

Abraham Heschel's Philosophy of Judaism as a Phenomenology of Religion

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Abraham Joshua Heschel belongs to those modern Jewish thinkers who do not have a problem in combining philosophy with faith. In Maimonides' terms, he may even have reached the prophetic status, being able to "plunge into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion",¹ but with one remarkable difference—although he mastered the "divine science" and, in Maimonides' words, his intellect attained an enormous strength, still, defying Maimonides' expectations, "all the gross faculties in the body"² did not cease to function. On the contrary: Heschel himself, as a philosopher of religion, stresses that "philosophy of religion is not philosophy of a philosophy"³ but philosophy of concrete things, events etc. In other words, a genuine religious philosophy is not a speculation on intellectual constructs such as notions, concepts, dogmas etc., but an observance of the existing world and the effort to understand it, to gain insight into it, to grasp its meaning. Heschel thus implicitly rejects Maimonides' strictly rationalist position by attempting to get the sense of *all* existence through rational analysis of *empirical* reality, particularly of its, as he puts it, "holy dimension".

In this way, Heschel joins those modern students of religion who prefer to reflect on religious *facts* rather than on religious *ideas*. Therefore his religious philosophy is not philosophy of a philosophy, or philosophy of a theology, it can be characterized rather as a philosophically-oriented *phenomenology of religion*. When speaking of Heschel's phenomenology of religion, we should not have in mind a merely descriptive discipline with no normative claims. Although he speaks about religion, or religions, as such, he is always already "biased": His worldview is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, his starting point is the monotheistic concept, tacitly conceiving of the ultimate power beyond this world as a personal and ethical being. Despite these "limitations", or maybe just because of them, one element of his phenomenological philosophy of (the Jewish) religion very much resembles one aspect of the general phenomenology of religion, as represented by the classics of the discipline, such as Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, or Gerardus van der Leeuw.⁴ The idea of the *irrational* is, after all, at the root of all religious reality.

As the above mentioned authors, Heschel, too, presupposes something that transcends the earthly reality that gives it its ultimate meaning. We encounter this "something" in rare moments of insight, in flashes of understanding, which come from "beyond" and vastly outdo our rational capacities; Heschel calls it "the ineffable". This encounter produces in us what is usually called a "religious experience"; but through a mere theoretical investigation of the religious experience, even in all its aspects – psychological, sociological, anthropological and other – we are not able to grasp the *essence* of religion. The reductionist, apparently disinterested, "objective" research into religion may produce a lot of interesting stuff but it misses its aim – to understand what a religion is about. To use Heschel's parable: Experts in religion may be similar to experts in the theory of verse-making, quite unable to compose poetry. There must be a capacity for being approached, for being able to receive the call from beyond, and for being able to adequately respond. In the phenomenology of religion, this

¹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1963. Volume II, Part III, Chapter 51, p. 619.

² *Ibid.*, p. 620.

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone. A Philosophy of Religion*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York 1966, p. 55.

⁴ Also these "general" phenomenologists are "biased": they are Christian theologians by education.

capacity is called *sensus numinis*, and Heschel speaks of “the sense of the ineffable” that lies at the beginning of religion.⁵

Speaking of philosophy of religion, therefore, we have to renounce the widespread concept of philosophy as a strictly rational-analytical discipline, as a kind of scientific methodology. To philosophize about religion does not simply mean to use our intellectual capacities, to deal with notions, to create concepts; we must be able to plunge into philosophy, to swim in the ocean of philosophical thinking, so to speak. We have to be able to expose ourselves to challenges from without and to actively respond by acts of reverence which is, according to Heschel, “not a psychological state but a fundamental norm of human consciousness, a *categorical imperative*”.⁶ Just as there is no impartiality, no “neutrality” within religion, so there is no detachment, no “objectivity” within philosophy. To philosophize about religion means to attempt to rationally articulate what is beyond words, “the ineffable”. This means that we cannot create a sort of scientific theory of religion⁷ which would be based on notions, *logoi*, words; this capacity of our reason may be applied only in the sphere of *purely* empirical reality. But it does not mean that we have to give up all rational reflection on religion. As “citizens of two realms”, *sacred* and *profane*, that are absolutely separated from each other, we use two different approaches: “The tangible phenomena we scrutinize with our reason, the sacred and indemonstrable we overhear with the sense of the ineffable.”⁸ We cannot mediate between these realms, “we can never fill the gap”, but we can “set up a system of references” between the two.⁹

This is possible only because philosophy and religion have common roots, similar origins. “Philosophy begins in wonder,”¹⁰ Heschel quotes Plato, faith begins in awe: “In awe and amazement the prophets stand before the mystery of the universe.”¹¹ Both philosophy and religion strive to discover the great mystery of being, both aim at an understanding of the ultimate meaning of all existence. To get such understanding is neither to step aside from reality and watch from afar, nor to get “knowledge” of secret laws of nature in order to be able to exploit them for the satisfaction of our needs, either scientifically, or magically. Genuine philosophy is not science, genuine religion is not magic. “Philosophy is the love and quest of wisdom,”¹² Heschel returns to the ancient meaning of the term, “faith is found [...] in a passionate care for the marvel that is everywhere.”¹³ Philosophy and religion are only different ways to the same goal—the goal of coming to terms with the ultimate sense of all that is.¹⁴ Gerardus van der Leeuw speaks of two different roads to the ultimate meaning: The first is the *horizontal* one that is “the extension of life to its uttermost limits”,¹⁵ reaching for

⁵ In the opening section of Rudolf Otto’s famous book *The Idea of the Holy* the author warns: “The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further...” Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London – New York – Toronto 1928, p. 8.

⁶ *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 27.

⁷ “There is a perpetual temptation for the analytic mind to classify religion under strict heads, to seal its facts with preconceived labels, as if reality had to fit the handy trade-marks of our theories” (ibid., p. 229).

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰ *Theatetus* 155D.

¹¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1986, p. 55.

¹² Ibid., p. 55.

¹³ *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 89.

¹⁴ For many phenomenologists of religion, the ultimate sense means *religious* sense.

¹⁵ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London 1963, p. 680.

the religious significance of things, “on which no wider nor deeper meaning whatever can follow. It is the meaning of the whole: it is the last word. But this meaning is never understood, this last word is never spoken; always they remain superior, the ultimate meaning being a secret which reveals itself repeatedly, only to remain eternally concealed. It implies an advance to the farthest boundary, where only one sole fact is understood—that all comprehension is ‘beyond’; and thus the ultimate meaning is at the same moment the limit of meaning”.¹⁶ There is an absolute frontier humans can draw near to, but which we are never able to reach. The second road is *vertical*, “it is a revelation, coming from beyond that frontier”. We can glimpse it in our experience, through our “spiritual eyes” but we cannot experience it fully. “We can never understand God’s utterance by means of any purely intellectual capacity: what we can understand is only our own answer...”¹⁷ Heschel, too, speaks of the incomprehensibility of what is beyond, of the “ineffable”, but also of the necessity of our answer to a call coming from beyond – and this is in the reach of our comprehension. Philosophy as reasoning might represent the horizontal way, religion as revelation the vertical way; philosophy of religion the rational articulation of our reaction towards revelation, which is based on our sense of the ineffable: “The search of reason ends at the shore of the known; on the immense expanse beyond it only the sense of the ineffable can glide.”¹⁸ Or in other words: “Philosophy begins with man’s question; religion begins with God’s question and man’s answer.”¹⁹ Philosophy of religion, then, means the reflection on our answer to the divine call—which is religion.

In the beginning of his monumental work, van der Leeuw explains that to study religion as an object is possible only with some reservation: We can take religion as an object of our research, or, in Husserl’s words, as an intentional object, as “something” that transcends our subjective situation, as a phenomenon. In reality, however, the object of religion is *us* as exploring subjects; what we study as an object is in fact the subject of religion, God. To put it differently, in our effort to understand, in our “horizontal” way, we suddenly realize that we have been “removed to some foreign region [...]”. We have not “only a firm awareness (*Ahnung*) of the superior, but [we are] also directly seized by it.”²⁰ So, the understanding of religion (which means all understanding, understanding as such), van der Leeuw goes on, “ultimately reaches the limit where it loses its own proper name and can only be called ‘becoming understood’. In other words: the more deeply comprehension penetrates any event, and the better it ‘understands’ it, the clearer it becomes to the understanding mind that the ultimate ground of understanding lies not within itself, but in some ‘other’ by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier.”²¹

When we turn back to Heschel, we can also find two ways of approaching the ultimate: the way of philosophy and the way of religion. “To the philosopher God is an *object*, to men at prayer He is the *subject*.”²² In saying that, Heschel has in mind the traditional philosopher–theologian. But from the point of view of the philosopher–phenomenologist, philosophy of religion means an understanding description of religious phenomena that arise in our meeting with the ineffable, with God, in full awareness of our being exposed to him: “The task is not to know the unknown but to be penetrated with it; *not to know* but *to be known* to Him.”²³

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 680.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 680 – 681.

¹⁸ *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁰ *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 681.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 683 – 684.

²² *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 128.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Heschel's philosophy of religion is an attempt to philosophically articulate a primordial experience of the divine which is shared by all humans.²⁴ This brings us to a similar question asked by phenomenologists of religion, whether the *sensus numinis* is a general "property" of human nature, or it is a capacity reserved only for a few—religious persons. The prevailing view has been, since the time of Rudolf Otto, that the ability to sense the divine, to have a *religious* experience, is common to all people, at least *in potentia*. Otto considers the holy as an *a priori* category, in some way parallel to Kant's categories of pure reason; he himself calls it "a 'pure reason' in the profoundest sense, which [...] must be distinguished from both the pure theoretical and the pure practical reason of Kant, as something yet higher or deeper than they."²⁵ This "pure reason" enables us to have religious experience, to get religious "knowledge" as a *synthesis* of rational and irrational elements, felt as necessary, as *self-evident*.²⁶ Van der Leeuw is methodologically more analytical and precise: He knows that the moments of insight, which are a part of the "pure" life, of "primal experience", are transient, ephemeral—we are not able to catch them, to make them directly an object of a theoretical analysis.²⁷ What we can only do, is to *reconstruct* them. The reconstruction means "the sketching of an outline within the chaotic maze of so-called 'reality', this outline being called *structure*. Structure is a connection which is neither merely experienced directly, nor abstracted either logically or causally, but which is *understood*."²⁸ In a certain sense, Heschel, too, considers the search for the ineffable a reconstruction: Although we can get sudden insights into the mysteries of reality – and this possibility exists only due to "vertical" revelation - we can really grasp and *understand* them through consequent reflection and articulation. When there is not such a "reconstruction", people *forget* that primordial experience.²⁹ It is therefore necessary to have a philosophy of religion which "may be defined as religion's reflection upon its basic insights and basic attitudes, as *radical self-understanding of religion in terms of its own spirit*."³⁰ Philosophy of religion cannot be a mere theoretical description of religion's external expressions; it must be an engaged and *understanding description* of religious phenomena that will enable their *essence* to show forth.³¹

Heschel's phenomenological philosophy of religion is "a mode of systematic reflection on consciousness which leads to intuitive cognition".³² A necessary condition for such a philosophy is the acceptance of the ineffable, the irrational foundation of all reality which, in a synthesis with the rational aspect of that reality, allows for the religious experience which is not only perceived spontaneously but also methodically grasped: "Only those will apprehend religion who can probe its depth, who can combine intuition and love

²⁴ "The intuition of God is universal, yet there is hardly a universal form – with few possible exceptions – to express it." *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 118.

²⁶ This self-evidence is not a *logical* necessity; it is rooted in deeper, *pre-logical* strata of the human mind: "We are forced to assume an obscure, *a priori* knowledge of the necessity of this synthesis, combining rational and non-rational." *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁷ "For the 'primal experience', upon which our experiences are grounded, has always passed irrevocably away by the time our attention is directed to it." *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 671.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 672.

²⁹ According to E. Kaplan, Heschel believes that all people have some religious experience although they might forget it. This can be proven „only by re-experiencing revelation“. See Edward K. Kaplan, *Heschel as Philosopher: Phenomenology and the Rhetoric of Revelation*, in: *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 21, No. 1, February 2001, p. 1.

³⁰ *God in Search of Man*, p. 8.

³¹ For Heschel, the privileged way to the hidden meaning, to the essence of religious phenomena, is the phenomenological description of human *consciousness*: "By penetrating the consciousness of the pious man, we may conceive the reality behind it." *Ibid.*

³² *Heschel as Philosopher*, p. 1.

with the rigor of method, who are able to find categories that mix with the unalloyed and forge the imponderable into unique expression.”³³

³³ *God in Search of Man*, p. 8.