

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

by ZE'EV LEVY

In modern Jewish thought — in that of 19th century Germany and, particularly, in that of 20th century America — one encounters various thinkers who attempt to formulate a “Jewish theology.” It is no accident that these attempts were, and are, primarily found within the liberal branches of Judaism, and some of the reasons for this will be explained below. Beginning with the periodical for Jewish theology published by Abraham Geiger in the '30s of the last century¹ through various books and manifestos in our own time (some of which will be discussed below), there have been constant efforts and attempts in this direction. Some of these will be mentioned at the end of this paper.

What follows will deal neither with the sources of Jewish theology — such as the belief in revelation, the Bible, the Rabbinic Talmud, the Kabbalah, the Talmud, medieval Jewish philosophy, etc.² — nor with its central values. Neither will it

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Translation by Jonathan Chipman,

1. *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Jüdische Theologie*, v. 1-6 (1835-1847).
2. Gershom Scholem analyzed this aspect of the problem a number of years ago in his article, “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” in his *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York, 1976, pp. 261-297.

dwell upon the impact of the two critical events of modern Jewish history — the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel — upon the thinkers who dealt with these problems. The purpose of the following reflections is to clarify the reciprocal relationship between philosophy and theology, in principle, as it is reflected in modern Jewish thought and, among other things, to attempt to determine why Jewish theology as such emerged only in the last century and whether there is, in fact, a role for theology within Judaism similar to that which it assumes in Christianity (and in Islam).

I

There can be no theology without religion, but there is a place for religion without theology as, indeed, the vast majority of religious people are not concerned with theology. This fact is of foremost importance within Judaism, which has in any event always placed the emphasis upon a religious way of life and the fulfillment of practical commandments, rather than upon obligatory principles of faith. Together with this, it should be pointed out that already medieval Jewish philosophy, even when not dealing with specifically theological problems, was characterized by the fact of a clear commitment of the philosopher to the sources of Judaism (i.e., the sacred texts) which bestowed upon it, retroactively, a certain theological character. The nature and ramifications of this commitment will constitute one of the central points to be clarified during the course of this discussion. In any event, the line of demarcation between philosophy and theology was never entirely clear, both in Jewish and in general thought. For example, Benedictus de Spinoza, one of the earliest thinkers of the modern period, who attempted to free philosophy from its ties with or even subjugation to theology, relied, perhaps unconsciously, upon a characteristic line of thought in the Jewish tradition. While, in his opinion, philosophy concerns itself with clarifying metaphysical truths, the task of theology (which Spinoza equated with religion) is to educate man to obedience and to piety, thus having nothing at all in common with philosophy. Spinoza illustrated this distinction through the critical analysis of two medieval Jewish philosophers, Maimonides and Judah al-Fakhar.³ In practice, however, Spinoza emptied the concept of theology of most of its intellectual content, which he associated with philosophy. From a Jewish view-point, this tendency was most sharply expressed in the thought of Moses Mendelssohn, for whom philosophy (which in his thought also included theology) was a universal, rational human concern, the uniqueness of Judaism being revealed in the “legislation” revealed to Israel alone in the unique Sinaitic revelation. If according to Spinoza there is room for Jewish theology, albeit within a very narrow scope which would cer-

3. See his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, London-New York, 1905 (Reprinted, New York, 1951), pp. 190-199.

tainly seem inadequate to any theologian, according to Mendelssohn there is no room at all for a uniquely Jewish theology.

II

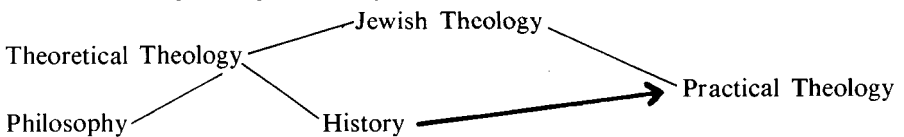
The problems of theology in the limited sense of "doctrine of Godhood" have doubtless concerned Jewish thought and Kabbalah from earliest times, but they never gave rise to a specific, systematic discipline of theology. The term "theology" was never adopted by the Hebrew language as was "philosophy." The reason for this seems to me quite simple: with the exception of a few known proselytes, all the sages of the Talmud and masters of the halakha were born as Jews. They did not come to Judaism from without, and therefore did not need to be convinced of its correctness in order to join it. In Christian circles, the situation was different: particularly in the earliest days of the Church, many were not originally Christians, but came to the Christian faith through a conscious, willed choice based upon affirmation of the principles of its faith. For this reason, they turned towards theological concerns as something self-evident.⁴ General (i.e., Christian) theology was characterized by the formulation of principles of faith which were a necessary precondition of salvation. On the other hand, Judaism, while it did rely upon a belief in revelation, never gave to belief a salvational role, unlike Christianity. Indeed, there is some debate among scholars as to whether there are obligatory articles of faith in Judaism and, in light of this, whether a Jewish theology did exist. There is a tendency to characterize medieval Jewish philosophy as "theology,"⁵ but the very fact that the various principles of faith propounded by different medieval philosophers, such as Maimonides, Ibn Daud, Albo and Crescas, were never identical in number, and were not adopted as normative, obligatory doctrines suffices to throw in question the alleged existence of a Jewish theology in the medieval period. In addition, the principles of faith propounded by Maimonides, for example — with the possible exception of the last two, concerning the coming of the Messiah and the Resurrection of the Dead — are unlike the dogmas of Christianity in that they represent principles which could have been derived through reason. It is not coincidental that they correspond approximately to the sequence of problems discussed by him in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. It is possible, therefore, to summarize to this point by saying that until the 19th century there was no Jewish theology in the defined sense of the term, as there had existed in Christianity from the Scholastic Age until the present.

4. This is, of course, a schematic picture, which does not pretend to discuss the full range of historical and spiritual factors involved in the origins of Christianity — unlike, for example, such a work as David Flusser, *ha-Yahadut u-Meqorot ha-Nošrut*, Tel Aviv, 1979 — but deliberately concentrates upon that point which is relevant to our discussion.

5. See, for example, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, s.v. "Theology," XV: 1106.

This spiritual reality was radically altered by the penetration of the process of secularization into Jewish life in modern times and, simultaneously, the weakening of the status of the *mišvot* and the ritual aspects of Judaism. Traditional *forms* of religious expression were gradually obscured by religious *ideas*. Rather than grounding Jewish religion upon the Torah as a system of *mišvot*, the emergent tendency was to see the Torah as an idea-message, to understand which theology could serve as a tool. One of the results of this ideological transformation was that in modern Jewish thought, beginning in the mid-19th century, theology was understood as a bridge between philosophy and religion. Interestingly, in the Middle Ages, when the dominant view of Jewish philosophy was that of the identity between the two truths — rational truth and revealed truth — there was in any event no need for the intermediacy of theology. Thus, Jewish theology is a relatively new phenomenon, one of the expressions of the transformations which occurred within Jewish thought during the course of the transition to modernity, reflecting its authors' wish to adapt Judaism to modern culture and life-style.

There were two central thrusts to this movement — rationalistic theology (whose earliest significant exponent was Abraham Geiger) and revelatory theology (whose main 19th century spokesman was Ludwig Steinheim, and in our own period Franz Rosenzweig). Within these there were, of course, various secondary trends. I shall attempt here to critically examine several of the major assumptions and difficulties which characterized the former trend, that is, the rationalistic one. Its central assumption is that a religion which does not rely upon reason is incapable of serving as the bearer of a faith worthy of that name, but fosters at best credulity. Thus, Jewish theology assumes the task of assuring the proper stature of Jewish religion in modern times. Geiger whom, as we have mentioned, was one of the first to formulate a Jewish theology, spoke explicitly in this context about the relationship of science to life, drawing a distinction between theoretical and practical theology. In Geiger's approach, one finds the following picture of Jewish theology, which may serve as a schematic archetype for all the attempts made in this area through the present day:



Of particular interest is the role granted here to history, which constitutes the link connecting practical and theoretical theology. Its function is to test the ideas and problems evolved by philosophy, which then become the basis for theoretical theology, against the transformations within the actual history of the Jewish people. It, history, conveys into the realm of practical theology the conclusions of its own research on what happened to the idea, whose nature was revealed by philosophy, over the course of the generations. In a similar spirit, Rabbi Prof.

Eugene B. Borowitz of New York, who is also associated with the Reform movement and has in recent years invested great effort in the formulation of a program for Jewish theology, states that, "History is the laboratory of Jewish theology."⁶ This central idea of Judaism is understood within the liberal movements as "ethical monotheism." The theologian is distinguished from the philosopher, including the religious philosopher, in that he is required to live and to act in accordance with and for the sake of his faith, and is not satisfied with mere intellectual understanding. He is an active participant in the faith whose principles he wishes to articulate. However, this does not make philosophy subject to theology, as the scholastic thinkers had thought. Philosophy maintains its own independent and autonomous status. However, on this point a certain theoretical difficulty arises with regard to the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology in modern Jewish thought.

III

Philosophy, by its nature, may not admit any preconceived ideas with respect to the subject of its investigations (whether this is at all possible is not the subject of our discussion here); it may not allow itself to be influenced by any considerations or interests other than the pursuit of truth, that is, that which is objectively revealed as the outcome of philosophical inquiry. On the other hand, theology is consciously and deliberately guided initially by certain assumptions and goals, which it seeks to justify and to strengthen. In this respect, it differs from comparative history of religions and from philosophy of religion, both of which are relatively new disciplines, for whom religion constitutes the subject of objective study. Both the comparative historian of religions and the philosopher of religion stand outside the boundaries of their subject and observe it with an objective gaze (whether or not they are themselves religious), while the theologian identifies with the object of his study from the beginning. Philosophy of religion is a reflective, critical discipline while, in Geiger's words, "The theologian must philosophize in a theological manner."⁷ However, on this point Geiger himself drew a problematical conclusion. Theology, which is *ab initio* conscious of religious truth, relies, according to him, upon philosophy, as we have seen, while the latter is required to be free of all prior assumptions. Otherwise, theology would be unable to derive any intellectual benefit from it. But is this not begging the question? What should a theologian do whose objective philosophical reflections lead to conclusions that cannot be adjusted to his aims as a theologian? Does not the theologian anticipate that his philosophical reasoning will miraculously confirm his religious outlook? Moreover, he is convinced from the outset of the result of

6. Eugene B. Borowitz, *How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today?*, Philadelphia, 1969, p. 25.

7. A. Geiger, *Einleitung in das Studium der Jüdischen Theologie*, in his *Nachgelassene Schriften II*, Berlin, 1875.

his philosophical beliefs. His subjective theological wishes dictate retroactively his objective philosophical conclusions. I am reminded of the custom of an eminent Jewish scholar and philosopher who heads the department of Judaic Studies at one of the prominent universities in the United States (himself noted for his liberality and intellectual openness) who punctuates his lectures and comments from time to time with the statement: "I, as an Orthodox Jew, think that . . ." This is precisely the source of the trouble, and in this respect there is no difference in principle between an Orthodox and a liberal Jewish thinker. One or the other: does he think what he does as the result of his own thought, in which case his declaration is superfluous; or does he think what he does because he is Orthodox, in which case we may no longer speak of the results of disinterested thought? It is impossible to enjoy both worlds simultaneously. This intellectual difficulty, which the liberal Geiger already found that he could not avoid, is one that Eugene Borowitz (mentioned above) attempts to overcome. In his opinion, Jewish theology is distinguished by the fact that, in contrast to Christian theology, which is by its nature dogmatic, it does not restrict freedom of thought. It may be systematic, but not authoritarian. Its conclusions will only obligate those who are convinced by its arguments and by its inferences.⁸

However, in principle the difficulty of the "committed" theologian remains. Indeed, one may argue that this dilemma is one which confronts every man of spirit and every individual who philosophizes, even if only once in his lifetime. The philosopher Fichte stated in the introduction to his *Wissenschaftslehre* that, "The philosophy that you choose depends upon what sort of man you are."⁹ Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the choice of a philosophical outlook, whatever may be the motivation of the choice, and the *a priori* acceptance of a given theological outlook. In the former case, all intellectual options remain open. Geiger, Borowitz, and the others who spoke of the obligation of Jewish theologians as such to engage deeply in philosophical speculation certainly did not intend that they would thereby be tempted to abandon their religious faith. If the study of philosophy is incumbent upon them by virtue of their being theologians, then certainly they would expect that this study would strengthen their religious faith and further their ethical-religious mission in practical life, and not the contrary. There is no escaping this unavoidable dilemma. Nevertheless, these theoretical difficulties do not diminish the important contribution made by Geiger and by those who followed him to the definition, in principle, of the relationship of philosophy and theology from the viewpoint of Jewish theology, as opposed to Spinoza,¹⁰ for whom philosophy and theology are concerned with en-

8. Eugene B. Borowitz, *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, Philadelphia 1968, p. 52.

9. J.G. Fichte, *Erste und Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, Hamburg, 1961 (new ed.), p. 21.

10. Spinoza, *op. cit.*, Preface (pp. 9-10) and Chapter XV.

tirely different realms (see above), and to Mendelssohn, who with regard to Judaism negated the very need for theology.¹¹ As we have already noted, Geiger was the first Jewish scholar to see a definite need for Jewish theology as an ideological-spiritual framework in which to assure the existence of Jewish religious life suitable to modern, post-Emancipation times.

IV

Let us conclude our discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology in contemporary Jewish thought. It is true that the tendency of philosophy to be subjugated to religion, as it was in medieval thought, has not continued, but rather theology attempts to utilize philosophy to further its own religious purposes. Nevertheless, the distinctive mark of traditional theology is maintained in modern Jewish theology: the preference of religious or faith truth above rational or theoretical truth. As we have already mentioned, when the two of them were considered identical there was no need of theology, an intermediary being unnecessary (see above). Thus, while philosophy is an independent discipline, theology is a functional discipline. Philosophy engages in reflections and speculations relating to religion, while theology formulates and presents the contents and principles of religion. Philosophy imposes upon religion the principles of human understanding (or at time argues that religion cannot be known by the understanding, but only by revelation), while theology infers from religion its own principles. Philosophy begins with astonishment (Plato, Aristotle), with casting doubt (Descartes) and confusion (Maimonides, Hegel), while theology starts from what might be called submission. In this respect, Spinoza's distinction, despite its sharp and extreme formulation, has not lost its pertinence. In the final analysis, the central point remains that the theologian is committed from the outset to the object of his study — religious commitment.

It goes without saying that the ends of Jewish theology may be as diverse as the philosophical views of its various exponents. The contemporary picture is certainly different from that sketched by Geiger more than a century ago. Such Jewish philosophers as Franz Rosenzweig¹² or, today, Emil Fackenheim stress what might be called a "theology of *Miṣvah*," while Martin Buber, Eugene Borowitz, and to a certain degree the late Moshe Schwarcz, notwithstanding their philosophical and religious differences, preferred what might be termed a

11 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, London, 1838, pp. 91-96, 152-155.

12. Without entering the discussion as to whether or not the term "theology" is appropriate to his thought; Rosenzweig himself introduced the second part of his *Star of Redemption* with the Greek motto, *in theologos!* (against theologians!).

“theology of the covenant.”¹³ Both of these trends emphasize the existential dimension of Jewish religiosity. These are but two of the many theological conceptions within contemporary Jewish thought. Others include those associated with the names of Leo Baeck, Abraham J. Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Richard Rubenstein, Will Herberg, Samuel S. Cohon, and others — but these go beyond the scope and subject of this paper.

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13 See Borowitz, *New Jewish Theology*, op. cit., pp. 63-64; E. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, New York, 1970; M. Schwarcz, *Hagut Yehudit nokhaḥ ha-Tarbut ha-kelalit*, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 56ff., 59ff., 116-144.