Emmanuel Levinas on Secularization in Modern Society

Ze’ev Levy

In his philosophical texts Levinas privileges le dire (“the saying”), which always presupposes the relation to the other, over le dit (“the said”), which transforms the other into an objective entity. Likewise in his analysis of thinking, he does not limit himself to the thought itself but aspires to reach what he characterizes by the word “transcendence.” This is a cardinal concept of his philosophy; it is not restricted to the religious meaning that God and God’s essence are beyond human comprehension, but expresses the true sense of beyond myself. Such is the vocation of ethics, but it can be conceived and understood only through the secularization of “the sacred” (or more exactly, “the sanctified”). The literal meaning of “transcendence” is “beyond” (trans) and “ascend” (scendo). In Levinas’s work, this word designates the change of place that is conceived as the ethical passage of the I to the other, or the substitution of myself for the other.

Levinas’s conception of transcendence takes its point of departure from the metaphysical tradition of occidental philosophy, and he strives to raise it to a superior level. Since Aristotle philosophy has been conceived as the aspiration to overcome ignorance; its goal is love of wisdom (philosophia). It has, as it were, no external ends; it is not destined
to solve problems that people encounter in their mutual relations. It certainly was not coincidental that in ancient Greece, since the days of Thales, astronomy was considered to be the most respectable among the sciences: one sought to understand the movement of the celestial bodies without worshipping them as in pagan religion. Levinas tries to show that the repudiation of the idolization of the stars — *l'idolatrie* — inaugurated by philosophy, was the first step toward secularity. It is therefore astonishing that he — a Jewish religious thinker — does not mention that Jewish monotheism was among the first sources of negative reaction to worship of the stars.¹ Already in early Judaism, stars are no longer identified with gods. These beliefs, rejected by Judaism and by other monotheistic religions, were grounded in the assumption that the stars are so far away from our human habitat that we will never be able to set foot on them. As Levinas points out, according to the ancients this distance expressed an elevation that prevents walking. In this connection, one might also think of the myth of Icarus, which no doubt expresses some of the same meaning. Much later, our recent expeditions into outer space, with a man actually walking on the moon, struck another blow to the ancient adoration of celestial bodies. Entities once considered divine proved on experience to be composed of ordinary stone on which one can indeed walk (*GDT* 132). Thus, as a matter of our history, modern thought in the occident has “passed from admiration to philosophy, from idolatry to astronomy, to rationality and to atheism” (*GDT* 165).

What remains unclear, perhaps deliberately on Levinas’s part, is whether secularism is therefore the result of a critique of idolatry, i.e., of the refutation of pagan belief. And is monotheism, which is based on the belief in the transcendence of an invisible God, immune from such conceptions? When Levinas describes technology as one of the manifestations of secularization, he expressly underscores that it “destroys pagan gods” (*GDT* 166). Does this mean that only certain gods “died” — the gods of astrology and fate (*fatum*), local gods (like in Greece and Rome), and so on? From this point of view, “secularizing technology figures in the progress of the human spirit. But it is
not its end.” The earlier form of transcendence has disappeared but the general process of its secularization has been fulfilled in the sphere of ontology, which leaves no place for human beings and society. This line of thinking thus joins Levinas’s better-known critique of Heidegger’s philosophy. In response, Levinas seeks an alternative transcendence that he tries to achieve by ethics.

This includes a criticism of the fashionable rhetoric denouncing technique (in the following I do not distinguish between technique and technology) as the origin of all evil. One cannot overlook the philosophically positive achievement by which technology destroys the “gods of the earth,” the “gods-things” (dieux du monde, dieux-choses); it is, in short, part of the process of “demythologization” (désensorcellement). Yet technology is itself susceptible to certain forms of mythology. One sees this in the ideology that describes technology as an ultimate goal. Such an idea represents an abuse of both technology and humankind. There is, then, something dangerous in technology. Not only might it injure personal identity by transforming an individual into a cog in an immense machine (portrayed in the 1930s by Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times), but it is now liable to cause terrible accidents and even endanger our planet. For a time, this argument was current mainly among the enemies of technology and industrial society, most of whom professed reactionary outlooks. Levinas has not overlooked this. In their worldview, he notes, despair obscures hope. They disregard the positive aspects of technology that are capable of contributing to our happiness. Reflecting on this, Levinas avails himself of the linguistic connection between the two French words désespoir and espoir: despair is absence of hope (see, e.g., GDT 64).

Levinas does not hesitate to describe the possibilities opened up by technology, which in general help us to ameliorate our place in the modern world. Eschewing nostalgic talk that betrays a longing for pastoral scenes that are, in any event, rapidly disappearing, for mountains and natural landscapes that are not yet soiled by technique — and this tendency can be found in Heidegger — Levinas sees reason to in fact laud technology. Yet this does not contradict or diminish much-needed efforts
to safeguard our environment and to prevent its defilement. Ecology does not clash with technology, but ought to supplement it. Technology can reinforce our relation to one another. Modern means of communication, for example, have contributed a most important share in this regard. Already Socrates preferred the city to fields, flowers and trees because it is there one encounters other people. The trees, he says, “teach him nothing.” Levinas seems to evoke this Platonic dialogue when he says: “Le judaïsme est frère du message socratique” (Judaism is the brother of the Socratic message) (DF 233).

Still, if the aim of technology is to strengthen human togetherness, why was Levinas so impressed (in a 1961 essay) by Gagarin’s achievement in becoming the first human traveler alone in space? His admiration was not limited to the audacity and accomplishment of the operation, but stressed the achievement of having been emancipated, if only for one hour, from all terrestrial dimensions. In his view, this was the chief implication of the great technological advance (DF 233). and further, he also believed it to likewise characterize Judaism, with its alleged release from earthly attachments. This is an idea he certainly took over from Franz Rosenzweig: Judaism distinguishes itself by severing itself from any particular piece of the earth, but at the same time maintains a permanent relation to human beings — or, in Levinas’s terms, to the other. On this point, Judaism differs from Christianity, and a fortiori Catholicism. Levinas does not refer especially to hermits, monks and nuns who-seclude themselves in monasteries, cut off from other human beings, but he does argue that Christianity continues, as it were, idol-worship, in its cult of saints, including saints who are closely tied to certain places (Assisi, Lourdes, and the like). Ancient Greece and Rome worshipped local gods, and some Christian denominations seem to worship local saints; they have exchanged idols of one kind for idols of another kind, while Judaism, for its part, demanded their annihilation. Then again, Levinas does not mention that this behavior also characterizes certain (orthodox) Jewish circles, where it is the practice to visit and worship the graves of saints. The alleged grave of Maimonides in Tiberias, of Rabbi Shime’on Bar Yochai on Mt. Miron,
and the grave of Rabbi Nachman in Braslav have become centers of yearly pilgrimage; adoration of the Lubavitcher Rabbi as the Messiah also belongs to this trend. It is true that in Judaism this phenomenon has never reached the same prominence as in Catholicism, but it has nonetheless never been absent. It therefore looks quite doubtful that Levinas’s generalizations on this point can be upheld. However, there certainly is some substance to the central assertion that Judaism, like technology, contributes to the demystification of the universe and the demythologization of nature. It has thus discovered humanity through the nudity (nudité) of the human face (DL 234).

Modern technology is therefore, according to Levinas, a major cause of the increasing secularization seen in our time, and it constitutes one of its salient expressions. Yet the rhetorical commonplace that condemns technology as a surrogate for human natural life seems not to pay sufficient attention to the responsibility that each human being ought to bestow on the other. Without technology humankind will not be able to feed itself. According to Heidegger one contemplates the world as a complex of tools, whereas according to Levinas the world represents for us, first of all, a complex of food (in actu or in potentia). But just as it would be incorrect to say that we live in order to eat, it would be incorrect to say that we eat in order to live. Although food is necessary for our existence, the ultimate end of eating is the food itself. As we smell the odor of a flower in order to enjoy its fragrance, or walk for the very pleasure of walking in fresh air and not for the sake of health (although sometimes this can also be a reason), food characterizes our existence in the world (TO 62–64). Our relation to food, like that to other objects, comprises enjoyment (jouisANCE). This is no hedonism but essentially the endeavor to liberate ourselves from vulgar materialism (TO 46.). Without proper and sufficient food one cannot live, and a fortiori enjoy life.

The problem of hunger occupies Levinas on numerous occasions. Already in the first chapter of Totality and Infinity he emphasizes its importance. Hunger is currently the terrible doom of many populations and, according to Levinas, it is also a factor that accelerates the
increasing secularity in the contemporary world. But this is again a questionable assertion. We witness nowadays the spreading of religious fundamentalism, and not in the least in those countries whose populations suffer from starvation. All the same, this trend is characteristic of certain rich countries, too. In the United States, where people suffer relatively rarely from hunger, one can also discern a growing tendency, especially among politically conservative circles, to reinstate religion in public life (the demand to renew prayer in school, prohibition of abortion, etc.). The French government faces similar demands, for example from Muslim groups. All of this makes Levinas’s analysis of food and technology as a solution to the problem of hunger, as discussed within the context of addressing the problem of secularization, look rather problematic. The technological development of agriculture in the Occident certainly has increased the production of crops and other foodstuffs significantly, but this does not alleviate the above-mentioned starvation in vast areas of the third world. Technology itself cannot put an end to the terrible situation of people and children dying from starvation that we see in many countries of Africa and Asia; they plainly embody Levinas’s thoughts on the horror of hunger as a dreadful reality. This can be overcome only by a political-social solution which, unfortunately, looks still very utopian and far away. To this end, Levinas states that a reflection on hunger ought to be the first task of our politicians (BV 14). This is something Joseph understood already when he was the Pharaoh’s minister, thus finding himself discharging an important political assignment. And he provided a reserve of food for the coming years of drought. However, what is of the essence in this discussion on secularization, as Levinas would have us think about it, is that hunger amplifies loss of faith because a person who suffers from hunger will certainly find it more difficult to believe in a beneficent God.

Levinas connects technology with secularization from another angle that also seems problematic. Technology, in his view, destroys the belief in “the pagan gods and their false and cruel transcendence. According to it certain gods — rather than God — have died.” This is a strange and rather surprising assertion. Did pagan beliefs disappear
in favor of monotheistic religions as a result of technological development? Would the astronaut’s footsteps on the moon, with all of their symbolic importance as an expression of our capacities, have finally brought about the disappearance of an old and venerable worship of the moon? Levinas characterizes the astronaut as a “half-god” (“demi-dieu”) in the wake of whose audicity at least 50 percent of the former beliefs were secularized. But why then, if we follow his argument, did technical development bring about the demise of pagan religions, but without impairing monotheism? The basic reasoning here looks unconvincing. Secularization spread mainly in the countries of the West where monotheistic religions were prevalent, and to a much lesser degree in the countries of the so-called Third World where pagan religions (and Islam) reigned supreme. Moreover, many beliefs characteristic of pagan religion were taken over by the traditions of the monotheistic religion. They attributed to God many activities that were formerly ascribed to the gods. Belief as such was not impaired. The behavior of Honi Hame’agel, the renowned miracle worker in the Second Temple Period (first century AD), for example, brought about rainfall in a manner not essentially different from that of pagan rituals aimed at the same outcome. Did this distinction between pagan gods and God derive from Levinas’s own philosophy, or did it express devotion to his Jewish faith? Whatever the answer, he certainly was right when he asserted, “Secularizing technology inscribes itself among the advancements of the human spirit, or more exactly, justifies or defines the very idea of progress and is indispensable to this spirit, even if it is not its end.”

Yet, as has already been observed, technology is not the only cause of increasing secularization; hunger too may have such an effect. According to Levinas’s philosophy, ethics gets its principal signification from the other, or more exactly from the vulnerability of the other; hunger is certainly its most salient manifestation. As concerns the implications for secularity, hunger may well represent an even more powerful factor than technology. “A starving stomach has no ears. . . . Hunger that no music can quench secularizes all this romantic eternity.” Marx proclaimed that religion is the opium of the people: it
alleviates their pain and helps the exploited and oppressed to bear their suffering. Such was the true meaning of Marx’s assertion, though it was later misinterpreted by vulgar Marxists and, along the same lines, by Levinas. Marx strove for a society that no longer has need of drugs to overcome suffering, while according to Levinas religion is defenseless against suffering: “Privation whose distress consists in despairing of this very privation.”16 But do people not look for a refuge from this despair in the lap of religion? Levinas is adamant: the secularization caused by hunger derives from questions about God and to God, but these questions are at the same time more (or perhaps less) than the outcome of mere experience. A lack of answers becomes the distant echo of the questions themselves.

Levinas tried to underscore that hunger — my hunger as well as the hunger of the other — engenders a refusal to believe in any harmonious totality, because nothing is capable of deceiving the hunger of the other person.17 This elicits my awareness of the other’s hunger and my responsibility toward the other. Moreover, hunger and starvation from hunger, as they are reflected in the face of the other, demonstrate the vanity of the conatus. When television shows us starving children, this ought to bring to our attention our responsibility to them. But although we are shocked by these views, we remain indifferent to their misery. This testifies to our stupefaction and to the absence of true ethical conviction.

What Levinas says about hunger as one of the factors of secularization in our times can prima facie remind us of Goethe’s assertion that he had lost his belief in God in the wake of the terrible earthquake in Lisbon, which Voltaire also mentioned in Candide in order to refute traditional theodicy (especially of Leibniz). However, the analogy is not exact. Levinas explains — out of strong personal commitment — the sources of increasing secularization (technology, hunger), but he does not abandon his belief in God. All of these dreadful phenomena reinforce, on the philosophical plane, his inclination to emphasize God’s transcendence. This means taking a stand against a more prevalent
view of the development of religion and philosophy in the Occident, which holds that religion drew its inspiration from the concept of the One in neoplatonic philosophy and also absorbed the rationalism of Greek philosophy. This Hellenistic heritage was then transmitted to the history of European philosophy, where it led to the separation of philosophy from religion in order to establish itself as autonomous thought. European philosophy reflects the process of emancipation from the neoplatonic tradition of immanence, emanating from the One. (In Jewish religious thought, this tendency is found in the teachings of the Kabbalah.) However, in the process Western philosophy nonetheless kept, inadvertently, the formal neoplatonic structures of return to the One, whether it be God or the idea. Modern philosophy — from Descartes through Hegel and even to Husserl — has preserved various forms of this framework, as for instance in the returning to itself of absolute thought, and the identity of the identical and the nonidentical in self-consciousness which, according to Hegel, is in no need of the other. This also applies to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, which returns to the immanence of subjectivity that externalizes itself.

Against all of this at once, Levinas affirms God’s transcendence, which is to say God’s absolute otherness. As a result, his philosophical outlook has no place for an encounter, or more precisely a relation, with the God who is completely other. The religious crisis of modernity is also a consequence of the impossibility of preserving a relation with God and of ignoring the existence of all who remain outside this (alleged) dialogue that expresses God’s love of humanity. This can remind us of some of Rosenzweig’s critique, in the third part of Star of Redemption, of the mystics who pursue only their own personal redemption. Both the religious Rosenzweig and the Levinas who drifts between religion and secularity refute the position that “I have saved my own soul.” What Rosenzweig defines by the religious concept of “redemption” — namely, responding to God’s love of humanity by transmitting this love to others — Levinas defines by the concept of “non-indifference” and responsibility to the other.
Still, one may ask: what finally distinguishes Levinas’s conception of God as the absolutely transcendent other — even if one can speak about God in the third person (i.e., about God’s *illéité*) — from a secular outlook? Is this not some modern version of deism? If we cannot think about God or conceive of God, but only deduce God’s existence from the traces God has left for us — according to a situation in which, after all, it is we humans who interpret them — then what kind of God is this? What Levinas says about God suggests he is trying to develop a philosophic language that will enable him to speak about God in a language that appeals to us moderns. All the traditional images of God as “king of the world” (*Melech ha’Olam*), “our father, our king” (*Avinu Malkenu*), and so on, that have characterized Jewish religious language for 2,000 years, appear obsolete and meaningless to enlightened persons today. Are they any more than ritual forms that convey to us the attachment of a modern Jew like Levinas to his own spiritual heritage? Levinas’s fascinating Talmudic lessons, on the other hand, are philosophical hermeneutics without theological implications. He himself elucidates these questions in his essay “A Religion of Adults” (*DF* 11–26) and emphasizes the need for “demythization,” “demythologization” and “demetaphorization.” What he says about the traces of the divine being discerned only by those who want to discern them does seem well suited to meet the mindset of an enlightened religious thinker. But one cannot overlook the fact that Levinas’s use of the concept of *transcendence* is sometimes ambivalent. It does not only characterize God’s being “beyond” (*au-delà*) but also signifies Levinas’s relation to the other person (*l’autre homme*) who is exterior to me but nonetheless shares with me a common denominator.

I do not want to define anything as God because what I know is the human. God I can define by human relations but not the other way round . . . When I have to say something about God, it always takes its point of departure from human relations . . . it is through the terms of relation to the Other that I speak of God. I do not refuse the term religious but I adopt it in order to designate the situation where the subject exists in a state of impossibility to hide himself. I do not depart from the existence of a very great or very powerful being.22
So of what does Levinas’s philosophical-religious outlook finally consist? Is he a theist who employs atheistic language or an atheist who employs theistic language? Levinas’s concept of “a-theism” (he writes it with a hyphen) carries a metaphysical and not a theological connotation. He does not deny God but repudiates all that can be derived from the traditional concept of revelation. From this point of view he is perhaps closer to Buber than to Rosenzweig, though he certainly would not accept Buber’s view that he can experience a revelation that is addressed to him personally. In Levinas’s language “a-theism” denotes nature and humankind, which is to say all that is not God. This might even arouse certain associations to the kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum: God’s self-contraction in order to make room for creation. In fact, Levinas does mention this, though it certainly does not play any role in his philosophical worldview, given its opposition to any form of mysticism. According to the view of the Kabbalah, God is infinite but vacates ontological space for a separate being that emanates from God. Perhaps such a view is consistent with Levinas’s denial of totality, which leaves room for a plurality of independent (human) beings that would entail the impossibility of evading one’s responsibility to the other. Still, in the thought that every human being must be responsible for all others — and this, of course, is the foundation of Levinas’s ethics — one seems to meet the thesis of a supreme responsibility that no ordinary human being could ever assume. The assignment seems literally superhuman. Are we then to interpret this claim as a deification of the human — homo homini deus — demanding of human beings what the religious tradition says only God can accomplish? Levinas does not think so: “The abstract idea of God is an idea which cannot elucidate a human situation. The contrary is true.”

The word God represents a concept that is religiously lucid but philosophically vague. Levinas notes that, according to the logic of occidental thought, revelation comprises elements that inevitably transgress the limits of reason. In modern philosophy this idea was put forward in the late philosophy of F. W. Schelling in the nineteenth century — “The philosophy of revelation and mythology.” In modern Jewish philosophy this trend of thought was elaborated a few decades later by
Ludwig Steinheim, and became most famous through Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*. Both Steinheim and Rosenzweig are inspired by Schelling’s later philosophy in their notion of revelation, and like him they give preference to belief over reason. Notwithstanding his great admiration for Rosenzweig, however, Levinas asserts that if one aspires to include the elements of revelation in an outlook that is acceptable to reason, such elements must be derived from philosophy and not from God. The idea of God is not certain. There is only discourse on God that springs from the above-mentioned existential situation of my responsibility to the other: “My point of departure is absolutely non-theological. That is very important to me. It is not theology that I do but philosophy.”

Although Levinas regards himself as a religious thinker, the conclusions that he deduces in his philosophy — and these are, above all, ethical conclusions — are secular *par excellence*. Modern man in the occident “aspires to try everything, to experience everything” (*NT* 36). Our highest human aspiration — what Levinas, in his talmudic lecture, calls “the temptation of temptation” — is the temptation of knowledge, and not temptations of pleasure and enjoyment. “The temptation of temptation is philosophy which is the contrary of (so-called) wisdom that knows everything without experiencing it” (*NT* 34). Such a sentence makes it seem that he identified the term “wisdom”(*sagesse*) with what we typically designate as “belief” (*croyance*). We may note, moreover, that his French word *experience*, like its English counterpart, blurs a distinction that the German preserves in two different words: *Erleben* and *Erfahrung*. Levinas strives to stress the importance of both meanings: on the one hand, experience as *Erfahrung* is acquisition of knowledge, in the sense underscored by Kant; on the other hand, and apparently more important to Levinas, experience is *Erleben*, or existential sensation, as understood by Martin Buber. Including both of these senses within itself and in the context of Levinas’s conception of plurality, “experience” designates awareness of one’s commitment and of one’s deliberate choice to restrict oneself in order to award more attention to the other.
Levinas tries to demonstrate all these problems in a highly original interpretation of the interpretation that the talmudic sages had given to the Sinaitic revelation, or perhaps more precisely, in an attempt to interpret their interpretation through the problems it raises. The sages cite the verse that says that the people of Israel “stood at the nether part of the mount” (Exod. 19:17) and offer the following commentary: “This teaches us that the Holy One hang the mountain over them like a pail and said to them, if you accept the Torah, all right, and if not, here will be your burial-place” (Tractate Shabbat, 88a). According to this strange interpretation the Children of Israel were compelled to accept the Torah and did not assent to it by their own free will. Levinas expresses his astonishment that the Torah was not embraced by free choice, but as the result of an act of violence (NT 3839). But if the Torah preceded independent and free thought, or represented its precondition, it follows, rather paradoxically, that either obedience or nonobedience to the Torah releases us from responsibility. Without thought there is no veritable responsibility. Does this not open a Pandora’s box of temptations to elude the responsibility that one cannot resist (NT 40)? Against this, Levinas insists that the responsibility of each one of us for the other is autonomous and not heteronomous. It is not derived from revelation but from our capacity for reason. This casts some doubt on the claims of some specialists of Levinas’s philosophy who argue that his notion of autonomy is also intertwined with a heteronomy, and therefore requires introspection. Levinas goes as far as possible to circumvent the concept of revelation, and speaks instead of an epiphany and of an unveiling that do not designate heteronomy.

But there is another problem to consider in this context. If Levinas criticizes the aforementioned interpretation of compulsory belief — “the mountain over them like a pail” — then how can he also and from the same perspective assert (arbitrarily, in my view) that Judaism, from its very beginning, distinguishes itself by tolerance, including religious tolerance? This has certainly not been the case. It seems to me that on this point Levinas blurs two distinct matters. If the claim comes down to supposing that Judaism has persecuted people less on account of
Then it may well seem that Levinas’s assertion expresses more or less wishful thinking. In the Bible, idolatry and defamation of God’s name were punishable by death (until the third generation); afterwards Judaism showed extreme nontolerance to the Karaites and to the Jewish “heretic” Chivi ha-Balchi in Persia; there were also the vehement polemics surrounding Maimonides’ philosophy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the ban on Spinoza, and the fierce struggles between the Lithuanian followers of Rabbi Eliyahu, “Ha’Gaon mi-Vilna,” and the Chassidim; and nowadays there is the religious coercion exercised by the religious establishment in the State of Israel and, moreover, effectuated by the secular institutions, the Knesset and the government. All of this suspends a question mark over Levinas’s claim that tolerance characterizes Judaism.

I do not wish to conclude without calling attention to some of Levinas’s reflections on a number of controversies in and about the State of Israel. Although Levinas did not settle in Israel, he was a convinced Zionist and visited the country frequently enough to be quite familiar with its prevalent issues. From the very founding of the State of Israel, he emphasized what he believed to be its religious significance, but sharply criticized the intolerance of the Messianic Zionism that spread among national-religious and rightist circles after the Six Day War of 1967. He also rejected all territorial mysticism and expressed his anxiety that slogans like “holy soil,” which became very fashionable among nationalist groups, might give birth to extreme chauvinism. Unfortunately, this has indeed happened. In his talmudic lessons, Levinas declared that “to argue in favor of Israeli soil can be based only on universal justice and not on national justice,” that is, not on religious claims. On this matter, the latter clash with the true elements of Judaism. There is an ethical limit for the state whose own establishment had been ethically necessary. “A human being is holier than the land, even of the holy land, because against a crime that is done to a human being, the holy land reveals itself in all its nudity of stones and trees.”
Still, notwithstanding his criticism of traditional religious behavior, Levinas was a religious Jew, and despite his opposition to compulsion and coercion he hoped that Israel would be a religious state; “[the state] will be religious or it will not be at all,” he wrote (DL 219). Levinas thus is not always consistent, and indeed sometimes says one thing and its opposite. And although this assertion itself looks *prima facie* intolerant, Levinas gives it a secular twist. In many places in his writings he grants special meaning to the term “re-ligio” (renewed linkage, relation) and employs it as a synonym of ethics. Hence there is no necessary bond between religion, as conceived by Levinas, and the religious parties in Israel and their claims. The chief motive for what he calls the religious quiddity of the State of Israel is the principle of justice that finds support from, among other places, the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. This we should not forget. Levinas regarded the reestablishment of the Jewish State not as a realization of a divine promise from ancient times as did most religious Jews, nor as the foundation of an independent and normal national life as did many secular Jews (though the two views sometimes overlapped). He was principally interested in the opportunity to improve the tragic situation of the Jewish people, who throughout their long history have been messengers of justice without achieving it for themselves. Perhaps, thought Levinas, it will at last be possible to found a state on the principles of social justice (DL 218).

In retrospect, this now looks quite naïve and utopian, but I will leave the matter aside. It was, in any case, the religious signification of the state as Levinas conceived of it. “The state will be religious,” a state that pursues justice. “Justice, justice, shall you pursue!” (Deut., 16:20). This leads Levinas to another distinction between religious and non-religious Jews that testifies to his ethical outlook, but once again looks somewhat arbitrary and doubtful: “And ultimately, it is in this way that we can distinguish those Jews who are religious and those who are not. The contrast is between those who seek to have a State in order to have justice and those who seek justice in order to ensure the survival of
the State” (DF218). This sentence certainly does express Levinas’s conception of (the Jewish) religion, but the present state of affairs in Israel certainly flies in its face. Many of those we might commonly understand as religious people are now included among those who consider the state and its enlargement on the whole of Eretz-Israel as the supreme goal. In contrast, many of those who emphasize the role of the state as a tool for bringing justice to all of its inhabitants are found in the secular sector. But further analysis of this phenomenon also lies beyond the scope of this paper.

One should not forget that Levinas himself understood that the operative distinction by which he approached the situation of Jews in the diaspora — religious Jews being mainly those who observe the commandments and keep a more or less religious way of life, and secular Jews being those who do not — no longer holds sway in the new era of the State of Israel. And though his own attempt to develop the religious significance of secularization does not go so far as to repudiate the religious tradition of Judaism, he nevertheless asks whether “the revolt against (religious) ritualism does not proceed from an opposition to its magic residues and does not open the access to its [Judaism’s] real essence?” (DL218–19). In this connection, he is naturally compelled by the struggle for justice reflected in the life of the Kibbutzim.31

In recent times, Levinas’s distinction between religious and nonreligious people — he generally prefers the term “nonreligious” to “secular” — has come to divide what we now recognize as the religious sector and the secular sector in Israel. The dividing line is between those who regard the state as the highest goal and those who regard the state as an important and necessary instrument in order to achieve and serve a higher goal. This would seem to bring Levinas the religious thinker interested in secularization quite close to the secular Jews who uphold a justice beyond the state itself. Put simply, Levinas wants no part of those who sanctify the tools and forget the end. From this new perspective, what he has written more than 50 years ago still preserves its importance and vitality in the complex and tragic political situation
of Israel today. However, one should not forget that except on very few occasions — most vividly, the massacre in Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon — Levinas refrained from commenting on concrete political issues facing the State of Israel.