

Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies
Sander Gilman and Steven T. Katz, Series Editors

DIFFICULT FREEDOM

Essays on Judaism

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Freedom on tablets of stone

(Tractate of Principles, 6.2)

The Johns Hopkins University Press · Baltimore

Ethics and Spirit

Boring Morality

Reading publications that define the social ideology of Christianity, or reviews such as *Esprit*, one could gain the impression that Christianity, even Catholicism, was moving towards a less realist interpretation of the dogma underlying the religious life of the faithful. Does not the authoritative exposé given recently by André Seigfried show that in certain Protestant churches religion has merged entirely with morality and social action?¹

This impression is a complete illusion in the case of Catholicism. The recent promulgation of a new dogma shows the degree to which the Church remains faithful to a notion of the spirit that does not exclude the realist affirmation of irrational facts which draw their significance from some intimate and impenetrable experience. As a result we cannot discuss them. All the same, we should like to stress that for Catholics themselves other meanings can be attached to the spiritual. In fact, in a study on Catholicism, conducted with a rare nobility enlivened by the experience of all things modern, Professor Latreille, while showing the Church's vigilance in the discussions regarding the material and intellectual problems of the day, also recognizes the existence of 'two European types of Catholicism which are very different and sometimes vigorously opposed to one another'.² The one is Mediterranean, 'still close to the old ideal of *Christendom*, where a widespread popular practice, rooted in external, collective, traditional forms of devotion, maintains a horror of any religious dissidence, or concession to the liberalism and indifferentism of the State'. This first Catholicism 'would willingly reproach the second', the northern kind, 'for its temerity, suspecting it of sacrificing the integrity of doctrine by making concessions to an inadmissible modernism, in fact by being irenic and compromising in its dealings with other denominations who are ignorant of the characteristics and rights of the true Church'. And Latreille adds:

In recent years, this move towards intransigence appears to have succeeded in bringing about a hardening of the Papacy's attitude towards those theologians suspected of favouring dreaded tendencies through their teaching or perhaps also through their presence in apostolic faculties considered too daring. (Encyclical *humani generis*, August 1950)³

Even in protestation, a similar movement of more rigorous orthodoxy appears to be taking shape. It is as if Christianity, having moved away from dogma and its realist interpretation, feels empty. Evidence of this can be seen in the book entitled *Protestantism*, published after the Liberation and bringing together several studies by Protestant theologians, professors and writers. Last winter a series of beautiful articles by M. R. Mehl, in *Le Monde*, confirmed the return to orthodoxy, or at least the nostalgia for such a return; the search for forms other than ethical to give to religious life and expression.

For a long time Jews thought that every situation in which humanity recognizes its religious progress finds in ethical relations its spiritual meaning – that is to say, its meaning for an adult. They consequently conceived of morality in a very vigorous way, feeling themselves attached to it as though to an inalienable heritage. Even in the nineteenth century, when Judaism entered the community of Western nations, it still claimed it as a *raison d'être*. It was convinced that it survived in order to preserve the teaching of the prophets in all its purity. In a world where, like material goods, spiritual values were offered to whoever wished to grow rich, morality meant it was worth remaining a poor Jew, even when one ceased to be a Jew who was poor.

And yet a long acquaintance with Western Christianity has created, even among Jews sincerely attached to Judaism, who have maintained through their family memories an emotional tie with the symbolism of Jewish life, a state of unease. Morality, social action, concern for justice – all that would be excellent. But it would be only morality! An earthly propaedeutic, too abstract to fill an inner life, too poor in figures of style to narrate the story of a Soul. Without the stuff of a literature or theatre. And, in fact, all that has ever given us is Psalms!

This Poor Nineteenth Century

This unease is not without cause, but it has nothing to do with Jewish morality.

Separated more and more from the rabbinical tradition and its exegeses, the morality offered in the Western temples no longer contained a message to justify the messenger. It more and more resembled the generous but general formulae of the European moral conscience. The European moral conscience did exist! It flourished in that happy period in which centuries of Christian and philosophical civilization had not yet revealed, in the Hitlerian adventure, the fragility of their works. Philosophical morality never seemed more conformist, or Israel's famous mission closer to its term.

And certainly the antiquity of the message, the existence of a Moses or an Isaiah in an age when Greece still wallowed in barbarism, sets the imagination racing. But historical worth cannot compensate for existing pointlessly. In the realm of the spirit, there are no automatic allowances to be claimed. Only a brilliant present can invoke its past merits without demeaning itself – or, if need be, can invent itself on the basis of them.

But did Jews at least continue to bring peoples a prophetic morality through the example of their lives? The virtues which, in the darkest periods of the Middle Ages, provoked the admiration of the Christians of good faith, were shattered like the walls of the ghetto. Others replaced them but the Jews, in discovering certain freedoms, also took on much of the violence of the modern world. They joyfully espoused every form of nationalism, but equally burdened themselves with their quarrels and passions. Israel has not become worse than the surrounding world, whatever the anti-Semites say, but it has ceased to be better. The worst thing is that this was precisely one of its ambitions.

Perhaps, from that age on, the Jewish presence manifested itself more in the Israelites' participation in liberal and social movements – in the struggle for civil rights or true social justice – than in the sermons to be heard in emancipated synagogues. All these denigrators of tradition, all these atheists and rebels, unwittingly joined the divine tradition of intransigent justice which expiates blasphemy in advance. With these rebels, Judaism, which had scarcely been absorbed into the surrounding world, already opposed it on one level. But in this manifestation, it found itself deprived of its own language. Having nothing but will, it turned to a borrowed system

of thought to understand itself. One cannot, in fact, be a Jew instinctively; one cannot be a Jew without knowing it. One must desire good with all one's heart and, at the same time, not simply desire it on the basis of a naive impulse of the heart. Both to maintain and to break this impulse is perhaps what constitutes the Jewish ritual. Passion mistrusts its pathos, and becomes and re-becomes *consciousness*! Belonging to Judaism presupposes a ritual and a science. Justice is impossible to the ignorant man. Judaism is an extreme consciousness.

From this moment on, is it possible for a Jewish revival to operate under the sign of the Irrational, the Numinous, or the Sacramental? Here, in fact, are the religious categories we are looking for. We need a Saint Teresa of our own! Can one still be a Jew without Kierkegaard? Thankfully, we had Hassidism and the Kabbalah. Let us rest assured that one cannot be a Jew without having saints. Hassidism and Kabbalah are established in the Jewish soul only where that soul is full of talmudic science. This talmudic science is the continual unfolding of the ethical order, leading to the salvation of the individual soul. Ah! how the moralism of the nineteenth century, in spite of all its naivety, begins to shine anew in our dulled eyes. At least it had one thing to its credit: *it tried to interpret Judaism as a religion of the spirit*. This is an essential point, even if, in the eyes of a youth that has become familiar with the charm of myths and mysteries, this moralism seems anaemic and emptied of all specifically religious substance.

*Spirit and Violence*⁴

Nothing is more ambiguous than the term 'spiritual life'. Could we not make it more precise by excluding from it any relation to violence? But violence is not to be found only in the collision of one billiard ball with another, or the storm that destroys a harvest, or the master who mistreats his slave, or a totalitarian State that vilifies its citizens, or the conquest and subjection of men in war. Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act: as if the rest of the universe were there only to *receive* the action; violence is consequently also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating in it.

Nearly every causality is in this sense violent: the fabrication of a thing, the satisfaction of a need, the desire and even the knowledge of an object. Struggle and war are also violent, for the only element sought out in the Other is the weakness that betrays his person. But

violence can also lie, in large part, in the poetic delirium and enthusiasm displayed when we merely offer our mouths to the muse who speaks through us; in our fear and trembling when the Sacred wrenches us out of ourselves; in the passion – call it love – that wounds our side with a perfidious arrow.

But is a cause without violence possible? Who welcomes without being shocked? Let mystics be reassured: nothing can shock reason. It collaborates with what it hears. Language acts without being subdued, even when it is the vehicle for an order. Reason and language are external to violence. They *are* the spiritual order. If morality must truly exclude violence, a profound link must join reason, language and morality. If religion is to coincide with spiritual life, it must be essentially ethical. Inevitably, a spiritualism of the Irrational is a contradiction. Adhering to the Sacred is infinitely more materialist than proclaiming the incontestable value of bread and meat in the lives of ordinary people.

The Jewish moralism of the nineteenth century based its negations on reason [*avait raison dans ses négations*]. In its naive respect for the scientism of the day, it excellently refused to confer any spiritual dignity on relations whose origins lay in magic and violence. For example, it perhaps threw suspicion on the idea of miracles solely in the name of scientific teaching. It is still the case that a miracle entails a degree of irrationality – not because it shocks reason, but because it makes no appeal to it. Spiritualizing a religion does not consist in judging one's experiences in the light of the scientific results of the day, but in understanding these very experiences as *links between intelligences*, links situated in the full light of consciousness and discourse. The intervention of the unconscious and, consequently, the horrors and ecstasies which it feeds – recourse to the magical action of the sacraments – all this is linked ultimately to violence.

Spirit and the Face

The banal fact of conversation, in one sense, quits the order of violence. This banal fact is the marvel of marvels.

To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him. The Other is not only known, he is *greeted* [*salué*]. He is not only named, but also invoked. To put it in grammatical terms, the Other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative. I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I *am* for him. In applying a

concept to him, in calling him this or that, I am already appealing to him. I do not only *know* something, I am also part of society. This *commerce* which the word implies is precisely action without violence: the agent, at the very moment of its action, has renounced all claims to domination or sovereignty, and is already exposed to the action of the Other in the way it waits for a response. Speaking and hearing become one rather than succeed one another. Speaking therefore institutes the moral relationship of equality and consequently recognizes justice. Even when one speaks to a slave, one speaks to an equal. What one says, the content communicated, is possible only thanks to this face-to-face relationship in which the Other counts as an interlocutor prior even to being known. One looks at a look. To look at a look is to look at something which cannot be abandoned or freed, but something which *aims* [*vise*] at you: it involves looking at the *face* [*visage*].

The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.; it is all that, of course, but takes on the meaning of a face through the new dimension it opens up in the perception of a being. Through the face, the being is not only enclosed in its form and offered to the hand, it is also open, establishing itself in depth and, in this opening, presenting itself somehow in a personal way. The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity. A thing can never be presented personally and ultimately has no identity. Violence is applied to the thing, it seizes and disposes of the thing. Things *give*, they do not offer a face. They are beings without a face. Perhaps art seeks to give a face to things, and in this its greatness and its deceit simultaneously reside.

'You shall not kill'

Knowledge reveals, names and consequently classifies. Speech addresses itself to a face. Knowledge seizes hold of its object. It possesses it. Possession denies the independence of being, without destroying that being – it denies and maintains. The face, for its part, is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill', and to hear 'You shall not kill' is to hear 'Social

justice'. And everything I can hear [*entendre*] coming from God or going to God, Who is invisible, must have come to me via the one, unique voice.

'You shall not kill' is therefore not just a simple rule of conduct; it appears as the principle of discourse itself and of spiritual life. Henceforth, language is not only a system of signs in the service of a pre-existing system. Speech belongs to the order of morality before belonging to that of theory. Is it not therefore the condition for conscious thought?

Nothing, in fact, is more opposed to a relation with the face than 'contact' with the Irrational and mystery. The presence of the face is precisely the very possibility of understanding one another [*s'entendre*]. Inner life is defined, moves towards the single voice of the contract, and frees itself from the arbitrariness of our bad faith. The psychic fact receives from speech the power to be what it is. It is amputated from its unconscious prolongations which once transformed it into a mask and rendered its sincerity impossible. No more will thought be overrun by obscure and unconscious forces that subject it to a protean fate! We have entered the age of logic and reason!

In this way – and it, is after all, extraordinary – universality is established: a *self* [*moi*] can exist which is not a *myself* [*moi-même*]. This self, viewed face-on, is consciousness, existing by virtue of the fact that a sovereign self, invading the world naively – like 'a moving force', to use Victor Hugo's expression – perceives a face and the impossibility of killing. Consciousness is the impossibility of invading reality like a wild vegetation that absorbs or breaks or pushes back everything around it. The turning back on oneself of consciousness is the equivalent not of self-contemplation but of the fact of not existing violently and naturally, of speaking to the Other. Morality accomplishes human society. Can we ever gauge its miracle? It is something other than a coexistence of a multitude of humans, or a participation in new and complex laws imposed by the masses. Society is the miracle of moving out of oneself.

The violent man does not move out of himself. He takes, he possesses. Possession denies independent existence. To have is to refuse to be. Violence is a sovereignty, but also a solitude. To endure violence in enthusiasm and ecstasy and delirium is to be *possessed*. To know is to perceive, to seize an object – be it a man or a group of men – to *seize* a thing. Every experience of the world is at the same time an experience of self, possession and enjoyment of self [*jouissance de soi*]: it forms and nourishes me. The knowledge

that makes us move out of ourselves is also like our slow absorption and digestion of reality. Reality's resistance to our acts itself turns into the *experience* of this resistance; as such, it is already absorbed by knowledge and leaves us alone with ourselves.

If 'know thyself' has become the fundamental precept of all Western philosophy, this is because ultimately the West discovers the universe within itself. As with Ulysses, its journey is merely the accident of a return. The *Odyssey*, in this sense, dominates literature. When a Gide recommends fullness of life and variety of experience as the fulfilment of freedom, he searches in freedom for the *experience* of freedom, not for the movement itself by which one moves out of oneself. It has to do with taking delight, experiencing oneself as a miraculous centre of radiance, and not with radiating.

Only the vision of the face in which the 'You shall not kill' is articulated does not allow itself to fall back into an ensuing complacency or become the experience of an insuperable obstacle, offering itself up to our power. For in reality, murder is possible, but it is possible only when one has not looked the Other in the face. The impossibility of killing is not real, but moral. The fact that the vision of the face is not an *experience*, but a moving out of oneself, a contact with another being and not simply a sensation of self, is attested to by the 'purely moral' character of this impossibility. A moral view [*regard*] measures, in the face, the uncrossable infinite in which all murderous intent is immersed and submerged. This is precisely why it leads us away from any experience or view [*regard*]. The infinite is given only to the moral view [*regard*]: it is not *known*, but is in *society* with us. The commerce with beings which begins with 'You shall not kill' does not conform to the scheme of our normal relations with the words, in which the subject knows or absorbs its object like a nourishment, the satisfaction of a need. It does not return to its point of departure to become self-contentment, self-enjoyment, or self-knowledge. It inaugurates the spiritual journey of man. A religion, for us, can follow no other path.

A Religion for Adults¹

Common Language

When faced with Semites and Christians – who, according to Pius XI, are spiritually Semites – is it not superfluous to expound the thesis that places man above the natural order of things? They would learn nothing, if one wanted to teach them that man occupies an exceptional place in the world; that his situation is that of a dependent being; that this dependent being is sovereign in its very dependence, for it possesses not just any old dependence, but that of a creature; that this creaturely dependence does not exclude existing in the image of God; that education must maintain this society between man and God which has been instituted as a result of their resembling one another; and that, in a very large sense, education's goal is this society and is perhaps the very definition of man.

Like Jews, Christians and Muslims know that if the beings of this world are the results of something, man ceases to be just a result and receives 'a dignity of cause', to use Thomas Aquinas's phrase, to the extent that he endures the actions of the cause, which is external *par excellence*, divine action. We all in fact maintain that human autonomy rests on a supreme heteronomy and that the force which produces such marvellous effects, the force which institutes force, the civilizing force, is called God.

This common language which we rediscover spontaneously – and which here, at 1,600 metres, resonates in a particularly pure way – is not a source of uniquely academic satisfaction.

During the years when this language was confronted by the proud affirmation of energies at free play, and drowned out by the overflowing of purely natural forces, this common language has also been a common life. In front of the representatives of so many nations, some of whom have no Jews in their numbers, I should like to remind you of what the years 1933 to 1945 were like for the Jews of Europe. Among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction.