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SECULAR THEOLOGY AS A CHALLENGE FOR JEWISH ATHEISTS

Avner Dinur*

ABSTRACT: This paper uses the term “secular theology” to criticize Jewish-religious approaches on the one hand and atheism on the other hand. It shows that the assumption of many that atheism stands at the centre of secular thought is baseless. The first part, largely assuming an Israeli context, claims that this assumption is problematic from a sociological and historical perspective. The second part follows Jewish philosophers who use theological ideas at the centre of their thought, and at the same time do not fit into the realm of Jewish religious writing of the 20th century. The distinction between the ontological and the ethical “role” of God in the theology of Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, is used to create new borderlines between the secular and the religious – “soft” borders that do not exclude God from secular world-views.

This paper is a critique of a common secular approach that is based, I argue, on a misunderstanding of religion in general and Jewish religion in particular. This approach, which I call “naïve atheism,” claims that atheism is the main pillar of secular world-views, and that through modern science we can see how ridiculous religious doctrines are, understand that God does not exist, and thus recognize that we should struggle to push religion into a dark corner of society. A deeper understanding of Jewish religion and culture, I argue, will enable us to find a place for the belief in God within Jewish secular world-views, and hence will promote a “secular theology.” This line of thinking is based on the one hand on a strong critique of central religious beliefs, but on the other hand, aspires to promote a better society on the basis of theological ideas that are inseparable from Jewish thought throughout the generations.

The discussion, and a few of the definitions I will use for terms like “Jewish-secular identity” (*Zehut Yehudit Chilonit* - זהות יהודית חילונית), or “Traditional Jews” (*Mesorati'im* – מסורתיים), is in general an Israeli one, and it builds upon the unique definitions of secularism and religiousness found in Israel,¹ but the thinkers I draw from, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber and others, are not necessarily Israeli, and the conclusions, I hope, can be relevant for other readers – Jews in the diaspora, secular non-Jews, and others. My suggestion is to read the Jewish philosophy of these thinkers under the umbrella term “secular-theology,” and to use this concept as an analytical category by

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¹ Many studies on this uniqueness can be found, including the studies in the following three collections: Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman, eds., *Maelstrom of Identities: A Critical look at religion and Secularity in Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Van Leer & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004); Gideon Kats, Shalom Ratzabi and Yaacov Yadgar, eds., *Beyond Halacha: Secularism, Traditionalism and 'New Age' culture in Israel* [Hebrew] (Sede Boker: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2014); and the recent: Yochi Fischer, ed., *Secularization and Secularism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Van Leer & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015).

which one can offer observations on the limits of atheist-secular Jewish identity on the one hand and religious identity (both orthodox and reform) on the other.

Understanding secular identity as if it is based on atheism is very common and seems obvious for many. Religion, they claim, means the belief in God, and if one is secular, one should not believe in God or in the stories that religions present. In the English speaking world one can hear this line of thinking from the well-known biologist Richard Dawkins, who is sometimes referred to as “Darwin’s Rottweiler,”² for his aggressive attack on “Creationist” religious thinking. In the Jewish world strong atheist statements are rarely used by Jews in the diaspora, but in Israel they are quite common. In the Israeli context one can hear them from atheists like Dan Meler,³ Yaron Yad’an,⁴ and others. One of them, Dan Boneh, in his popular book *The God Fallacy* [Hebrew],⁵ refers to a poem by Yehuda Amichai called “The Destiny of God,” in which the poet says that “God is destined to stay with us.”⁶ Boneh, who seems not to understand the metaphoric and ironic depth of the poem, presents a harsh critique which is worth reproducing here at length as a representative example for naïve-atheist polemic:

This kind of *Pilpul* (empty talk - פלפול) is an example of the way secular people fall into the trap that prolongs the concept of God – they insist on keeping it and using the concept for their own benefit. “God is love,” “God is me,” “God is nature,” “God is eternity,” “God is the unity of being” – and other definitions that secular people accept so they can create a God of their own. [...] My approach in this book criticizes this tendency. God is a well-defined monotheistic concept. For religious believers he is tangible and clear. Most of them will accept the definition that we used, common to all monotheistic religions – “a super-natural being, wilful, creator of the world and manager of the universe”. It is preferable that this definition will be used in the public discourse as the basic definition of the concept, just like a dictionary definition and like the definition that religious believers use.⁷

Boneh claims that secular Jews, who define the term “God” differently to him, are cooperating with religious people and giving religion authority in a time when it should have lost all its powers long ago. He thinks that if we persuade the multitudes that God never existed (*Lo Haia Velo Nivra* - לא היה ולא נברא), as the title of his book in Hebrew shows, we will promote a better society that is not worsened by the burden of religion. The difficulty that Boneh encounters, and is evident in this quote, is that for many Jews (Amichai among them), God does not conform to the easy-to-use definition that Boneh suggests. For many Jews, both religious and secular, God is not the manager of the universe and hence for them, the “scientific” and modern understanding of the world does not lead to disbelief in God.

² See Stephen S. Hall, “Darwin’s Rottweiler,” accessed 22 December 2015, <http://discovermagazine.com/2005/sep/darwins-rottweiler>.

³ See many of Dan Meler’s articles, and other writers who use similar jargon, in the journal “יהדות חופשית” (*Yahadut Hofshit* – free Judaism), and “חופש” (*Hofesh* – freedom) website, accessed 22 December 2015, <http://www.hofesh.org.il>.

⁴ See website *Daat-Emet* (true knowledge, דעת אמת), accessed 22 December 2015, <http://www.daatemet.org.il>. See also Yaron Yadan’s blog, accessed 22 December 2015, <http://www.orr.org.il/wordpress>.

⁵ Dan Boneh, *The God Fallacy* [Hebrew] (Bney Brak: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2011). The title in Hebrew reads: “לא היה ולא נברא: משנה אתאיסטית סדורה” (*Lo haia velo nivra* – Never Existed – A Well-Structured Atheist Doctrine). According to the publishing house it is a best seller. The first two editions were each sold out in a month.

⁶ Yehudah Amichai, *Achshav Bera’ash: Poems 1963-1968* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Shoken, 1968), 36.

⁷ Boneh, *The God Fallacy*, 265. Emphasis added.

Secularism is not Atheism - a sociological-historical perspective

The almost automatic identification that many make between secularism and atheism is baseless. It is problematic from a theological-philosophical perspective as I will show later, and it is just false if one looks at it from a sociological or historical perspective as I will show now. Most surveys that articulate approaches to tradition and self-definition in Israel during the last 30 years show that while about 50% of the Jews in Israel identify themselves as “secular,” about 80% say that they believe in God, and an even larger percentage say they participate in central practices of Jewish tradition – for example, 94% circumcise their children, 91% have Bar or Bat Mitzva, 90% celebrate Seder-Pesach, and 82% light Chanukah candles.⁸ From these numbers we can deduce that most secular Israeli Jews (and here the focus is on Israeli society because away from Israel far fewer Jews define themselves as secular) do believe in God and are committed to the ongoing survival of Jewish tradition, and thus, at least according to self-definition, it is clear that for a great majority of these secular Jews atheism and secularism are fundamentally distinct. It is worth noting that the Gutman surveys that I draw upon, although they are very extensive and seem to be well structured, are not consistent enough in their use of the term “secular” – a few of these polls use the term “not religious” or even “anti-religious,” but parallel polls, a few years later, use “traditional-secular,” and others “not observing the *Mitzvot*.” These inconsistencies should not be seen simply as a sign of unprofessional surveys – rather, they are a symptom of the inherent difficulty of pinning down Jewish secular identity, and of finding unambiguous definitions for secular and religious in the Jewish world in general and for Israeli-Jews in particular. This difficulty is unique to the Jewish culture and it builds on the problematic combination of religion and nationhood. Clear-cut definitions are indeed very hard to find, and even though in what follows I will suggest a few new guidelines to differentiate between a religious and a secular approach, I do not believe in the utility of such distinctions for future surveys. Here they serve a different purpose.

Boneh and his atheist colleagues might claim that the majority of “secular believers” who said in the polls that they are secular but do believe in God, have false ideas about religion – for these people, who in most cases come from *Mizrahi*-traditional or conservative families (*Mesorati'im* - מסורתיים), the belief in God is only a simple kind of folklore and not a well-structured world-view. Traditional people say they are secular because they do not understand the meaning of secularism, Boneh might claim. But this kind of claim is evidently essentialist and tautological – it assumes that being secular means not believing in God and therefore concludes that people who are seen by others and by themselves as secular, but who say they do believe in God just do not understand what they are saying.

⁸ Asher Arian and Ayala Keisar-shugerman, eds., *Jewish-Israelis – a portrait: beliefs, tradition and values of Jews in Israel 2009* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Gutman surveys institute, the Israeli institute for Democracy and Avichai foundation, 2009). To give a broader perspective on the percentage of secular Jews in Israel, it is worth noting that this survey articulated self-definition of Jews by the following definitions: 3% “Secular-Anti-Religious,” 43% “secular-not anti-religious,” 32% “traditional or conservative” (*Mesorati'im* - מסורתיים), 15% “Religious,” 7% “Ultraorthodox.” (*Charedim* - חרדים)

God plays various roles in the belief systems of secular Jews. For some it is a source of comfort in times of trouble, for others, a way to be humble, identifying a source of power greater than one's own, for others a stable basis that defines the demands of moral obligations, and for others it is a sign of traditional commitment – being faithful to the beliefs of ones foremothers and forefathers. Secular believers have various reasons to call themselves “secular.” Most of these reasons have nothing to do with a negation of Boneh's definition – the idea of God as ruler of the universe. Most secular believers use a modern and scientific understanding of the world, or at least they use its fruits, with technology and scientific knowledge in their daily lives. From this observation one can deduce that even if secular believers might say that the God they believe in is the ruler of the universe – they seem not to act as if it is so. Since they “assign” a different role for God, it is easy for them to find a place for their belief within a secular and scientific understanding of the world, an understanding that they share with atheists like Boneh.

Secular theology, the line of thinking which will be theologically portrayed in the second part of this paper, is an attempt to find a place for the belief in God within a secular understanding of the world. Secular theology is sociologically preferable over naïve-atheism because it is open to the majority of the Jewish public in Israel, which is populated by “secular believers,” who see no appeal in the statements of Boneh and his fellow atheists. Secular theology can include many kinds of “soft” religiosities, which can be found, not only within secular, reform, and Mizrahi-traditional identities, but also within orthodox Jews in Israel and within many Jews in the diaspora who don't call themselves “secular,” but follow similar patterns to the ones I just articulated. Secular theology can include these identities without diminishing its secular criticism of major ideas within religion, as I will show later. Most of these “soft religiosities” are not based on conscious theological considerations. Secular theology can therefore contribute to their thinking by articulating the pitfalls of religious theology in a way that the atheism of Boneh and his colleagues just cannot – this is because the belief in God is a strong component of the identity of many secular Jews.

The claim that secularism is a form of disbelief is also problematic from a historical perspective. Atheists tend to negate or reject, not only the belief in God, but also other symbols and practices that are associated with religion and with the past, including theological ideas. For Jewish atheists the consequence of such a rejection is the need to distant themselves from Jewish culture as a whole. Menachem Brinker, an eloquent speaker for Jewish secularism and atheism, says that this rejection is not an easy task. It is a constant struggle of the secular Jew against what he calls “the law of gravity” of Jewish tradition:

The modern Jew cannot express his national loyalty or his Humanistic world-view without using linguistic and other symbols which holds clear religious connotations. A Jew who insists on being secular must therefore create his own language. He is in a constant struggle against

the law of gravity that pulls him down to give-up his modern uniqueness for the sake of the historical depth of an ancient identity.”⁹

Brinker describes this “law of gravity” in a paper called “Without any Doctrine,” a title that emphasizes that for him Jewish secularism, as opposed to the Jewish religion, cannot hold any obliging doctrine. Secularism for him means promoting the freedom of the individual and therefore cannot oblige anyone to hold this or that world-view. According to Brinker, the problem of many secular Jews is that they are not brave enough to stand in front of modern reality without a doctrine and therefore they are pulled back to use the old ideas of religion.

Jewish secular-atheists like Brinker find it hard to accept the great influence that Jewish religion has on their culture, the Israeli culture in Brinker’s case, but also other Jewish cultures around the world. In their view the problem of the modern Jew is that her language is full of religious symbols and if she does not wish to simply abandon her Jewish identity, she must always be “on the watch” from being pulled into religious identity. This line of thinking is based on the idea that the Jewish past was religious. It is a very common idea that seems obvious to many and I would like to challenge it in order to show that Jewish theological ideas should not be seen as part of a religious past which secular Jews in the present should reject. Many have claimed before me that Judaism is not only a religion and that in the present it includes cultural and national elements too. My suggestion here is more radical – it is not enough to say that Judaism is *not only* a religion. I think in the past it was not a religion at all, and therefore it is wrong to state that Jewish secular thinking is the breaking of the Jewish past. I will present three arguments to support this claim:

The first is the unique combination of religion, nation, and ethnicity in the Jewish culture. If one compares Judaism to Christianity (and this comparison is natural and even needed in any analysis of secularism), in which religion is separated from nation and is defined by what one believes and not by one’s ethnic origin, than at least according to Christian definitions, Judaism was never a religion at all. And from a more objective, not necessarily Christian perspective, we can say that it was not a religion nor a national identity; it was a combination of both – Jewish religion was defined in ethnic terms (Jewish identity was defined not by what one believes in, but by the identity of one’s mother), and Jewish nation was defined by religious definitions.¹⁰ We can say that European culture was religious before the age of secularization because European Christians differentiated between their religious identity and their political or cultural belonging. When European society became more secular many Europeans gave up religious identity but their cultural or national identity remained intact. For Jews this was not an option since for them giving up their religious identity meant also the breaking of their cultural and national identity. The content of their religion was cultural and national in the first place. The gravity that Brinker mentioned was indeed very powerful for Jews but it was not a religion that pulled them to stay close to their heritage. Europeans who were religious lost their religion with

⁹ Menachem Brinker, “Without any Doctrine: The Uniqueness of the Secular Jew,” in Ruvik Rosental (ed.), *The Root of Things: Another Look on Questions of People and Society* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), 55-56.

¹⁰ This is clear in the Zionist era, with citizenship defined by religious definitions, like in the case of “the law of return,” but signs of the same phenomena can also be traced in diasporic communities in which one could not be part of the community without taking part in religious practices and beliefs, Spinoza for example.

secularization. Jews who were not religious, even if they wanted to distance themselves from Judaism, even if they hated Jewish religion, were not able to do so.

It is interesting to note that the first Jews who claimed that Judaism should be seen as a religion were not the orthodox Jews, who are keen today on using this idea. The reforms used this idea for the first time in their efforts to find a place for themselves in the new nation-states that grew near the end of the 19th century. It is within reform circles, in Germany and the United States, that we find for the first time calls like: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community."¹¹ This statement, that was central in the rebellion of liberal Jews against traditional Jewish identity, and against orthodoxy, became a major claim of orthodoxy itself in the present. When anti-Zionist-ultraorthodox reproduce this idea it still makes some sense, but when Zionist-orthodox say Judaism is a religion one can hear the laugh of history behind their back.

The second reason why it is wrong to say that the Jewish past was religious is also related to the confusing combination of religion and culture, but here I turn the gaze to the inside of Jewish communities. Before modernization and secularization, in the "ghetto way of living," common to most Jewish communities in one form or another (the *Melach* of North-African communities is another name for the same phenomena), Jewish identity was formed by a combination of many factors which surrounded the individual from all sides: Jews lived in a Jewish area, dressed as Jews, ate Jewish food, prayed as Jews, had political rights and obligations that were unique to them, married only with Jews, and were buried among Jews. Which of these factors is cultural and which is religious? It is very hard to say, because the differentiation we use today between the secular and the religious was not yet formed for the Jews of the ghetto. Only a few of these factors are considered today as religious, or are solely practiced in the present by religious Jews. Today we use different definitions for what we call "a religious Jew" - When 50% of Israeli Jews defined themselves as secular they probably meant that they do not go frequently to synagogue, or do not wear a *kippah*, or that they eat non-kosher food, or other "negative definitions." All these definitions are problematic and partial, but these are the definitions people actually use to define their identity. It does not matter which of these definitions one uses - none of them can capture the breadth of what was considered Jewish before secularization. For example, if one thinks that a religious Jew is someone who wears a *kippah*, then it should be clear that first, most Jews in the pre-modern world did not wear a *kippah* (and so they were not religious according to this definition), and second, even if they did, what they considered as Jewish and what we consider today as part of their Jewish identity is far broader than this narrow definition. The same will apply for wider and more complex attempts to differentiate the religious from the secular. Judaism was in the past a broad and encompassing culture, and the part of this culture we today call "religion" was relatively small. Jews of earlier times could not define their culture as secular or "not religious" and they also did not have any reason to do so because the differentiation between the religious and the secular did not occur to them. Jews before secularization were indeed religious but their Jewish identity was secular, or at least most of its components were parts of what we call today "secular Jewish identity."

¹¹ See the Pittsburgh declaration, accessed 29 December 2015, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pittsburgh_program.html

The third reason why it is wrong to see the Jewish past as a religious one, and to see secular identity as a negation of this stable and well-structured past, is the structure of modern orthodoxy. As we saw earlier, Brinker claimed that secular Jews should stand guard against the gravity of religion if they do not want to fall prey to its attraction. But is it true that secular identity is formed against a structured changeless religious identity? From the moment secularism appeared in the western world, different religious communities structured themselves in opposition to it. The term “orthodox” (“the right belief” or “the right world-view,”) is the product of such a negation. People call their thinking “the right belief” only when they understand themselves as a culture in struggle which must define its identity in opposition to the others who are holding the wrong beliefs. The term “*Charedim*” (“חרדים”) as the common name for the ultraorthodox communities, is another sign of the same move - by using this name Ultraorthodox Jews admit that they are afraid, worried or anxious about the modern world in general, and about Jewish secularization in particular. Orthodox Jews today tend to portray their identity as if it was the authentic Judaism of the past, and as if liberal, reform, conservative and secular Jews drew apart from this past, and hence, claim many Orthodox, the identity of all non-Orthodox Jews is a negation of Orthodoxy and not an independent Jewish identity. Brinker, although speaking from a secular perspective, accepts this allegation. However not only secular Jews have to struggle against the gravity of Jewish religious identity – orthodoxy on its part has to struggle against the gravity of secularization, and this is why orthodox Jews took upon themselves slogans which are problematic and without precedent in Jewish tradition, like the well-known saying of the Hatam Sofer (1762-1839) – “חדש אסור מן התורה” (*Hadash Asur Min Hatorah* – the new is prohibited by the Torah) – a slogan that is seen by many as the founding idea of orthodox Judaism.¹² The idea that “the new is forbidden” is in itself a very new idea which shows that laws of gravity hold for both the Orthodox and the secular. Both sides need the other to validate their own identity. Both sides draw different ideas from Jewish past, which was neither religious nor secular.

The secular move should be seen as distancing oneself from specific elements in Jewish past which are today considered by the secular Jew as religious. It is true that in the Jewish past, the religious and the secular were fundamentally inseparable. It might also be true in the present, and Brinker is right when he writes that secular Jews need to find a proper secular language to fit their worldview. But contrary to him, I think the secular world-view is not a struggle of the new against the ancient, but an effort to differentiate within the Jewish past between elements that would fit secular thinking and elements that would not. The main point of this paper is to show why the belief in God does not need to be part of the past that the secular Jew rejects. It is true that Jewish tradition is in many ways “theistic.” In the pre-secular world, belief in God was indeed part of the confusing Jewish conglomerate of religion, culture and nation, but it does not follow that the belief in God, or to be more precise, the belief in all the predicates that are associated with the concept of God, are part of what we call today the religious way of thinking, and hence should be rejected by secular Jews.

¹² Moshe Samet, *Chapters in the History of Orthodoxy* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005), 19. The Hebrew title of the book reads: “החדש אסור מן התורה: פרקים בתולדות האורתודוקסיה”.

So far we have seen that understanding the secular world-view as if it is based on atheism is problematic sociologically because most secular Jews (in Israel at least) do believe in God, and it is problematic from a historical perspective because the rejection of the belief in God as part of the Jewish “religious” past is based on the wrong observation that the Jewish past was religious. People who identify the secular with atheism might think that the defence of theism suggested here is part of an attempt to bring them back closer to religion (*Lehachzir bitshuva* - להחזיר-בתשובה), or that it is as a defence of orthodox ways of thinking. But in what follows, I will suggest that secular theology aims its critical arrows not only towards the atheist but also towards the religious way of thinking.

Secularism is not Atheism: a theological-philosophical perspective

In what way does secular theology criticize religion? What is so “secular” about it? In order to answer this, I will now suggest a theological-philosophical analysis of religion following the words of the philosopher Hans Jonas:

The crisis of modern man – at least one aspect of it – can be put in these terms. Reason triumphant through science has destroyed the faith in revelation, without, however, replacing revelation in the office of guiding our ultimate choices. Reason disqualified *itself* from that office, in which once it vied with religion, precisely when it installed itself, in the form of science, as sole authority in matters of truth [...] The situation is reflected in the failure of contemporary philosophy to offer an ethical theory, i.e., to validate ethical norms as part of our universe of knowledge. How are we to explain this vacuum?¹³

Jonas’s claim here is based on an observation, which can also be found in the works of other thinkers like Emanuel Levinas and Martin Buber: religious tradition, within the three monotheistic religions at least, took upon itself two very different roles. The first role was ontological or scientific – religion explained what the world is, how it was formed and how it functions. The other role was ethical, moral and practical - religion told us what we should do. As we saw earlier, the ontological role is the main object of atheist criticism on religion. In Boneh’s words, God is “a supernatural being, wilful, creator of the world and manager of the universe.” Boneh overlooks the ethical role that religion “assigns” to God.

Atheists like Boneh thinks that in modernity science took the place of religion in the ontological field, and following the words of Jonas, we can say that in this sense they are absolutely right. Science indeed offers a much wider, coherent and opened-eyed approach than the description of creation that can be found in the bible. Science also presents a much less childish understanding of current reality than the expectation for divine intervention that is supposed to fulfil our needs. Here, the thinkers I call “secular theologians” and secular atheists stand on the same ground and criticise religious thinking in the same way. But what happened in modernity to the other role that religion once took upon itself – the ethical role? It is within the ethical field that secular theologians wish

¹³ Hans Jonas, “Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective,” in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 168. The italics are Jonas’s.

to take central ideas from the Jewish heritage and to use them in the secular age, an age that is described by Jonas as suffering from a “moral vacuum.”

I propose the term “secular theology” for world-views in which God is not seen as the ruler of the universe and is not expected to intervene in the course of history, but nevertheless, do not neglect the idea of God as the basis for ethical discourse. Since secular theologians put the concept of God at the centre of their thought and as the locus of the ethical demand that is presented to humans, their thought finds itself between secular ideas and religious ones. For this reason, if we wish to see the uniqueness of this kind of thinking, some work of conceptual classification is needed; not a strict definition of who can be a member of the secular theology “club,” but a broader differentiation between secular and religious theology.

The term “secularism,” not used as referring to a historic period, but as a way of thinking, is based on the assumption that the *seculum*, this world, is not the realm of God. In this way secularism is indeed close to atheism, as they are both based on a negation, and their negation points at a similar concept. But based on the differentiation between the ontological and the ethical use of the concept God, we can now see that atheism and secularism do not negate the same thing. The secular theologian does not seek Godly intervention in times of trouble. She does however see God as a source of ethical demands.

Jonas and other secular theologians point at various reasons for the need in modern times of a new discourse on ethics. One of the reasons is the technological age. From the quote above we can discern that science never pretended to have any authority over moral behaviour, but in his extensive writing on the imperative of responsibility in the technological age,¹⁴ Jonas shows that modern science did change the ethical field – through the advancement of technology it gave humans a “quasi-God-like privilege” and powers that are almost divine, and paradoxically, it did so at the same time when it eroded the position of God as the supreme authority on the true and the good.¹⁵ Jonas believed that the technological age requires a new ethical discourse and that parts of this discourse rely on theological considerations.

Three major factors should be mentioned in addition to Jonas’s analysis of the modern ethical vacuum – capitalism, postmodernism and nationality. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to deal only briefly with each and no extensive discussion of them is provided. I only want to consider the way these elements function on parallel tracks to construct the ethical challenges of our time and the need for a stronger basis for the ethics of the present and of the future.

When it comes to capitalism that can be described as the “religion” of caring only for one’s self, its contribution to a modern ethical vacuum is quite obvious – capitalism does not encourage a person to care for others. More than that, because the resources for human living are limited, the main imperative of capitalism is in many cases to harm the other in order to earn a little more for oneself.

Postmodern thinking also reduces the strength of ethics because it breaks the great “isms” of modernity, and shows how these absolute values serve the ruling forces in society. Postmodernism, with its relativistic tendencies, shows how these values that were

¹⁴ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Jonas, *Contemporary Problems in Ethics*, 172.

supposed to lead our conduct, and were seen in the past as essential and universal, are nothing but European ideas that help the West to control the world. Postmodernism and its siblings – post-colonialism and multiculturalism – make us see truth as relative, and shake the position of the good, which moral philosophy has sought through the ages.

Nationalism also threatens ethics. If ethics necessarily deals with universal imperatives, as old Kant taught us, then national particularism is the opposite of such universal demands. In the age of nationalism humans are expected, not to care for others, but only for others like themselves. Martin Buber saw nationality as one of the main obstacles for ethics and he phrases the tension between the two in theological terms:

The typical man of our times cannot believe in God anymore, but he cannot believe in himself either, in the self that has no basis, so he believes in his wider self, in his people (or nation) as the greatest being that can exist ... and if there is no being greater than nations, no supreme court above the decree of each nation, the result is that the nations and their rulers are fighting among each other with all means until extinction.¹⁶

It is important to note that when I claim, following Jonas, Buber and others, that we live in a time of an “ethical vacuum” that is connected to the disempowerment of religion by science, capitalism, postmodernism and nationalism, I am not claiming that previous times were better from a moral perspective. My assertion aims at articulating the challenges of contemporary ethics and the sources of ethics for the future. It also does not follow that secular theology must object to any form of nationalism, or postmodernism, and that it should stick to the great “isms” of European Enlightenment. The thought of Emmanuel Levinas provides a good example of theological ideas that are entwined with postmodern ones. The works of “Rav Shagar” (Shimshon Gershon Rosenberg) provide another example of a conscious combination of religious ethics and postmodern ideas.¹⁷ Following these two thinkers one might claim that through the acceptance of postmodern ideas the secular theologian should be even more aware of the need for an absolute imperative. In other words, it is not the case that *although* truth is relative we need to distinguish between the good and the bad, but *because* it is so – we need an absolute good to stand as an opposition to the relativity of truth, or in a more traditional way to put it:

”אַמֶּת [יחסית] מֵאַרְצֵךְ תִּצָּמַח וְצֶדֶק [מוחלט] מִשָּׁמַיִם יִשָּׁקֶר” (תהילים פה, יב).

(Relative) truth springs from the earth, And (absolute) righteousness is seen in heaven” (Ps. 85, 12).

Buber and Jonas are good examples (though in different ways) of a national (Zionist) commitment that is combined with secular theology. It is clear from these examples that secular theology’s concern with the ethical vacuum does not necessarily exclude all causes of this vacuum. It does lead secular theologians to look for the sources of ethical claims

¹⁶ Martin Buber, *Spirit and Reality: Nine Gates to Discuss their Relations* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Machbarot Lesifrut, 1942), 23.

¹⁷ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg [Rav Shagar], *The Remainder of Faith: Postmodern Sermons on Jewish Holidays* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2014). Shagar is mentioned here as an example of a combination of theocentric thinking and postmodernism. I do not see him as a secular theologian.

within the religious field and to try and promote more responsibility-taking in secular societies, using theistic ideas.

Atheists might claim that the democratic mechanisms on the one hand, and Humanistic values on the other hand, are sufficient replacements for the ethical field, and that these modern values and mechanisms make religion redundant. But is it really the case? Is the democratic mechanism enough to cover the human need for ethics? Do we actually wish that people behave according to the law and not pass moral judgment on the law? Humanistic values seems to be a stronger answer than democracy for the modern ethical vacuum, and indeed if we examine the works of Jonas, Buber, Levinas and other secular theologians, we will probably conclude that humanistic values stand at the centre of their theistic worldviews. It makes sense then, to ask if humanistic values are unique to secular world-views or perhaps religions in general, and Jewish religion in particular has always believed in these values and the only real difference between traditional works that promote these values and humanistic discourse is that tradition sees humanism as the demand of God.

If we examine secular approaches that we usually refer to as “Humanistic,” that are neither nihilist nor relativist, we see that while in the ontological field they contradict the traditional religious approach and use scientific understanding of the world, in the ethical field the contradiction is not great. A non-nihilist secular approach seeks to do “the good” and assumes that this kind of good is not part of reality. Goodness is needed because we want to change reality into this good. This view is even clearer in times when reality lacks any kind of good, and our post-Holocaust thinking cannot ignore this.¹⁸ In this way the non-nihilist-secular approach resembles the idea of a transcendent God who defines the good that we need to aspire to, but does not intervene to change the world into this good. The non-nihilist-secular thinker claims that humans in general, and she in particular, has a role in this world and a responsibility to fulfil this highly demanding role. The main difference between this role and the commandments of Jewish religion is that for secular people divine reward or punishment is not expected as a consequence of their obedience since they don’t believe in a God that is able to respond to their actions. We can claim then, that secular people believe in God just as much as their religious counterparts, the difference between them is that secular people believe in a God who is not the ruler of the universe.

More than any other thinker, Jonas’s call to see God as powerless after Auschwitz, can illustrate this move. Jonas is using an existential vocabulary to pin down the need of our society for a new ethics that would be based on “the myth of God’s Being in the world”;¹⁹ in other words, like Heidegger and other existentialists, Jonas claims that humans are “beings in the world” who finds themselves thrown choicelessly into the world, but contrary to these existentialists, he does not conclude from this that humans are free to create their world. Jonas says that humans must acknowledge that this world is not theirs, that God is (in a way) part of the world, and that the myth of God assigns a role for them - a role which they did not choose, a role that can be articulated by understanding the great

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of Jonas’s and Levinas’s work as responses to the Holocaust, see Avner Dinur, *Judaism and Universalism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas* [Hebrew] (Ph.D dissertation, Ben-Gurion University, 2010), ch. 4.

¹⁹ Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice,” in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 134.

order of things. Jonas does not deny that for him God is “a myth,” i.e. not part of an objective scientific understanding of the world, but he believes that this myth is very much needed as a basis for human conduct.

Is it true that God never existed, “לא היה ולא נברא” (*Lo Haia Velo Nivra*), as Boneh and other atheists claim? Secular theology, as a gathering of ideas from the philosophers mentioned above and others, “declares” that God, portrayed as the ruler of the universe, indeed never existed; but it also declares that God’s non-existence does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that God is unimportant, and that God’s decrees should have no authority over us. A culture that is based only on the things that exist is easily drawn into taking what is as the only possibility, and into not being critical about reality. This critical analysis of modern reality stands at the centre of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy and his call to put less weight on ontological considerations, and to see the ethical as “first philosophy.” Levinas articulated what he saw as the basic misunderstanding of Jewish atheism in the following way:

[Atheism] would also be the healthiest response for all those who until now have believed in a rather primitive God who awards prizes, imposes sanctions, or pardons mistakes, and who, in his goodness, treats people like perpetual children. But what kind of limited spirit, what kind of strange magician did you project as the inhabitant of your heaven – you who today state that heaven is deserted? And why are you still looking, beneath an empty heaven, for a world that makes sense and is good?²⁰

Like Levinas, we can assert that the problem with naïve atheists is not that their critique of religion is too harsh, but that they do not understand religion in general and Jewish religion in particular. They use a primitive and pagan view of religion and in the name of this view negates a whole range of traditional aspects of Judaism. That is why the term “naïve,” used throughout this paper, is appropriate for this kind of atheism. In order to define atheism as an opposition to religion, atheists see in religion only narrow-mindedness, and in religious people they see blind followers of corrupted rabbis. I am not claiming that there are no corrupted rabbis, but rather that by seeing religion as a whole through this perspective, one misses a great deal of what religions have to offer the modern world.

Moreover, the attempt of atheists to undermine religion’s power by showing how ridiculous the belief in God is, plays into the hands of different streams in current orthodoxy (*Chabad* is an obvious example, but other streams follow the same pattern) which stress the centrality of faith in Jewish tradition. By trying to confront their attempts to bring more Jews into their ranks (*Lehachzir Bitshuva*, להחזיר בתשובה), atheists assume that the question of whether God exists is the central pillar of Jewish understanding of the world. A better understanding of Judaism will enable us to see that the main question Jews struggled with throughout the ages (at least until Chasidism) was not what we should believe in, but what should we do – *Jewish thought is basically ethical*.

I have tried to show in this paper that the critical role of secular thinking, in the Jewish world of today in general, and in Israel in particular, is not to prove the non-existence of

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “To Love the Torah more than God,” in Zvi Colitz, *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith*, (Hoboken, NJ: Ktab, 1995), 28.

God, or to persuade us to give-up any attribute of traditional Judaism solely because the tradition is believed to be a religious one. Jewish tradition has included both religious and secular components throughout the ages, and the ability to differentiate between these components, is open to our time and to the generations that will follow. I suggested that the theological component and the belief in God as an ethical demand, should not be left solely for religious people as naïve-atheists argue, and that the differentiation between the ontological and the ethical role of God enables us to criticize the moral vacuum of our time and find within the traditional concept of God the basis for a better defined ethics.

The belief in God, throughout the ages, included a belief in an absolute good and in the imperatives of that good – a belief that is very necessary in a time when truth has become relative, and politics, through the great powers of nationalism on the one hand, and capitalism on the other, seeks the good of the individual and the good of the nation, rather than the good that God demands.

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