

ROSENZWEIG'S PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM

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In the fall of 1995 Bibhuti Yadav and I were invited to participate together in a workshop of Jewish and Buddhist philosophy that was held by a Philadelphia Conservative synagogue, the Germantown Jewish Center, as part of a general conference on the significance of the contemporary interface between Jews and Buddhists. The workshop appealed to me personally for a number of reasons. First, Bibhuti and I have been colleagues in the same Department of Religion for more than two decades. During that time we have developed a great respect for each other as both persons and philosophers, but we have never talked as seriously as we should about what matters to us most, viz., our respective religious commitments, mine to Judaism and his to Buddhism. Second, Buddhism today has great appeal to many Jews, especially in North America, but Judaism has yet to develop any serious theology of Buddhism.

In the past, when Islam and Christianity challenged Jewish religious identity, serious Jewish thinkers entered into serious religious and philosophical discussions with serious thinkers from the other religions. In the course of these discussions Judaism changed both in its practice and thought, and Judaism developed a fairly clear understanding of precisely what it means to be a Jew in relationship to the thought and communities of these other two religions. Yet, although Buddhism has made significant inroads into the lives of many contemporary Jews, many of whom have adopted Buddhist practices and beliefs as an enrichment of, rather than a denial of, their Jewish identity, no serious Jewish philosopher has yet tried to come to terms with what this interaction means for a genuine, authentic, viable Jewish religious and communal identity in our times. No one, that is, with one exception — Franz Rosenzweig, who gives considerable attention to Buddhism and other Asian religions in his magnum opus, the *Star of Redemption* (*Der Stern der Erlösung*. Frankfurt a. M.: J. Kaufmann, 1921. Translated into English by William W. Hallo. *The Star of Redemption*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, henceforth referred to as *The Star*.)

Now, I have a reasonably good understanding of what Rosenzweig says in *The Star*, but I have practically no knowledge of Buddhism, so I am in no position myself to evaluate whether or not Rosenzweig's fairly critical evaluation of this religion from his perspective as a Jewish philosopher is just. Bibhuti, on the other hand, has wonderful critical ability to deal with Buddhism as a philosopher, but limited knowledge of Judaism and no knowledge of *The Star*. So we decided to do the following: while reading *The Star* I would provide him with a fairly detailed summary of Rosenzweig's words. That discussion is still

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ASIA: THE NON-PLASTIC WORLD

Rosenzweig's general thesis is that, as in the case of metaphysics and God, by recognizing the problem of the limitations in the move from nothing to something, Asian religion again moves backward from the initial nothing of cosmology and world, rather than forward to the new negation that makes possible a new something in creation. He illustrates his claim in the religions of both India and China.

India

In the case of Indian religion, the focus of attention is on Buddhism (rather than Hinduism). Rosenzweig argues that Buddhism begins properly with the self as a unique particular (*Besondere*), and then Buddhism correctly moves on through the universal (*Allgemeine*) to the world essence (*Wesen*) as a concept (*Begriff*). However, in the end Buddhism collapses back into its original negation of both the human self and the world. The source of its misdirection is its error in determining world essence as a concept. What it affirms is a concept of spirit (*Geist*), but it affirms it to the exclusion of anything else, which, as such, entails the negation of the material world.

China

In the Chinese religion the focus of attention is on Confucianism (rather than Chinese Buddhism). It has the opposite problem of Indian Buddhism. Confucianism affirms the material world in its full particularity to the exclusion of the general world essence that is the spiritual world. The problem here is the world acknowledged is so individual that it leads Chinese religion in the end to move to its own negation (*Nicht*) by raising inward directed action to the status of highest action, which leads Chinese religion to lose all of the external world, for it submerges (*eintauchen*) itself into the inner world of the individual, material human self. Rosenzweig labels this two-fold abandonment of the world — into its general spirit in India and into its individual matter in the case of China — “primitive phenomenism”.

Primitive Phenomenalism

Rosenzweig condemns Asian religion's primitive phenomenism as an escape from the world. It escapes from, rather than discovers, the reality of the world because it lacks the courage (*Mut*) to raise its philosophy to the needed new level of thinking where it can grasp the true structure or order (*Gestalt*) of the world. In this sense Greek civilization carried thought beyond the level that

in progress. Is Rosenzweig's understanding of Buddhism correct, or has he merely inherited the prejudices against and misconceptions of Buddhism that were commonplace in the German universities of the early twentieth century, where Rosenzweig obviously learned whatever it is that he knew about Buddhism? Beyond historicizing Rosenzweig, is there any validity to what he says? Does Rosenzweig have any insight into what it means to be and think as a Buddhist, and, if he does, is his Jewishly rooted critique of Buddhism sound? Ultimately we can ask, are Judaism and Buddhism conceptually compatible, or are they clearly in opposition to each other? To what extent can Buddhist teachings be incorporated into Jewish life without negating that life? What can Buddhist thought add, if anything, to enriching the ever-changing tradition of Jewish belief?

What follows is a record of the beginning of this discussion. It is simply my summary (without value judgement) of what Rosenzweig says in *The Star*. It will be followed at a later time by Bibhuti's initial response to the summary, which should, in turn, produce a response by me to what Bibhuti publishes. Neither of us knows where our discussion will lead us, but we are both anxious to find out. We thank the editor of this journal, Nathan Katz, for giving us the opportunity to share our discussion in public. Our hope is that it will be as interesting to the readers as it is to us.

ROSENZWEIG'S STAR OF REDEMPTION, I:1

In Asian Religion

A very different picture of the universe emerges when we turn to the world-view of Asian religious texts. Here there is still no grasp of any source of knowledge beyond that which is naturally accessible to human beings. But the view that emerges from this data, rooted in the same exclusively empirical observations, is radically non-mythical. Here Rosenzweig has in mind the combined major religious texts of both India and China.

ASIA: THE NON-MYTHICAL GOD

India and China posit deities who simply are abstractions of power. As such they swallow life, rather than (as in the case of the Greek deities) live it, and in so doing they reduce what is to what is not. In other words, while the empirical world from which their thought begins is something (*Etwas*), the Indians and the Chinese reduce it to nothing (*Nicht*). In so doing they extend thought beyond the empirical, but the extension is a regression rather than progress. The world, as we shall see in Book Two, is a movement from a source in nothing towards an end in something, but Asian religion reverses the direction of thought back to the original nothing. In this sense, as regression, it is inferior to the static religious thought of ancient

Greece. Greek thought goes nowhere in the sense that it never transcends the world of objects given to human experience. But at least it does not move back into the womb from which that world, and all thought about that world, is born.

Specifically in the case of Indian religion, the regression occurs ritually by vocalizing syllables¹ that express divine essentiality (*Wesenhaftigkeit*) in order to invoke a power that negates into itself all that is. By this way of recitation Indians affirm a deity in form, but what they are really doing is negating a negation, i.e. affirming a *Nichtnicht*, beyond which nothing remains. This nothing-that-remains is the God of Buddhism. It is a deity that is absolutely, purely nothing.

China

In the case of China the main religion in consideration, Taoism, is a kind of atheism, for here God is not a nothing, but is nothing at all. In Taoism the "power of heaven" is identified as the source of all activity, but its act is nothing, viz. it is the concept of *Wu Wei*, which is a nothing act. Hence Chinese religion presupposes a non-act as the foundation of all action. In this way it is, no less than Indian religion, a regression, for it is a reverse motion, viz. a motion from the something (action) perceived in this sensate world back to an original nothing (non-action). One (final) step beyond the regression of Asian religions is to what Rosenzweig calls the "primitive atheism" of the people whom he identifies as "heathens."

C. Primitive Atheism

Again, primitive atheism is a step beyond the absolute irrecoverable negation of the Asian religions. Heathens are not able fully to enter into the empirical realm of the living precisely because there is a living voice closed off to them, viz. the voice of God. But they are not totally non-living or dead because they are not, as a people, nothing. They live collectively on into the future through producing art. In their art they preserve for history what was their life and the laws of their life, although that life is severely limited by its self-containedness, i.e. by its non-openness to the voice of deity from beyond the confines of the sensately perceivable.

With his discussion of the most deprived form of human life in society, that of heathen primitive atheism, Rosenzweig introduces what will become the central methodological concern in his discussion of religion in Part Three, the realm of aesthetics. It will not be fully developed until Part Three because, as revelation brings human consciousness beyond the limits of human logical reason, so art enables the religious to reach beyond what they can believe exclusively from revelation. Art is able to be introduced here in Part One, because even those human societies most deprived of divine presence still have art. But the art considered at this level is itself very limited.

Asian civilization achieved. While the former's philosophical insight remained inferior to that of Asia, viz., Greek philosophy never adequately grasped the inadequacy of thought limited to the plastic world of sensible objects, Greek civilization developed forms of art that transcend the limitations of its philosophical view point. The source of that insight is the inner form of the central foundation principle of Western aesthetics.

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ASIA: THE NON-TRAGIC HUMAN

The analysis of ancient Greek religion is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two movements from origin to end that characterize the elemental human. On one hand, Greek philosophy (particularly in the case of Aristotle, and especially when he defines the human as "a political animal") emphasized the human movement from individuality to personality, and in so doing, placed the human almost exclusively within the physical world of politics and relations with other individuals. On the other hand, Attic drama emphasized the human movement of its heroes from initial character to final distinctiveness, and, in so doing, placed the human almost exclusively outside of the worlds of both the physical and the moral. (It is this isolation from others that makes it "tragic.") In the case of the religions of Asia, these two tendencies are divided between the religions of India and China.

India

On one hand, the religions of India attribute too much to character and distinctiveness (*die Besonderheit*) and nothing to individuality and personality. For example, Indian Buddhism posits a radical, unconditional ideal of the heroic, perfected, redeemed self, free in character from all forms of relation, including caste, family, sex and age. This perfection is a constant, ever-increasing immersion into the original nothing (*Nichts*), which is most complete in death where the last remnants of any individuality, including the distinctiveness of being redeemed, is stripped away. By placing exclusive emphasis on the one pole of the new thinking's analysis of the elemental human, Indian Buddhism becomes a total, destructive (in the terms that Nietzsche reserved for Judaism and Christianity) nihilism.

China

In contrast, the religions of China attribute too little to character and distinctiveness, and too much to individuality and personality. Rosenzweig

gives two examples. First is the way Chinese religion pictures the sage, especially Confucius. Second is the way Chinese poetry portrays humanity, especially the verses of Li Po. However, he notes one important exception to his generalization, and it is with this exception that he concludes the paragraph. He notes that Lao-Tzu transcended Chinese radical individuality in the direction of Indian radical character when he posited the concealment of the self as the ideal of the perfect one. This exception brings us back to Indian and Greek religion and to the primary philosophical lesson that Rosenzweig draws from all of these so-called elemental religions, viz., the form of philosophy that he calls "primitive idealism."

Primitive Idealism

In general, the philosophy implicit in all of Asian religion is that the human, in marked distinction to Greek religion, is described as "pathos" rather than tragedy. "Pathos" is that art form whose subject matter is the self-suffocation of the hero through misfortune in the world. It stands in marked contrast to "tragedy," where the hero asserts a defiant will in the face of worldly adversity rather than succumbing to it. According to Rosenzweig, Asian art has no tragedy for two reasons, one consequent upon the one-sided view of India, and the other consequent upon the opposite myopia of China. First, in the case of India, character is too conditional (*Bedingung*), because of the ideal of self-overcoming (*Selbstüberwindung*). Second, in the case of China, there is not sufficient individual volition because of the ideal of self-concealment (*Selbstverheimlichung*). Once again, Rosenzweig concludes by judging the Greek forms of religion and philosophy, despite their inability to think beyond the level of the elemental, superior to those of Asia, despite their correct initial philosophical insight that the origin of everything is in nothing rather than in something. Only Greek thought, especially in its drama (and not in its philosophy) grasped both kinds of elemental movements that describe human life, and in so doing, because they had not yet recognized that there is more to reality than the elements, reached the more advanced judgment that human life is tragic. It is in the characterization of the tragic hero that elemental new thinking tells us all that there is to learn about human life.

¹ For example, when practitioners of at least one Indian religion recite "Hare Krishna."