an entire system of courts. There must be lower courts, appellate courts and a Supreme Court – "for this thing is too heavy for you, you are not able to perform it yourself alone" (*Exodus* 17:13-26). "Too heavy" for Moses, who is daily in direct contact with God, and whose face radiates holiness! The rabbis, the "teachers" of Israel, to this very day - for this is of the essence of the Talmudic mentality - continue the process of judicial refinement begun in the Bible, guarding all judicial proceedings, and capital cases above all, with elaborate, exacting, deliberative legal procedures of accusation, prosecution, testimony, defense and evidence. To be sure, God's own justice remains inscrutable, forever beyond human comprehension (*Genesis* 33:13). But God's justice on earth, the justice of the God who commands the ethical religions, is found nowhere else than in the meticulous proceedings of human courts - the very same courts that are instituted and protected and sanctioned by the state. These lessons regarding justice and mercy, as Levinas has said, are nowhere found in Kierkegaard's

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<sup>37</sup> Such is the classical rabbinical interpretation of the infamous "law of talon" (*Exodus* 21:23-25).



account of a religion that requires only sentimental faith and blind submission. For Judaism, in any event, and this seems to hold also for all the ethical religions, the holiness of God – for believers and for all humanity – is upheld in a partnership of “trust” (*emunah*) and “covenant” (*bris*). God is no less God – indeed he is precisely God - for obeying the strictures of justice.

Holiness itself is traced in the high exigency of a moral responsibility for the neighbor that requires, for its own extension, the disinterested application of laws that are just for the neighbor and the stranger alike. Just as the trace of God “appears” in love of the neighbor, the justice of God is found in the courts of humankind.

### **IX. Theocracy, Secularism and the Monotheist Risk of Atheism**

This view of holiness, however, has always been challenged by a certain strain within religion known today under the label “fundamentalism.” It is a perspective that insists exclusively on an anthropomorphic or onto-theological interpretation of God as the personal and direct Ruler of the universe. From within the limits of such a point of view, the ethics and politics of Levinas appear to be merely secular rather than religious, insofar as Levinas understands the *public* and *communicable* face of God to be manifest in the imperatives of morality and justice. While there can be no doubt that Levinas’s understanding of Judaism is firmly grounded in, supported by, and is indeed a prolongation of a long prophetic and exegetical tradition, nonetheless the fundamentalist interpretation of religion manages to read the same texts and tradition quite differently. Obsessed not with the alterity of fellow humans, but with the infinite alterity of God, its aim is to substitute *personal witness*, or direct contact with God, for any understanding of holiness that insists rather on the human elaboration of social morality and political justice. Levinas’s ethics and politics are in this way conflated and lumped together with certain Enlightenment reformulations of Judaism that were indeed products of secularization. If for the moment we think of proper *social* manifestation of relationship with God according to Aristotle’s scheme of the mean, then according to Levinas social morality and political justice would be the mean, atheism would be the deficiency and theocracy the excess. So there should be little surprise that the excess, in this case a theocratic outlook, precisely because it is blinded by its extremity, misinterprets both the deficiency and the mean and considers them to

be one and the same danger. That is, it takes Levinas's morality and justice to be merely secular or atheist.

We have seen that messianic humanism is subject to the same misperception from the side of atheism, which lumps Levinas's covenant religion with theocracy. Those who are outside of religion altogether and who oppose it likewise insist that the religion they oppose must necessarily be fundamentalist and theocratic. Mirroring the distorted excess of fundamentalism, this deficiency makes a no less simplistic conflation, but now equating ethical or covenants religion with theocracy. Thus, ironically, fundamentalists and secularists agree that the religion they support or oppose can only be fundamentalist. From the atheist perspective, then, and not surprisingly, it follows that Levinas's conception of ethics and politics must be theocratic.

Such are the natural distortions that spring from the simplifications of extremist views, whether religious or atheist. The extremism of theocracy derives from the infinity of a heteronomous God; the extremism of secularism derives from the indefiniteness of an autonomous humanity. The truth, however, is that Levinas's politics are neither theocratic nor secular because, as has already been demonstrated, Levinas rejects any exclusively anthropomorphic or onto-theological interpretation of God - the basis of fundamentalism - as itself a mystification of genuine religion. Indeed, for Levinas, it is precisely this superstitious form of religion that, on the religious front, Judaism specifically aims to eradicate. Judaism, for Levinas, is the anti-idolatrous religion par excellence.

Still, given the political forces active in today's world, it seems to me that we must give further consideration to the claim that Levinas's ethics and politics are, despite his own claims, merely secular and atheist, yet another Enlightenment reduction of Judaism. Even in academia, where Levinas's writings are most discussed, one finds the prevalence of this deficient understanding of religion, an insistence that all religion is fundamentalist. Certain citations from Levinas's own texts are selected out of context to defend this reading. A few examples will suffice to show this misreading. First, from *Totality and Infinity*, to show the loss of divine transcendence by means of a secular moralization typical of the Enlightenment reformers, secularists and fundamentalists would invoke a citation we have quoted above. Namely, "Everything that cannot be reduced to an inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion."<sup>38</sup> What this citation does confirm, however, is not Levinas's rejection of religion, but rather and precisely his unequivocal rejection of its fundamentalist interpretation. It rejects

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<sup>38</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79.

– as immoral and unjust - the legitimacy of any social and political intervention based on a direct or unmediated divine order, including, of course, those orders allegedly heard by Kierkegaard’s knight of faith. The moral and juridical legitimacy of society and politics depends not on orders given directly by God, however loud the trumpets may sound, but rather on an already established and permanently effective *covenant* between God and humanity. “The Torah,” Judaism says, “has been given” – and it says this to God Himself! This does not, however, freeze religion into a once and for all given eternal mold, as if time and history were meaningless. Messianic politics is precisely the continual refinement of divine covenant, in the diverse forms it takes in a pluralist world, as a call to justice guided by moral imperatives. To put the matter in its simplest terms, God acts in history when humans are moral to one another and when they protect, preserve and encourage that morality through the rule of just laws and institutions. God Himself, were He to try somehow to act as an agent in this world, would not be above His own moral and juridical order as elaborated in human language and institutions. Morality and justice, one might say, are the continual and difficult miracle of God in history – what Levinas calls “holy history.” To be sure, the holiness of God, preserved in religious ritual with its moral and juridical teachings, has not yet been fully accomplished on earth. But its accomplishment is a matter of time and history, not radical intervention. This understanding of God’s role in society and politics will not satisfy the puerile imagination of a religiously immature humanity, or, apparently, of a narrowly secular criticism of religion. God – so is the rejoinder - demands more of humanity than childishness and narrowness. He demands nothing less than righteousness: love of neighbor, just laws and institutions.

What the fundamentalist reading fails or fears to understand, or rather, what it fails to tolerate, is the *risk of atheism* that is an inherent component of monotheist politics and religion. Only beings able to deny God can accept God. Only a God respecting morality and justice is a true God. Only beings created with the capacity for immorality and injustice, able to refuse as well as to welcome their fellow human beings, are capable of morality and justice. For humanity to be capable of rising to righteousness the *integrity* of each person and of all persons must be respected. Here again what we see is the essential classical liberal character of Levinas’s perspective. Based in ethics rather than natural law, in defending the integrity of the individual, he is defending what classical liberalism called the “inalienable rights” of humanity. Certainly these “rights” can be abrogated, and of course they are repressed time and again. That, too, is the risk taken by monotheist religion. But their abrogation is not tolerated precisely in the name of a moral subjectivity infinitely subject to the neighbor.

Again it is a matter of that infinitesimal yet infinite "distance" splitting and uniting "Abraham, Abraham": the other person in the self, the self for the other before itself. Fundamentalism, *whether religious or atheist*, in contrast, fails to take the pluralism of God's own *creation* seriously, reducing it, as far as humans are concerned, to a puppet show whose strings remain firmly in God's masterful hands. In the case of the atheists, of course, God's firm hands are replaced by the no less firm (and usually far more severe) hands of the all-powerful state.

What these critics of religion fail to grasp, whether seduced by the irresponsibility an impossible providence or a naturalized freedom, is that the morality of a beneficent God requires that humans be free independent beings. Freedom is not illusion or mirage. It is not negation or fault. Only an independent being can take responsibility and take responsibility seriously. For humans to be independent beings, their status as sensuous individuals, spontaneous beings "in-the-world" can neither be theologically nor ideologically compromised and reduced away as illusory. Human dignity, in a word, is a function neither of God nor the state. The "problem of free will" is not, as fundamentalist theology fears, that it challenges God's absoluteness, but rather that it makes that absoluteness possible – as risk - on earth. It is not, as totalitarian ideology fears, that it challenges the efficacy of politics, but rather than it acknowledges the limits and sources of the political. Without the risk of atheism, that is to say, there would be no subjectivity capable of bearing the "non-allergic" relation with transcendence that impels the morality that is the public face of religion and the goal of just politics. "Only an atheist being," Levinas writes, "can relate himself to the other and already *absolve himself* from this relation."<sup>39</sup> The human self neither absorbs the other nor does the other absorb the self, nor is it locked in a war to the death of such mutual absorption, as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hegel and Sartre seem to believe.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the genuine self is one that is capable of taking responsibility for the other. The freedom of such a self is what Levinas calls "finite freedom" or "difficult freedom."

Here we are not raising the specter of the ironic self-defeating intellectual atheism Nietzsche pointed to in the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, that of the scientist whose pure and scrupulous "will to truth" requires that he or she deny the existence of God. Yes, a certain God must be denied: an overpowering all-absorbing Master who usurps all freedom for Himself. Such is not the God of monotheism in any event. Rather, in the "risk of atheism" alone one takes

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<sup>39</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> I am referring, of course, to the famous discussion of the "Master and Slave" dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and to Sartre's logically necessary assertion, given the abstract dichotomy of "being-for-itself" and "being-in-itself" that determines the existentialism elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*, that "Hell is other people."

seriously the very pluralism of a divinely created humanity, each person an independent being, capable of separation from others and from the world – created “in the image and likeness of God,” but not as a God or a slave. It is to take seriously God’s creation – the paradoxical conjunction of the many that comes from the one without being equivalent to the one - of the human even in its relation to God. “Faith purged of myth, the monotheist faith,” Levinas writes, “itself implies metaphysical atheism. Revelation is discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required. Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with a true God.”<sup>41</sup> The creation coming from a monotheist God is not *ersatz*, a vanishing trick that takes back with one hand what the other hand only appears to give. As Franz Rosenzweig understood very well, resisting the all-embracing globalization of the Hegelian Concept, creation, though coming from God, is independent of God. Morality and justice, then, are a returning to the God who is irreducibly transcendent. God does not reabsorb the individual, stripping away the singularity of each and thereby undoing the very pluralism that is the mark of creation. Rather than obliterate the singularity of the individual, the monotheist God demands not an impossible union – whether with Himself or with nature - but righteousness, “love of the neighbor,” the fission of the natural self – “Abraham, Abraham” – turned inside out for the other in moral obligation and responsibility. “The atheism of the metaphysician,” Levinas continues, “means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology.”<sup>42</sup> Creation is concretely enacted in human morality and justice.

It is on this basis, grounded in the irreducible and singular relation of moral beings to one another, protecting, preserving and enhancing this relation, that Levinas can write that: “God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto humans.”<sup>43</sup> It is this justice and this morality that are supported by genuine monotheist religion through the difficult everyday choices and tasks of messianic politics. Precisely the divinely ordained mediating labors of this politics – covenant - are discounted and denied by the fundamentalist misinterpretation of religion. And this is true whether the latter is held by those persons who claim to be religious by exclusively supporting a theocracy, or by those persons who claim to be secular and anti-religious by exclusively opposing and thereby upholding the very same theocracy. “Metaphysics,” Levinas writes, “is enacted in ethical relations.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78. Again, for the radical difference and apparent similarity that such an idea has with Spinoza, see note 27 above.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79.

Finally, this perspective enables us to understand the new support that Levinas’s philosophy gives to the individual liberties that underlie classical liberal politics. It enables us to make and uphold yet another distinction regarding the character of the just state. F. A. Hayek, in his incisive book of 1944, *The Road to Serfdom*, distinguishes the just or liberal state from the doctrinaire or totalitarian state.<sup>45</sup> Of the latter he writes:

The state ceases to be a piece of utilitarian machinery intended to help individuals in the fullest development of their individual personality and becomes a “moral” institution – where “moral” is not used in contrast to immoral, but describes an institution which imposes on its members its views on all moral questions, whether these views be moral or highly immoral. In this sense the Nazi or any other collectivist state is “moral,” while the liberal state is not.<sup>46</sup>

Of course Hayek’s terminology is not Levinas’s. What Hayek calls the state’s “utilitarian machinery” we would call its “utopianism,” its aiming beyond itself. What Hayek broadly understands as its ground and its goal, “individuals in the fullest development of their personality,” Levinas would specify more precisely as moral selfhood, the compassionate “for-the-other” character of righteousness. Of course the term “moral” when “not used in contrast to immoral” is not moral at all. The state, then, through the impartial rule of law serves justice, which in turn serves social morality, not by forcing individuals to be moral, but by allowing, preserving and enhancing the greatest possible moral development of individuals in their social relations.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, in certain instances, the state, through its sanctions, will enable certain regulatory organizations beyond the scope of a society of morally striving individuals, organizations designed to protect the environment, provide security, ensure economic fairness, medical standards and welfare services. Still, despite its necessary interventions, the state is not the source of justice or morality, but must be judged according to whether

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<sup>45</sup> F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944).

<sup>46</sup> Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 57.

<sup>47</sup> This is what Aristotle recommends, in the last chapter (9) of the last book (10) of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, when he is moving from a discussion of ethics to a discussion of politics. “It is difficult, however, for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under correct laws; for the many, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live in a temperate and resistant way. That is why laws must prescribe their upbringing and practices, for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them. ... For, clearly, attention by the community works through laws, and decent attention works through excellent laws.” (1179b32-35 and 1180a35), trans. Terence Irwin.

it is just. Its justice is *judged* according to whether it enhances or diminishes morality. In this way ethical-religious justice utopian politics, the messianic politics that Levinas supports, is nothing other than a rethinking of the grounds – in view of the extra-ordinary structure of the ethical face-to-face - of the politics of the liberal state with its respect for individual liberty.

## X. The "Beyond Politics"

Let us ask, finally, in what way politics so conceived stands in relation to a "beyond" not only as the as yet unachieved justice toward which it works daily, but in relation to what Levinas calls the "beyond politics." Or, to raise this same question in different terms: Why, in referring to the unachieved of a politics of justice, does Levinas prefer the religious language of *messianic* politics? What does the term "messianism," which calls to mind a *Messiah* or at least a *messianic age*, add when applied to politics that the usual language of "idealism" lacks? In what way is the path to justice not simply the realization of an ideal? What is the true meaning, we are really asking, of the utopianism of political utopianism?

It is a matter of means, ends and the significance of history. In contrast to a political idealism that claims to know both the means to and the ideal toward which it aims, messianism, a term explicitly taken from religious discourse, opens out upon an *unforeseeable*, novel and unpredictable future. "The sage." Levinas says in an important lecture on politics entitled "Beyond the State in the State" delivered in 1988, "is not defined in *Pirke Avot* [*Wisdom of the Fathers* or *Ethical Principles*] as knowing beforehand what will happen."<sup>48</sup> By recognizing a break between the present and the future, messianic politics submits to a radical caution or humility regarding the means – ultimately the coercive practices - appropriate to a politics of justice. While it knows where it is going, toward justice, it does not precisely know, in the face of contingent history, how to get there or where precisely it will end up. In the face of the irreversibility of time and the novelty of the future, it admits an essential humility regarding the manner in which politics of the present is capable of transcending itself toward the future.

What is at stake in such a consideration is the status and role of history, the nature of historical progress, the proper relation between the justice sought and the present struggle against injustice. It is because the politics of today involves a necessary but unwanted coercion that the politics of justice, both

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<sup>48</sup> Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings*, p. 000.

messianic and idealist, advances toward its elimination. The question, then, is whether we have today a real or imaginary vision of the post-political justice of tomorrow. Idealist politics and messianic politics are distinguished insofar as the former claims to know today the better world of tomorrow, while messianic politics precisely insists that tomorrow cannot be foreseen today. “Must we underline the current relevance,” Levinas says in his 1988 lecture, “of this difference between rationality, ‘reading the future in the present,’ and the wisdom that still learns from every new human face? In the first, the sage is exposed to ideology, to the abstractions of totalitarianism; it can lead from ‘scientific socialism’ to Stalinism. The sage of the second wisdom” – of monotheist or messianic politics – “is not immobilized in a system, resists cruel abstractions, can be renewed, and is open to each new encounter.”<sup>49</sup> Despite its self-righteous clairvoyance regarding today’s wrongs, it is not by accident that political idealism has very little to tell in fact, indeed has almost nothing concrete at all to tell about the world of tomorrow. Yet for the sake of that world about which it knows both too much and too little, political idealism is nevertheless more than willing to sacrifice the world of today.

For both messianic and idealist politics, the political fulfillment of justice would produce a society that foregoes coercive political oversight. The idealists, however, despite a complete lack of specificity, act as if they *already* know today what that society of tomorrow will be like. Spinoza, for instance, aims at a post-political humanity made just through the acquisition of scientific knowledge. In his *Theological-Political Treatise* he writes: “Now if men were so constituted by nature as to desire nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, Spinoza believes that few people are so constituted and hence that a prudential politics must indoctrinate and control the passionate masses for the sake of those happy few. The presuppositions of such a view are elaborated in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, where “true reason” is fully grasped once and for all *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>51</sup> But what

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<sup>49</sup> Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings*, p. 000.

<sup>50</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapter 5; in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), p. 438.

<sup>51</sup> It matters not that “knowledge of the second kind” – the ongoing scientific process of discovering all adequate ideas – is as yet incomplete, because such discovery is guided and predetermined by the eternal verities intuited by “knowledge of the third kind” – “the intellectual love of God,” as Spinoza also calls it. I take the latter to be Spinoza’s *Ethics* itself, the complete comprehension of the comprehensive scientific framework within which the ongoing efforts of scientific knowing plies its trade. God, in contrast to humans, has complete knowledge of both the second and third kinds. Let me add that I do not for a moment believe that Spinoza’s *Ethics* is what it claims to be, namely, the mind of God (“the love of God wherewith God loves himself”), or that Hegel’s *Logic* is anything of the sort either. And this is precisely because it *does* matter



is Spinoza able to say concretely about a fully scientific humanity? God only knows. Michael Bakunin, less sanguine than Spinoza about the possible intellectual advancement of the masses, advocates the same politics of science. In *God and the State*, he writes: "Once they ["the natural laws connected with the development of human society"] shall have been recognized by science, and then from science, by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction, shall have passed into the consciousness of all, ... then there will be no need either of political organization or direction or legislation."<sup>52</sup> It sounds lovely, but how can he be certain that the science of today will produce the wonderful scientific humanity of tomorrow independent of the historical developments that will lead from today to tomorrow? Of course there are also romantic versions of the same idealist politics, as in Rousseau. In all such cases, however, idealist politics relies on a presumptive *knowledge* today that without alteration is to determine the society of tomorrow.

The advocates of political idealism always *already* know the end, the ideal, toward which the abolition of politics is a mere means. It is precisely this presumption of knowledge, binding tomorrow to today, reducing novelty to a system, which explains why instead of vanishing, the politics of idealism always becomes more rather than less coercive. It is not difficult to grasp this mechanism of idealist repression. As the novelties of the future require the revision of past perspectives, any rigid adherence to outdated visions, no matter how visionary they may once have appeared, must increasingly resort to coercion to maintain themselves in the face of new knowledge and changed circumstances. In a word, political idealism aims to imprison the future in what necessarily becomes an outmoded past. However much it claims to derive from historical analysis of the past, it simply does not and cannot take account of a time and history that have yet to occur. But then, let us ask in the face of this repressive over-confidence, is the alternative a merely situational ethics and a groundless relativist "justice"? In providing a different answer, by following a middle way, we come to see the virtue of messianic politics: it avoids the repressive ahistorical straightjacket of idealism without succumbing, on the other side, to the delirium of historicism.

Certainly, as we have seen, the political messianism to which Levinas subscribes is neither shackled by Spinoza's elitism nor enthused by Bakunin's optimism, for it does not overestimate present society's capacity to do without a

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that, to use Spinoza's language, "knowledge of the second kind" is not "knowledge of the third kind." But this opens another discussion for another time.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*, trans. Benjamin Tucker (New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 29-30. Agree or disagree, this small book – unfinished as are all of Bakunin's writings – is a penetrating polemic against religion, monotheism in particular.

supplemental political supervision. Certainly, too, the political task of justice entails not the immediate elimination of politics but its progressive *harmonization* with its moral ground, a ground that finds its ultimate and absolute support, as we have seen, in religion. A messianic politics labors toward a polity whose justice increases in the measure that it enables and enhances moral and religious life. In view of the post-political programs of political idealism, does this not mean that the labor of messianic politics is no less guided, especially given the intimate and inextricable relation between ethics and religion, by the presence of a static and hence eventually repressive vision of the "beyond politics"? The answer is both yes and no. The answer is "yes" because the genuine ideal of a just politics, its regulatory standard, is precisely to establish a society where everyone can be moral without hindrance. In this idealist and messianic politics agree. In this messianic politics has a genuine vision. But the answer is "no" at the same time, and most importantly, because messianic politics, unlike idealist politics, does not *already* have a complete plan of how to get from here to there, or of what a just world would be like. It acknowledges – and the very term "messianic" captures this – that there is an essential and unbridgeable rupture between the historical present and its completion in a just politics. It acknowledges, in other words, that politics has to do with people, and people create their own future. To aim for justice is in no way to succumb to the blind groping of historicism, but neither is it the mere filling in of a predetermined plan, a plan that is always only today's plan.

A just politics is *messianic* rather than idealistic because, while it knows the direction toward which it aims, it does not claim to have now a complete knowledge of what that end will be like. Politics, like morality itself, has no all-encompassing "bird's eye" view of the sort that philosophers and theologians have attributed to *God* or *Geist*, and therefore for themselves, as if the human adventure were merely a puppet show to whose script they somehow had privileged access. Messianic politics frankly admits the impossibility of having a complete plan for getting from here to there, from now to then. In conformity to the novelty of time and history, it provides as best guidance as it can, but no necessity. Because the future remains open, it remains humble. It takes seriously, as idealism does not, the independence of the individual and the uniqueness of history. There can be no plan today for a new tomorrow precisely because the novelty of tomorrow renders today's plans obsolete – *otherwise God's own creation, the world of history, the temporal world, would be illusory*. Messianic politics, in contrast to idealist politics, then, takes place, time and people seriously, not seeing in history the fulfillment of a preordained pattern. Messianic politics, contrary to misconceptions that have become popular,

precisely because it is ultimately grounded in the transcendence of God and the integrity of His creation, cannot believe in *theodicy*. Unlike idealist politics, which claims to know both the end and the means, it is a politics neither of resignation nor of presumption, but a difficult freedom that struggles every day to both maintain and create itself

Because the conception of messianic politics that I am presenting here does not fit the mold of popular misconceptions, I want to pause for a moment to call attention to one of its great virtues. Far from aiming for the religious intolerance and tyranny that its anti-religious opponents imagine when they hear the word "messianic," and equally far from the same intolerance and tyranny toward which the misguided advocates of theocratic politics unfortunately do aim, *messianic* politics involves an essential and unsurpassable *humility*. That the goal of just politics *transcends* politics indicates not only that a fully moral society has not yet been achieved, but also that the very nature of a fully moral society exceeds any present conception. What do we really know, after all, about a fully just society? Of "messianic times," only a few very general notions have ever been proposed and even fewer have been accepted. In the normative tradition of Judaism, for instance, only a few general claims are widely accepted as authoritative. It will be a time without war. This is perhaps its most outstanding feature. The people of Israel will have gathered together under the leadership of a Messiah in a sovereign State of Israel. A restored line of David will in some sense govern that state, with Jerusalem as its capitol. And, finally, in some sense there will be a third Temple. Beyond these few indications, which hardly provide concrete political guidance, and are more like signs than signposts, everything else determinate about the messianic time is fantasy or subject to legitimately unresolved dispute. But unlike the unknown future for which the idealists would sacrifice the present, the vagueness of the Jewish image of messianic times reflects the unpredictability of a better future. One does not lock into the present or overthrow it entirely for such a vague future. Instead, preserving the accomplishments of the past, one proceeds in the difficult struggle to revise, modify and improve the present for a better future.

One proceeds not without wisdom, as if nothing has been learned from the past, and not without foresight, as if nothing is known about where we are headed, but integrating both one remains open to historical change. Such is the dialectic of tradition, built on the past, open to the future. Against the tyranny of the state that wants to stop time, messianic politics sees in time a movement toward justice, an "exodus," to take a biblical image (and not merely an image), from slavery to freedom. Such a politics is, Levinas writes, "an always revocable and provisional power, subject to incessant and regular modifications.

Is it not thus," he continues, asking rhetorically, "in this refusal of the politics of pure tyranny, that the outlines of democracy take form, that is to say, a State open to what is better, always on the alert, always renovating, always in the process of returning to the free persons who delegated to it their freedom subject to reason without losing their freedom?"<sup>53</sup> Messianic politics, let us remember, is without messiahs. It occurs in the courageous risk, neither cowardly nor foolhardy, of a better future.

Messianic politics, with the irreducible rupture it maintains between the present and the future, between the politics of today and the "coming of the Messiah," thus contains an inherent check, an inner reticence regarding power and the authority of all the alleged visions of humanity's redemptive apotheosis. Levinas thus distinguishes sharply between the liberal *politics* of the historically engaged and developing messianic state, the "always revocable and provision power" of the state "subject to incessant and regular modifications," the state that not only aims at justice but actually moves toward it in this world, "*olam ha'zeh*," and the distant eschatological vision of a *post-politics* or *non-politics* of what the rabbis call "the world to come," "*olam ha'bah*." It is a distinction found in the "Talmudic wisdom," Levinas writes, that "is entirely aware of the internal contradiction of the State subordinating some men to others in order to liberate them."<sup>54</sup> This contradiction – violence reluctantly used to eliminate violence - is not resolved in the world as we know it, but one must nevertheless always remain acutely, morally aware of it. The post-political condition, however desirable and whatever it will be like, for we genuinely do not know, is not the condition of *this world*. What is required in this world, at this time in history, is the *difficult* struggle for goodness and justice – without any guarantees - in a world that contains much that is evil and unjust. Levinas spoke directly to this point, underscoring the difficulty of the difficult freedom demanded by this very real contradiction, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. "The true problem for us Westerners," he wrote, "is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle."<sup>55</sup> The messianic state, in contrast to the state envisioned by political

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<sup>53</sup> Levinas, *New Talmudic Reading*, p. 000.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 184.

<sup>55</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 177. Also, regarding not war but the limitations of the political coercion required to maintain and improve society, I refer to two relevant observations taken from Hayak's *The Road to Serfdom*. First, regarding the allegedly "static" character of the liberal "definition" of the self and its social interactions: "There is nothing in the basic principles of liberalism to make it a stationary creed, there are no hard-and-fast rules fixed once and for all. The fundamental principle that in the ordering of our affairs we

idealists, opposes evil, opposes violence, while radically questioning its own use of violence in that opposition. No system and no dialectic, but rather the vigilance – “always on the alert, always renovating” - of a diachrony that joins and separates one human with another through moral responsibility, and one human with all others through justice, and the present from the future, moves forward step by step to repair the breaches of morality and justice in our world.

Separating eschatology from messianism, Levinas avoids the hubris of political idealism, including the hubris contained in the naïve optimism of those revolutionaries who ask that we wager the entirety of an allegedly entirely corrupt present for the sake of an entirely unknown but somehow certainly to be better future. “The proletarians,” Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, “have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.” In these words are expressed the typical idealist presumption which assumes that the very historical progress that has been achieved in creating the proletariat’s higher consciousness, as Marx himself describes it in the same manifesto, has produced nothing but imprisonment, chains. It is the presumption – overlooking the accomplishments of history - that only an *entirely* different world, peopled with an entirely different humanity, alone would be capable of completing the work of freedom. Yes, we “have a world to win,” but we aim toward the new world not by destroying the old but by improving it, making it better, prosaically, step by step, open to novel ideas, making, holding and building on the progress we have achieved.

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should make as much use as possible of the spontaneous forces of society [Levinas’s “separated” moral agents], and resort as little as possible to coercion, is capable of an infinite variety of applications.” (p. 13). Second, regarding the present ignorance, or at least lack of unanimity, regarding any ultimate hierarchy of social values, as well as the unforeseen character of the future: “It is not a dispute on whether we ought to employ foresight and systematic thinking in planning our common affairs. It is a dispute about what is the best way of so doing. The question is whether for this purpose it is better that the holder of coercive power should confine himself in general to creating conditions under which the knowledge and initiative of individuals is given the best scope so that *they* can plan most successfully; or whether a rational utilization of our resources requires *central* direction and organization of all our activities according to some consciously constructed ‘blueprint’.” (p. 26). Human pluralism and debate is the basis and driving force of morality and justice, not some flaw to be eliminated overnight. Lenin’s so-called “democratic centralism” was anything but democratic. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was in fact the dictatorship of Lenin and then Stalin. In its form and in fact it was inevitably a cult of personality – the exaltation of the personal value judgements of the one Leader – and as such was indistinguishable in practice from Nazi Germany’s “*Fuhrer* principle” (which was no “principle” at all). What makes a claim like this so sad is that unlike the mythic glorification of power that drove the Nazi ideology, the self-proclaimed “communist” leadership of the former Soviet Union appropriated the highest rhetoric of human self and social fulfillment. From the “double-think” of such hypocrisy, one of the debilitating and inevitable effects of the disjunction between the real and ideal in eschatological politics, comes, unfortunately, not only a healthy cynicism regarding its own leadership, but also a corrosive cynicism regarding the sincerity that ultimately drives a genuine messianic politics.

Messianic politics requires the humble admission that we will advance further and higher than our eyes can presently see. In this sense it is filled with hope and optimism. Just as genuine morality contains the “risk of atheism,” a respect for the independence of moral agents, a genuine politics contains the “risk of the unforeseeable,” as we might call it, a respect for developments of justice that have not been foreseen and are not yet even conceivable. Such a “beyond politics” does not undermine the hard work, the diplomacy, the compromises and the negotiations of today’s messianic politics of justice. Rather it keeps alive an eternal hope for a future beyond our own, for the arrival – may it be soon, please God - of solutions to the conflicts that *for the present* plague us and escape our most visionary reach. “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work; yet, you are not free to desist from it. ... And know that the reward of the righteous is in the time to come.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Pirke Avot*, Chapter 2, Mishnah 16. The speaker is Rabbi Tarfon.