

Identity Dialogically Constructed

**Jerusalemmer Texte
Schriften aus der Arbeit der
Jerusalem-Akademie**

**herausgegeben von
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Band 4

Verlag Traugott Bautz

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Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese
Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH
99734 Nordhausen 2011
ISBN 978-3-88309-610-0

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Preface

In this collection of articles, I have brought together various texts that articulate my point of view on a range of subjects that all deal with identity and communication, mostly in religious existence. Several of the articles were published previously and have been reworked and enlarged in view of the present edition. Two of the chapters were originally written in Hebrew and appear here for the first time in English. Two chapters contain original contributions for this volume.

The first chapter, written especially for this publication, contains my view on the problem of religion and the necessity of a “trans-different,” dialogical attitude that celebrates both specificity and plurality, yet, at the same time, also urges cooperation between differing religious ways of life. The second article was originally written for a Festschrift in honor of Hamburg theologian Professor Wolfgang Grünberg on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.¹ It deals with the life-long task of constructing religious identity, a task that I consider to be necessarily dialogical.

The third chapter analyses the essay “Love and Wisdom” of the Christian dialogical thinker Franz Fischer. I compare his thoughts with those of Jewish dialogical philosophers, indicating that Jews and Christians participate in the same dialogical mode of thought. The chapter appeared previously under the title “Fischer’s Essay ‘Love and Wisdom’ in Light of Jewish Dialogical Thought,” in *Die Bildung von Gewissen und Verantwortung – Zur Philosophie und Pädagogik Franz Fischers* (Franz Fischer Jahrbücher).² Chapter 4 “Towards ‘Profective’ Philosophy and ‘Proligion’ with Fischer and Buber” continues the

¹ Ephraim Meir, “I – You. Constructing Religious Identity,” in *Theologie der Stadt* (Kirche in der Stadt. Band 17), eds. C. Bingel e.a. (Berlin: EBVerlag, 2010), 140-144.

² Meir, “Fischer’s Essay ‘Love and Wisdom’ in Light of Jewish Dialogical Thought,” in *Die Bildung von Gewissen und Verantwortung – Zur Philosophie und Pädagogik Franz Fischers* (Franz Fischer Jahrbücher) (Norderstedt and Leipzig: Anne Fischer Verlag and Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010), 226-245.

comparison between Fischer and Jewish thought, more specifically that of Buber. In this text, published here for the first time, I propose a radical dialogical philosophy and a new way of looking at religion, in the footsteps of Franz Fischer and Martin Buber.

Chapter 5 “Janusz Korczak’s Care for the Little Ones in Light of Jewish Tradition” was originally a foreword for Monika Kaminska’s doctoral dissertation, published under the title *Dialogische Pädagogik und die Beziehung zum Anderen. Martin Buber und Janusz Korczak im Lichte der Philosophie von Emmanuel Levinas*.³ This essay presents Kaminska’s approach, which situates the Polish-Jewish pedagogue in a longstanding Jewish tradition and brings Korczak’s thoughts in the proximity of Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. Care for the other and respect for the mystery of the child and for the children’s otherness characterized Korczak’s life.

The next chapter, “On Hasidism as Dialogical Existence that Hallows Daily Life,” appeared previously in the re-edited Hebrew translation of Buber’s “For the Sake of Heaven,” published by Yediot Aharonot and Sifre Hemed.⁴ It situates the Hasidic chronicle “Gog und Magog” within Buber’s dialogical thought that was eminently expressed in his “I and Thou.” It shows the extraordinary ability of Buber to present Hasidism as a source of inspiration for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Chapter 7, entitled “On a New Age in Democracy as Part of the Holocaust Memory,” appeared first as a review of Shmuel Trigano’s *The Democratic Ideal and the Shoah* in the Website *Scholars for Peace in the Middle East* (SPME).⁵ It discusses the book of this French-Jewish

³ Meir, foreword to *Dialogische Pädagogik und die Beziehung zum Anderen. Martin Buber und Janusz Korczak im Lichte der Philosophie von Emmanuel Levinas* (Jüdische Bildungsgeschichte in Deutschland 9), by Monika Kaminska (Münster: Waxmann, 2010), 9-16.

⁴ Meir, “On Hasidism as Dialogical Existence that Hallows Daily Life,” (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Sifre Hemed, 2007), 287-303.

⁵ Meir, “On a New Age in Democracy as Part of the Holocaust Memory,” review of *The Democratic Ideal and the Shoah*, by Shmuel Trigano, September 14, 2010, *Scholars*

scholar, for whom the formation of what I call an “active memory” of the Shoa implies a critical reflection on democracy as well as the necessity of thinking the concrete and the particular.

Chapter 8 appeared in the second volume of the Rosenzweig *Jahrbücher*.⁶ It is a memorial that I include here because Professor Rivka Horwitz was an eminent Jewish scholar and a warm personality, to whom I was closely connected and with whom I frequently studied. I had the privilege of discussing with her, in her Jerusalem home, a variety of Jewish thinkers as well as many themes that are crucial in modern Jewish thought. She loved Judaism and situated Jewish thinkers in the larger context of the *Zeitgeist*.

The last chapter “How to Think Death from Time and not Time from Death” appeared as a foreword in the Hebrew translation of Emmanuel Levinas’s *Death and Time*.⁷ It presents Levinas’s original thoughts on time in a nutshell; these philosophical thoughts are universal yet bear the traces of a particular, Jewish thinking.

It is my hope that the essays assembled here will stimulate the reader to reflect upon his/her own religious existence and identity, and to put him or herself in permanent dialogue with those who belong to other religious traditions. All the essays highlight one fundamental idea: that the same and the other, identity and communicative, inclusive thinking, specificity and universality, belong inseparably together.

for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), <http://www.spme.net/cgi-bin/articles.cgi?ID=7168>.

⁶ Meir, “Rivka Horwitz of Blessed Memory,” in *Rosenzweig Jahrbücher* (Freiburg-Munich: Karl Alber, 2007), 263-267.

⁷ Meir, “How to Think Death from Time and not Time from Death,” foreword to *Death and Time*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 7-13.

1.
Quo vadis, religio?
Religion as Terror and Violence or as Contribution
to Civilization.
A Plea for Trans-Difference

“In the beginning is the relation.” (Martin Buber, *I and Thou*⁸)

In Western Europe, migration, mainly that which comes from Muslim countries, has definitely changed a traditional Christian society. Islam is more and more visible, and discussions of religious symbols in the public sphere often take place, in France and elsewhere in Europe. In the Middle East, frictions and clashes between different groups frequently bear religious overtones. Ever since 9/11 Americans know for certain that terror also appears in a religious garment.

All this prompts us to ask a question concerning the role of religion in Western secularized and pluralist societies: What is the impact of religious life upon civil society?

It seems that secularization as self-sufficiency, or even as the liberation from religions, no longer has the last word.⁹ The relationship between secularization as a positive emancipation process and religiosity as pertaining to orientation has changed from a model of conflict to a

⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 69.

⁹ Even a philosopher such as Habermas now writes on religion. See Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt on Main: Suhrkamp, 2005). Thanks to Wolfram Weisse (Academy of World Religions in Dialogue, University of Hamburg) for this idea. I owe the definition of secularization as self-sufficiency or liberation of religion to José Casanova (Georgetown University, Washington, DC), whom I heard at a conference entitled, “Beyond Secularism? The Role of Religion in Contemporary Societies,” that took place July 9–10, 2009 in Hamburg. Significantly, Peter Berger abandoned his theory of secularization for a theory of pluralization of religion; see Peter L. Berger, “Die Pluralisierung der Religion in Zeiten der Globalisierung,” in *Theologie im Plural. Eine akademische Herausforderung* (Religionen im Dialog 1), ed. W. Weisse (Münster: Waxmann, 2009), 14.

model of cooperation. Although the Enlightenment placed reason and the anthropocentric standpoint at the center, religion or at least religiosity as the quest for the spiritual, is again *à la mode*; we are beyond secularization, in “ultra-modernity,” where the relationships between state, society and religion are rearranged, and traditions and institutions reinterpreted and critically evaluated.¹⁰

In different societies, religion functions differently, and its Janus face¹¹ places a choice before us: religion as expression of violence or as a civilizing force. As a phenomenon with undeniable social components, it cannot be reduced to some “confessional” residues and to the private sphere, although many modern democracies would prefer it if that were the case.

In this manner, religion as social fact has a civilizing function or else it contributes to a clash of civilizations. Frequently, religion has been the enemy of modernity, yet it also contains values that remain important in our secularized societies. A thorough analysis of religion as a potential producer of violence has been carried out by people such as Jan Assmann, Regina Schwartz, and Hans Kippenberg. In the face of the frequent use of religion for political purposes, one tends to adopt the position that the influence of religions has to be reduced as much as possible, since the various faiths have constantly fought bitter battles with each other, supported wars, and kindled the fires of existing conflicts.

In his bestseller, *The God Delusion*, the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins even maintains that there is a logical link between the acceptance of God and terror, and that without religion the

¹⁰ The term “ultra-modernity” stems from Jean-Paul Willaime. It designates the new stage of modernity in which a new dialogue between states, society and religion is taking place. See Willaime, *Le retour du religieux dans la sphère publique. Vers une laïcité de reconnaissance et de dialogue* (Lyon: Olivétan, 2008).

¹¹ This characterization of religious reality stems from José Casanova.

world would be much better off.¹² He hopes that religion will someday be a thing of the past. However, it is not clear that a world without religion is less aggressive. Therefore, modern and postmodern societies do not have to exclude religious consciousness, since living religiosity may be a positive factor, a pillar in society, fighting nihilism and affirming life. Religion does not only foster fanaticism, and there is even a revival of religiosity that positively affects society. Taking into account this relatively new circumstances, which can be called the post-secular situation, I ask the question whether or not we have to disconnect once and for all religious life from the public sphere, or, if religions, beyond secularism, could contribute, not to an undesirable melting pot but to a much-needed community in plurality that would be characterized by solidarity and recognition of the Other's uniqueness.

In my essay, I first offer an overview of some recent research on the relationship between monotheistic religions and violence. Thereafter, I criticize the tendency to equate religions and violence. At the same time, I point to an alternative approach that does not deny the destructive forces hidden in religions, which have both caused and worsened conflicts, but I go beyond this position and present religiosity as a possible positive energy that could diminish tensions and promote interculturalism and social reform.

Religion as violence

Hans G. Kippenberg recently wrote a book alleging that monotheism is intolerant religiosity.¹³ The Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, has already

¹² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

¹³ Hans G. Kippenberg, *Gewalt als Gottesdienst. Religionskriege im Zeitalter der Globalisierung* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2008). For a survey of the main representatives of this view, see 17–23. In his book, Kippenberg devotes many pages to the socio-political situation in Israel. I agree with him that a geo-philosophy or a geo-theology is extremely problematic, and that religions are potentially violent. Yet when Palestinian attacks are called attacks of “freedom fighters,” isn't that a one-sided view (121)? Is attacking innocent people legitimate violence? Does violence not remain violence, independently,

maintained that biblical monotheism as it distinguished between false and true religion (*die mosaische Unterscheidung*) brought hatred and conflict, and that exclusivist and intolerant monotheism was violent. He perceived this hidden dynamite in the holy texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Idolatry, magic, and apostasy are the targets of religious violence that comes to the fore amongst religious fundamentalists.¹⁴ Regina M. Schwartz has added to this sad analysis her own interpretation of narratives, such as the story of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and the conquest of the Land of Canaan. The particularity of one people chosen by God who bestows privileges on His people, granting it the right to a territory, is characterized as violent.¹⁵

Kippenberg criticizes Assmann for not being radical enough: the Jewish people did not only develop a “semantic paradigm,” they also acted. He mentions the case of the Maccabees, members of the ancient Hasmonean priestly dynasty, who fought against the Greek rulers and defined themselves as potential martyrs in case they were to lose the battle against the Hellenistic rulers and their collaborators. Whereas Assmann restricts his vision of the link between monotheism and violence mainly to apostates, Kippenberg recognizes a religiously legitimized fight against those who prevent religious autonomy in

whether it is religion-based or non-religious? Do all religious Jews think that occupation is redemption (p. 122)? Kippenberg also analyses the religious violence of Hamas, which has gone so far as to even inherit the old European form of anti-Semitism (133–144). Noteworthy is his own slippery shift from “Selbstmordanschläge” (139; suicidal attack) to “Selbstmord” (suicide; 141), and the moralizing end of his own one-sided narrative: Israel and the United States are not able to recognize what is called the “patience” (*Geduld*; 144) of Hamas and its sincere offer of a possible “hudna” (armistice).

¹⁴ See Assmann’s books, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich: Hanser, 2003); *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt* (Vienna: Picus, 2006).

¹⁵ Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain. The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

biblical texts. At the same time, he contests Assmann's idea that there was no cohabitation between Jews and pagans. In many ancient pagan cities, he argues, Jews did cohabit with pagans, who worshipped Adonai as the highest God. He quotes Peter Schäfer, who calls Assmann's idea of an exclusivist monotheism a "mumbo"¹⁶ that was historically nonexistent, and who protests against Assmann's idea that anti-Semitism was the consequence or flipside of Egyptian anti-monotheism.¹⁷

Kippenberg's final conclusion is that there is no necessary link (*zwingend notwendigen Zusammenhang*) between monotheism and violence. He agrees with Assmann that one cannot extrapolate from a language of violence to a praxis of violence. On the other hand, the fight against apostasy and against common enemies speaks against the thesis that monotheism was always peaceful and that violence is the exception. In his view, there is a connection between monotheism and violence, which is "contingent" (*contingent*), not necessary (*notwendig*) nor impossible (*unmöglich*). All depends upon the concrete situation of a religious community.¹⁸ At the end of his book, Kippenberg writes¹⁹ that

¹⁶ "Ein Popanz," see Peter Schäfer, "Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte: Jan Assmanns Mosaische Unterscheidung," in *Memoria – Wege jüdischen Erinnerns. Festschrift für Michael Brocke zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Birgit E. Klein and Christiane E. Müller (Berlin: Metropol, 2005), 22.

¹⁷ Schäfer, "Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte," 28. Assmann defended himself, referring to Talmud Tractate Shabbat 89a, which states that when God gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, hatred came in the world; Assmann, "Antijudaismus oder Antimonothismus? Hellenistische Exoduserzählungen," in *Das Judentum, im Spiegel seiner kulturellen Umwelten. Symposium zu Ehren von Saul Friedländer*, eds. D. Borchmeyer and H. Kiesel (Neckargemünd: Mnemosyne 2002), 34–35. Schäfer reacted to this defense (Schäfer, "Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte," 30–33), contending that the contrast between monotheism and polytheism/cosmo-theism would be a contrast between Judaism and other religions, and that this battle takes place in Judaism itself, especially with the manifold Godhead (*vielfältige Gottheit*) in Kabbala. See Schäfer, "Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte," 22–24.

¹⁸ Kippenberg further mentions that in Christianity and in Islam rights were denied to apostates, but Islam did give Jews and Christians a position as "people of the book." He refuses to label medieval societies as "persecuting societies."

religions as such rarely cause the fire, but that they may accelerate conflict situations and develop a martyrdom ideology. He very briefly mentions that religion may offer an ethics of fraternity (*Brüderlichkeitsethik*) as the motor for creative social organizations, yet this is obviously not his focus.

Summarizing the above, one may say that scholars today discuss the topic of religion as violence and that there is a tendency to qualify religion as potentially violent. In light of this, it is deemed expedient to reduce religion to the private sphere, even to a personal preference. The Enlightenment belief in reason was followed by violent religious-eschatological thoughts and we witness an unholy connection between religion and politics occurring at this time. Islamic defenders of Palestine, certain religious Zionists, and Protestants, who expect the coming of the Messiah after the return of the Jews to Israel, all combined their beliefs with acts. Both Al-Qa'ida and 9/11 with their idea of jihad, as well as former U.S. president George W. Bush, who wanted a crusade against the "axis of evil," used religious terminology.

One understands why scholars are now more focused on the analysis of potential violence in religion. Western Europe itself has a long history of religious wars and violence that came to the fore, for instance, in the religious anti-Semitism that prepared the ground for a national, industrial, and murderous racist anti-Semitism. It is significant that Kippenberg only devotes two pages in his book to the question of how religion can contribute to a disruption of violence (*Gewaltunterbrechung*). His answer is too brief to satisfy me. In his opinion, interruption of violence could come from trans-religious initiatives and international institutions. Furthermore, he believes, Jews who have made pacts with others in the past have to accept a "hudna" from Hamas, and religious Islamic groups that are involved in social welfare work have to be encouraged.

¹⁹ Kippenberg, *Gewalt als Gottesdienst*, 198—207.

In my view, all this is fine but largely insufficient. Suspension of violence is good, but countering violence through the active search for ways to coexist is better. My impression is that Kippenberg's analysis that focuses upon violence as religion does not take the power of a humanizing religiosity in which human rights are central sufficiently seriously. Such a religiosity is not in contrast to a political sphere that is becoming more and more autonomous, but could be a source of inspiration in our modern societies. Theonomous thoughts are not necessarily in opposition with the autonomy of our daily lives; they may even demand and promote such an autonomy. Kippenberg ends where I would start. His is too external an approach, one which could be challenged by an "internal" vision that acknowledges the civilizing power in religions.

Religiosity as humanizing force

I seriously doubt that modern societies will definitively say farewell to religions. One and a half million copies of Dawkins' book will not change this. I do not agree with Herbert Schnädelbach, who tends to consider religions outdated and obscurantist. This well-known German philosopher writes about the "curse" of Christianity (*der Fluch des Christentums*), and thinks that morality has its own autonomy that is ideally free from religious influence.²⁰ True, desacralization or secularization is a fact, and basing ethics and values upon man's autonomy is a legitimate enterprise, but I believe that our societies have reached a post-secular or—in Willaime's terminology—"ultra-modern" stage, in which religiosity as humanizing energy again plays an important role.

²⁰ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Religion in der modernen Welt* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2009). Schnädelbach considers Islamism as a new form of fascism and thinks that the Jewish tradition was of importance for the West.

In the following, I will give some examples of Jewish religious approaches and some common to the three monotheistic religions that stimulate people to live and work together towards a more humane world, in which diversity is seen not as a threat but as an enrichment. The examples from the Abrahamic religions that I will outline are the result of inclusive thinking. Against any claims of absolute truth, they uncover the ethical or dialogical potential in our religious sources. In a dialogical hermeneutics of the monotheistic sources, the acceptance of a common Father, the interaction between love and law, the ideas of hospitality and of the ineffable, and, finally, the connection between love of God and love of the neighbor all represent centuries-old ideas that may contribute to the humanization of our societies, which must be approached in a critical way. Together with a dialogical exegesis of religious sources, these inclusive and predominantly trans-confessional ideas may hopefully lead to the formation of societies that consist of dialogical communities.

The three monotheistic religions foster the lofty idea of a common Father, whose very existence not only guarantees the equality of all His daughters and sons, but also their uniqueness, never to be absorbed in generalities or in larger categories. When in a social psychosis the Law of the father is denied, humanity ceases and equality is destroyed. Jean-Gérard Bursztein has revealed this process in his thought-provoking book on the Holocaust.²¹ Conversely, one may see fraternity as the result of the acceptance of the common Father and his Law. If one accepts the paternal prohibition, “Thou shalt not kill,” an equality among all is established. This is a positive effect of religion. From this perspective, acceptance of and respect for the other human being is the way of being in touch with the Divine. The ethical movement brings one into contact with the Infinite, with the Father. The acceptance

²¹ Jean-Gérard Bursztein, *Hitler, la tyrannie et la psychanalyse* (Aulnay-sous-bois: Nouvelles Etudes Freudiennes, 1996).

of the Father makes fraternity possible and makes monotheists modest, since other human beings are also beloved children of God, and the fact that they are created “in His image” (Gen. 1:27) reflects the multiple aspects of the Divine.

It was Freud who made us reflect on the cultural necessity of the acceptance of the Father and His commands. An eminent example of the potentially humanizing power of religion is to be found in his book, *Moses and Monotheism*, which appeared in 1939.²² This volume was discussed by Assmann, who—surprisingly, after his negative qualification of exclusivist monotheism—sought a critical analysis and redefinition of the Mosaic difference that was not based on fixed revelations. It was also discussed by his opponent, Peter Schäfer, who interprets Freud’s theory as the transformation of monotheism by therapy.²³ I offer my own interpretation of Freud’s book, free of apologetics of religion as such. When one reads this remarkable volume in an empathic way, rather than with the intention of claiming that it was written by someone who did not cope with his own tradition, one may come to the conclusion that in his first and last book on Judaism, Freud in fact uncovers the civilizing power or genius of Judaism. Freud reflected upon his own identity in an attempt to solve what he calls “the mystery” of Judaism. True, he defined religion as illusion, obsession, and neurosis, the result of childish needs. This remains his view throughout his work, but in his second critique of religion,²⁴ “Moses and Monotheism,” he

²² Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion. Drei Abhandlungen*, was translated into English in 1955 under the title, *Moses and Monotheism*. In the following I refer to the edition of “Der Man Moses” in the *Studienausgabe. Band IX* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2000).

²³ Schäfer, *Der Triumph der reinen Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Der Man Moses und die monotheistsche Religion* (Berlin: Philo, 2003). Schäfer thinks that Freud understood himself as a new Moses and a new Jochanan ben Zakkai, who – after the destruction of European civilization by the Nazis – made the last necessary transformation of monotheism, converting it into therapy.

²⁴ The first critique was formulated in his *Die Zukunft einer Illusion (The Future of an Illusion)*, written in 1927.

regarded the collective religious experience of Judaism as the result of the renunciation of the immediate satisfaction of instincts (*Triebverzicht*), a process that founds culture.²⁵ According to Freud, Judaism opts for life by accepting the prohibition, “Thou shalt not kill.” The prophets reminded the Jews to remain faithful to the universal God, who demands ethical behavior.²⁶ Consciousness of their election made them optimistic and self-confident.

In Freud’s analysis, Jews opted for the spiritual and have a religion that endows an enormous spiritual power in which one remembers the “forgotten” that is unforgettable; they remember the murder of the Father. A reflection such as this uncovers the hidden forces in the Jewish religion, the “*Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*.” Such a progression in spiritual life is in my view as strong as the violent undercurrents, which must not be denied. Freud’s “Moses and Monotheism” highlights the positive impetus that religion may provide, indeed, also in our modern societies.

A second possible contribution of the Abrahamic religions lies in the idea that the ungraspable, an element that is essential to our common heritage, constitutes an anti-dotum to the totalitarianism that characterized the preceding century. Of course, the term “God” may be used in a narcissistic way; it may be abused to confirm one’s own limitless grandiosity, but it also limits human violence through the recognition that there is a transcendence that cannot be reduced to what is. The recognition of transcendence, of the unutterable, enables a positive limitation to the Promethean power and egoistic self-assertion of the human being. Religious tradition that highlights transcendence may bring critique of self-sufficient and totalitarian societies. A third example of the possible civilizing force of religiosity lies in the exceptional relationship between law and love that characterizes Judaism: law

²⁵ Freud, *Der Mann Moses*, 563.

²⁶ Freud, *Der Mann Moses*, 500.

without love is cruelty, love without law is anarchy. If the limitations of the law are anchored in love, one avoids the sanctions of the super-ego. The pleasure principle therefore requires the reality principle, which has to remain linked to the pleasure principle. Reinterpreted in this manner, Judaism could offer to humanity the concept of the recognition of a Father who loves and demands at the same time.²⁷ A fourth example of the possible role of religious traditions in our post-secular age lies in their vital function of realizing the idea of hospitality. In interreligious dialogues, one frequently concentrates upon theological content. This has its own importance, since it illustrates how multiple and variant are the ways to God. This plurality is not only necessary because of the fact that we are not self-sufficient; pluralism is the precondition for a sound approach to the Absolute. Pluralism in religion goes against absolute truth claims and exclusiveness. Although the appreciation of theological differences remains important, the common effort of the various communities with their specific languages to realize together human rights, to bring justice and peace, and to extend hospitality to each other is even more urgent. For the monotheistic religions, the practical realization of these goals means to live the Abrahamic adventure of hospitality anew. The way to God necessarily is effected by respect of the inalienable rights of the other human being and welcoming of him.²⁸

In all the monotheistic religions, finally, one may develop a dialogical hermeneutics that interprets their texts in an inclusive manner. Certainly, fanatical interpretations always remain possible, but mankind also has interpreted its writings in specific contexts in an inclusive way that contributes to the humanization of humanity. Monotheism is therefore not only a problem—though it may produce indoctrination and

²⁷ For a development of this theme, see E. L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Every Day Life. Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001).

²⁸ For a more detailed account of this view, see Meir, “Das Abrahamitische Abenteuer (Er)Leben” in *Theologie im Plural*, 33–40.

coercion—, it is also and foremost an opportunity. If in monotheistic religions justice is central, religion will contribute positively to civilization and to the stability of our societies. Because there is not one monotheistic religion but three, the recognition of the uniqueness of each group is a consequence of the belief in one Creator who apparently wants diversity. In a *global* consciousness, the other is merely an other I and the strange is ultimately familiar, but one may also adopt and develop a *universal* consciousness in which the otherness is not eliminated, but rather a prerequisite in order to obtain a complete picture of higher realities.²⁹

Towards trans-difference

The differences between the three monotheistic religions remain valid, but different houses do not yet constitute the whole street or the whole town. With thinkers such as Levinas and Derrida, we learned to evaluate otherness versus sameness and also to discover alterity in ourselves. I would like to affirm *and* to transcend these differences in order to develop an attitude of communication, exchange, coexistence, and interaction. The affirmation of differences in itself may also bring with it domination, self-interest, and the neglect of what is common. With the end of what Lyotard called the “big narratives,” we witness multi-culturality and inter-culturality. Intra-culturality is not cultural enough. In one day, we may meet Jews, Christians, and Muslims in our towns, and churches are no longer the sole house of God in Germany or France.³⁰ Identities became more dynamic because of the presence of the other and the daily contact with him or her. We learn about the other and from the other. We may learn not to be afraid of each other. One even switches identities if the old identity no longer fits, or freely adopts elements of

²⁹ The distinction stems from Eric Santner.

³⁰ For the pluralization of religion in our global age, see Berger, “Die Pluralisierung der Religion in Zeiten der Globalisierung.”