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# Atheistic Theology: From the Old to the New Way of Thinking

FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

## TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) was born in Cassel, Germany, into a socially prominent Jewish family. He studied medicine and philosophy at the universities of Göttingen, Munich, Freiburg, and Berlin, receiving his Ph.D. in 1912 for his dissertation on Hegel's political philosophy. At the outbreak of the first world war, Rosenzweig was sent to the Balkan front where, on postal cards sent home to his family, he wrote his major work, *The Star of Redemption*, in which he developed a theology of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Stricken in 1922 with a fatal paralysis which was to leave him entirely bereft of the ability to write or speak, Rosenzweig (with the aid of his wife and a laborious signal system developed between them) displayed great spiritual courage by continuing his work in the midst of great adversity. It was during this period in his life that he, with Martin Buber, translated the entire Old Testament, founded and directed an adult college for Jewish learning, and wrote innumerable essays. Among his close associates at this time were Erich Fromm, Martin Buber, Ernst Cassirer, and Hermann Cohen.

Although it is now rather generally recognized that Franz Rosenzweig is one of the most significant theologians of our time (he has been heralded as one of the first existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century), only a small fragment of his writings have appeared in English. In translating this article, written by him in 1914 at the very beginning of his career, we have attempted to make a small yet significant part of his work available to the general public.

Footnotes have been added by the translators and a few explanatory words or phrases inserted in the text. Certain minor omissions have been indicated in the usual way.

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The following pages attempt to describe a still young yet apparently strong direction in modern Judaism, along with certain objections which may be levelled against it. Whether or not this is successfully done, waits to be seen.

In the past few years a certain development in Protestant religious thought has occurred which non-Protestants have regarded as rather peculiar, that is,

a departure from the Life-of-Jesus theology. The Life-of-Jesus theology was dead even before Drews,<sup>1</sup> with insufficient means, attempted to kill it; the battles over the historicity of Jesus have made this apparent to everyone; the genuine work took place before.

The roots of this part of liberal theology, which in the nineteenth century had become more and more the centre of German neo-Protestantism, lay in the eighteenth century. The origins of the Life-of-Jesus theology are not to be found in those known attempts of the Wolfenbüttler Fragmentist<sup>2</sup> and in the related and less significant early attempts of the Life-of-Jesus research, but rather in the eighteenth-century writings of Lessing, Herder, Kant, and other less significant thinkers around them, who attempted to present the human life of Jesus as the life of the great Teacher and Christianity as the teaching of this Teacher. These products of the Enlightenment are part of the primitive critical science of history and not of constructive systematic theology. . . . If it was possible [for them] to show [that] the spiritual powers in the "teaching of Jesus" could give significant meaning to their times, it was also possible [for them] to show that Christianity could exist apart from the dogma of Christ. In the place of the religion about Jesus, came, to speak in the words of Lessing, the "religion of Jesus." The Enlightenment – as generally understood, if this was possible – could make peace with the strongest tradition of the past; the true Christianity, namely the Christianity of Jesus, taught nothing else than that which the tradition itself taught; only the church which had concealed the Christianity of Jesus with the Christ of Christianity was to be removed; Christianity itself remained vital and emerged once again in its original form. Now, however, instead of believing in the God-man, it was important to be taught by the Teacher himself.

But this proved impossible. The Romantic view that the world should be ruled by dynamic individuality and not teaching as such (even if it taught the truth itself) made the view of Jesus as Teacher obsolete even before it could be clearly formulated. According to this new view, he could not have been the Teacher with whose appearance it was supposed that "the time was fulfilled." Schleiermacher found the right phrase when he said "that the emergence of a revelation in a single person was prepared in human nature, and was to be viewed as the highest of its spiritual powers." Therefore Christianity, today as well as eighteen-hundred years ago, grew out of the [view] of Jesus as "personality" and not as "Teacher." "Personality" was no phenomenon of the past, no dead matter; for the contemporaries of Goethe realized that, immanent in a human life, there is a significance which transcends the killing force of history. It was according to this view, so it seemed, that the existence of Jesus could be understood, indeed had to be understood, if one was determined to evade dogma.

1. Arthur Drews (1865–1935).

2. This appellation refers to Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768).

Strauss<sup>3</sup> grandiose undertaking to understand the origin of Christianity purely in terms of the overpowering necessities and eternal truth of history . . . failed, not because of the indignation of the watchmen of Zion,<sup>4</sup> but because of the opposition of the Romantic movement, which considered personality as the driving force in history. Only Strauss himself fully realized this when he published – a generation after the first – his second life of Jesus, in which Christianity, explained in terms of the nature of myth, receded behind the attempt to sketch the man Jesus as an individual character.

At that time this tendency was already victorious all along the line. Strauss himself was, as is well known, drawn into it by the stir which Renan<sup>5</sup> created by combining the German views of history and research, which have for decades since then been the hobby-horse of liberal theology. The confidence with which one believed oneself to have established the result of a critical science of history in the holy of holies of faith, cannot be understood, if one does not consider the concealed presupposition common to all: the infinite value of personality. The man who was to emerge from the unbiased interpretation of the sources<sup>6</sup> – which had been concealed by dogmatic interpretation – had to be a timeless power, for “neither time nor power can destroy a form which emerges in the process of life.” The life of Goethe was the tacit model upon which German liberal theology attempted to base the life of Jesus. Individual research was in accord with the atmosphere of the time.

They both carried within themselves the remedy for their own illnesses, namely, the feeling that no man understands the other; . . . that personality remains imprisoned within the walls of its own individuality. This view began to replace the supposition that the life of another human being ought to be grasped in its full uniqueness. . . . This [supposition] was to be for mankind, what the God-man of the dogma could have been. [Those involved in this] research, on the other hand, became increasingly self-critical and found themselves more and more often on paths which led away from the intended goal. They believed that they were able to detect features of personal individuality in the human portrayal of Jesus which were so deeply rooted in the spiritual soil of his time and people that it appeared increasingly more difficult to overcome the “peculiarity” of the portrayal of his character which had been gained by scientific method. The never-silenced doubts of the theological Right as well as the Left were heard among those engaged in this research. The mere man<sup>7</sup> could not tolerate the spotlight of faith in which they had attempted to place him.

Was it possible, perhaps even necessary, to abandon him entirely, and – after one had suffered shipwreck with the one half of the dogmatic paradox,

3. David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), the German theologian who in 1835 published his famous *Life of Jesus*.

4. The phrase “watchmen of Zion” applies to the traditionalists.

5. Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

6. I.e., Christian sources.

7. I.e., Jesus.

true man and true God – to return to the second half? Was the philosophical theology a substitute for the historical? Was the Christ idea a substitute for the Life-of-Jesus idea? Or are we to gain the courage for the total paradox? And will it be possible to move the concept of the historical-superhistorical revelation into the centre of science? This decision stands at present before the scientific consciousness of Protestantism. From here will arise the controversies of the near future.

Although Jewish thought has always stood in lively relation to Christian scientific thought – sometimes, as in scholasticism, the influencing, sometimes, as in the nineteenth century, the influenced – it could not produce an immediate parallel to the described movement. The problem of personality could not, according to the character of our dogmatics, have the central significance for us that it did naturally for Christian dogmatics. It is only by being in the general intellectual trend that our science has witnessed at first hand the history of Christian theology: in the nineteenth-century, German Christian theology in particular. After the great attempted religio-philosophical systems of the first part of the century . . . there came about, in our theology as well as in Christian theology, a period of retreat into detailed historical research. This research has for decades been characterized by apologetic rather than independent systematic thought. It was Cohen's<sup>8</sup> rationalistic reinterpretation of the concept of revelation which was the most significant example of the "re-awakening of philosophy" in our midst. In the last few years the [notion of] the Chosen People as receivers of the revelation has been placed once again in the focal point of systematic investigation.

Those older religio-philosophical systems of the nineteenth century had tried to render this difficult concept inoffensive or unobjectionable. A softening of a similar kind developed in classic German philosophy with the concept of the Christ figure. Just as this was reduced to the idea of the ideal man, the idea of the Chosen People was among us reduced to the idea of the ideal human society. In both cases elements of the divine . . . were softened. It is not difficult to guess why there was at that time no attempt to develop a systematic account of the idea of the Chosen People as bearers of the foundations of Judaism. Moreover, this humanization of him who was until now held to be divine<sup>9</sup> – by which the abandonment of the notion of a human life of Jesus recommended itself to the Christian theologian of that time – could also appear as the tempting result of a Jewish-People theology. A notion of a human life of Jesus could result from the identification of the notions of God-man and ideal-man. Yet no theologically workable representation of the Jewish people could have resulted from the corresponding Jewish identification of the [notions of] Chosen People and ideal-mankind. While the [notion of the] man Jesus promised, on the basis of such an identification, to gain the

8. Hermann Cohen (1842–1918).

9. I.e., Jesus.

power of real existence, the notion of the Jewish People would, on such an identification, have lost all of its substance theologically; it<sup>10</sup> would have turned into a chance bearer of a notion which would not have been in accord with its existence. The reason [for this] is obvious and is already acknowledged. The "Kantian" concept of the ideal-man joined congenially with the "Goethian" concept of ideal-individuality. The concept of ideal-mankind, on the other hand, seemed then to conflict with [the concept] of the individuality of a single people. The peculiar attempts in this direction which arose at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Fichte's and Hegel's Germany were intended primarily to unite the concepts of people and mankind in such a way that the people were depicted as the bearer of ideas drawn from within themselves – ideas without which mankind would perish. Hegel's teaching that the world's historical peoples would die after having fulfilled their historical missions, lay in the natural consequences of such a national self-consciousness. With this notion of the relation between peoplehood and mankind a Jewish science – for which Judaism was an eternal existent – was useless. It<sup>11</sup> would have required a theory which would have enabled it to regard the pure existence, as well as the achievement, of a people, as an eternal necessity of mankind. Such an analogue for the romantic notion of personality was not yet developed for the notion of peoplehood.

In recent decades a change has come about. A notion of peoplehood emerged, which, although it was related to the older notion of peoplehood in German Idealism, was essentially new. This new notion of peoplehood gained the status of eternal existence.<sup>12</sup> He who is capable of penetrating the pseudo-naturalistic veils of the race-idea . . . recognizes here the attempt to transform the notion of peoplehood so that it finds justification within itself rather than in its actual achievements. The naturalistic and unspiritual features of this new concept have given it the strength to do this. Like a product of nature, the people exist unconcerned and without consciousness. Any question concerning the meaning of this existence seems to have lost its validity. Yet in truth it remains as valid as ever; indeed it was only for its sake that this seeming despiritualization of the idea of people into the idea of race occurred. . . . In the eyes of the philosopher the people, which now no longer lives or dies for the sake of supranational purposes, finds within itself the right to live. And where there is now a determination to anchor this right in a historico-philosophical context, it can no longer be said of a people, as it could a hundred years ago, that through it the world-renewing "idea" is carried out, after which then, an empty shell, it may be discarded; but now it is understood thusly, that the world will be made whole through the character of the people. By that, however, the unchanging character of the people acquired a

10. I.e., the Jewish people.

11. I.e., a Jewish science.

12. *Daseinsewigkeit*.

tremendous significance, and on the basis of this concept of "national character" for the historic people, a similar evaluation of its real existence was possible, as it was acquired for the historical man<sup>13</sup> through the concept of personality. It was now possible for an atheistic theology to develop in Jewish thinking.

We see this happening in our midst. Now, instead of showing – in the eternity of the philosophical thought or in the temporality of the historical process – the human under the power of the divine, the divine is shown to be the self-projection of the human against a sky of myth. Here the people is understood in human terms, and as such offers itself as the object of faith to a thoroughly positivistic generation. In a similar way the Life-of-Jesus theology was convinced that it could evade dogma by pointing with all force to Jesus the man, and only the man. The possibility that such a purely human reality . . . was untenable was first as little considered on the Christian side as it was on the Jewish side; the satisfaction [of theologians] in having found an object of faith which was this-worldly and "free of metaphysics" kept them from doubt. It was fully realized that a live people, about which any statement can and must be immediately tested against "reality," poses difficulties . . . totally different [from those concerning] the life of an individual who had disappeared from the earth nineteen hundred years ago. This led to an all the more bold construction of the relationship which existed between faith and the object of faith. Whereas in Strauss' criticism of the traditional picture of faith the rationalistic humanization of the Christ figure developed into the Life-of-Jesus theology, in [Judaism] the rationalistic deification of the people developed into the Jewish-People theology. The Godhead of Christ as viewed by Strauss is the mythological product of the spirit of the primitive church. The eternity of the Jewish people is demonstrated [on the other hand] in the production of the "myth."

In both cases the myth is the superhuman regarded as a product of the human. That the Christ myth, according to Strauss, did not originate from, but crystallized into, the figure of Jesus, while the covenant-of-God myth originated from the Jewish people, is indeed a difference which is related to the already referred to difference between the Eternal People and the deceased Individual. Yet in both cases the significance [lies in the point] that man's believing attitude towards the content of faith becomes explainable – explainable in human terms. This affords here as there<sup>14</sup> the introduction of the pagan concept of the relation between the believer and the object of his belief, between man and God, into the science of the revealed religions. This world-historical antithesis of "mythology and revelation" ought not to have been recognized in vain; it is the highest triumph of a theology antagonistic

13. I.e., Jesus.

14. I.e., in Judaism as in Christianity.

to revelation . . . to invalidate revelation entirely by depicting it as mythology. Furthermore, in both cases the old faith is rendered obsolete by rational explanation, while the new faith – the positivism of the life of Jesus as well as the Chosen-People theology – is built on the rejected rock of the old, in fact by the very same builders who have rejected the rock. For this, the concept of the myth needed the inner strength which had been immanent in it since the German Romantic movement. Where myth is created, there the heart of history pulsates. What is recognized in this way as myth, however, ceases to be true in the same sense. It is by the historical reality to which the crystals of myth cling that myth becomes a reality for the faith. And if it<sup>15</sup> gains significance from yet another side, for instance from personality or, more recently, peoplehood, then nothing stands in the way of its deification; the myth is a light which shines forth from this [reality] itself; and it shines forth independently of the glory of the Lord.

Therein lies the deepest meaning of the whole movement. The distinction between God and man, which was a stumbling block for all new and old paganism, appears to be abolished; the offensive notion of revelation as the pouring forth of a superior content into an unworthy vessel is silenced. Yet something of it remains and indeed has to remain, for once the thought of revelation has attached itself to an historical reality it becomes so coloured by it that it is entirely impossible simply to reinterpret it. . . . Here now, the atheistic theology helps itself by a peculiar scheme by which it transforms the breaking-in of the active divine upon the passive human into a mysterious and immediate – or only by its own tension mediate – polarity within the human itself. Instead of God becoming human, the humanity of God is maintained; instead of his coming down to the mountain of the giving of the Law, the autonomy of the moral law is maintained; and instead of the revelation story,<sup>16</sup> existing human nature is maintained in which history manifested itself more than it<sup>17</sup> would be subject to history. The duality immanent in the human, which must not be denied, was now to be understood as the “character” or “nature” of the human. [For those who were engaged in the Life-of-Jesus research] there was in the life of Jesus a dichotomy between the “finite” and the “infinite”<sup>18</sup> or between the “Jewish” and the “supra-Jewish” in his character. In addition there was the task to understand, as a necessary phenomenon . . . , the sad fact of his emergence or at least his appearance among the Jews. And finally [they] had to distinguish within him an absolutely unexplainable [and] unique self-consciousness of his calling from the humanly intelligible remnant of his consciousness. In a corresponding way there developed among us a notion of the “polarity” of the Jewish character. This

15. I.e., reality for the faith.

16. I.e., Moses at Sinai.

17. I.e., human nature.

18. *Zeitlichem*.



“polarity,” which exists in the people itself, is more than the tension between the demand of the Law and the desire of the heart; more also than the conflict between the inspiration of the moment and the routine everyday, or between “mythical” and “rationalistic” Judaism. It means here the tension between the election of the Chosen People and the People itself. It is only this latter tension which possesses the uniqueness, which is in general attributed to the Jewish “polarity”; only it heightens the contrast – as it can be traced out in the character of each people and in general of each living being – to the immeasurability of a metaphysical tension. It is only from this ultimate separation that there can result for our people the eternal meaning of their existence, namely, the constantly rejuvenating desire to reconcile absolute duality with absolute unity.

We see this desire for unity – the most Jewish of concepts – being established by our more recent theologians as the crowning of their vision of the Jewish people. It is, indeed, especially on this point that they depart most consciously from tradition. While traditional Jewry poses to the Jew the task of unity on the basis of the revealed unity of God, and allows the acknowledgement of the future Kingdom of God to precede the acceptance of the God-ordered way of life, this interrelation between man and his God is now regarded as an historical sub-case of the immanent longing for the unity of life which was always the lasting character of the Jewish people. The acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven is in this case not a precondition, but only to some degree an historical, yet not necessary, consequence of that which alone is necessary: the acceptance of the one law of life. Since this unity of life with its final and self-sufficient bearer, the Jewish people, is conceived only as its longing and not as its actualized nature, it receives again its meaning from something which lies beyond it. There is no attempt to explain this character of longing for unity as a part of the “polarity” of the Jewish character; and indeed there cannot be such an attempt since this polarity in its highest degree is just the very object of this longing for unity; it is only by the absoluteness of polarity that this demand for unity is for us absolute. In this way the notion of unity, although considered to be the content of the spirit of the people, and by a special destiny to be their constant desire, moves again into a supranational notion; and by this, where the people come to signify a religious ultimate, into a supernatural context: although according to its intention [this notion of unity is the] nucleus of the “nature,”<sup>19</sup> it in fact becomes doctrine; what is predicated about the people is as such simultaneously the task for the individual; what is there in the object of faith, namely as a demand, is first to be fulfilled by the believer. Thus, the object of faith loses its absolute inner-humanness,<sup>20</sup> and confronts the individual again; the

19. I.e., the “nature” of the Jewish people.

20. *Innernesslichkeit*.

purely human content of faith becomes – independently of its totality – again at a certain point “dogmatically” decisive. It is the same when in the Life-of-Jesus theology a single feature of the total personality is singled out, and somewhat in the fashion of the neo-Protestant “God-the-Father faith,” when the “personality” of Jesus reassumes the character of “teacher,” the notion of “teacher” takes on a new sense: he now “teaches” that which is the essence of his “personality.” Thus in Judaism the essence of the character of the Jewish people becomes law for the individual. In both cases a gap is created in the human, through which the superhuman threatens to invade the realm of atheistic theology.

Such an invasion of the opposed principle would be impossible if the atheistic theology did not already contain within itself the justification for it. This is shown at the present in Christianity by the development of the Life-of-Jesus theology. The emphasis on the human personality of the God-man was admissible also from the dogmatic position, for, confronted with a purely rationalist “Christ-idea theology,” the Protestant Right had also to reach back to the idea of the Life-of-Jesus theology, for it too is rooted in tradition. And it is just because of this that the future development of our theology cannot ignore it. This is especially evident in the case of the idea of unity. It is usual for us to carry it from the realm of the dogmatic to the realm of the ethical. We have always done this. Bahya’s popular book, *Duties of the Heart*, shows this. It has recently become apparent how deeply influenced he was by the mystical movement. The prayer which introduces the daily reading of the Confession of Unity – older than the medieval scholastic and mystical movements and lasting until this day – rests on the reciprocal relation between the “unification” of the concept of God through man and the heart of man through God. Of course, what is meant is a reciprocal relation of the theoretic and sober isolation of the humanly ethical from the divinely true, rather than the mystical paradox. Of course, what it meant there would not have been comprehended by the older traditionalists.<sup>21</sup> It is only the concept of polarity which transforms the conflict between a superhuman revelation and human unwillingness into the inner-human, and which signifies, in contradiction to all other relations between human author and intellectual product, the realm of religious phenomena, which has already been dealt with. The past bears witness to this. We have not lost sight of the significance of the change of Jacob’s name to Israel. The old exegesis has already laid its fingers upon the promise to be like the dust of the earth and, of same yet differently sounding meaning, to be as the stars of the heaven. When they rise, the one; and when they fall, the other. So it is explained. But again, it<sup>22</sup> knows what rising and falling means and that it makes no sense to speak about rising and falling if

21. *Alten.*

22. I.e., exegesis.

there is no absolute standard outside of that which rises and falls. This holds good also in the case of myth. The new theology is, according to this theory of the emergence of the divine from the human, consciously rooted in the old mysticism. It is not by chance that the famous key phrase of the master of the Cabbala, "God speaks: 'if you do not bear witness to me, then I am not,'" is spoken as the word of God, and in the written-word-of-God projected into it by exegetical manipulation. God makes himself dependent upon the testimony of man. . . . "He sells himself" to man, according to a profound parable. He who is able to "sell," however, has a claim on the purchase price as well. . . . The conscious point of reference which the new theology seeks here in mysticism it could with as much or as little justification seek in rationalism. The fundamental idea of our philosophy – that the light of God is the soul of man, and that only the rays of this light, which the soul needs for illumination of its earthly ways, are visible – was and is, along with its mystical parallels, capable of atheistic interpretation.

The final meeting of mystical and rationalist humanization . . . appears to give justification to the attempt to make Judaism determinately this-worldly. At the outset of each acknowledgement of our faith stands the certainty that God and man must be conceived as inseparable. But the unbridgeable gap between man as he is conceived by mysticism and rationalism, and man as receiver of revelation and as such subject to faith, this unbridgeable gap as it consists despite all present possibilities of interrelation of the concepts of peoplehood and manhood – in our case between man and Jew – ought to confuse anyone who wants to attempt to cover the totality of the religious world with only one part of this pair of fundamental ideas. If the one part, namely man, would be in himself simple and without inner contradiction, then the man of thought as well as the man of action could dispense with God. But man now finds himself under the curse of historicity, divided within himself between first receiver and last fulfiller of the Word, between the people standing at Sinai and the Messianic humanity; he is unable to eliminate the God to whom by his historical deed the historicity of history is subject. To understand the Jewish people as the heart of faith, man has to posit the God who builds a bridge between people and mankind. In doing so, his theology may be as scientific as it will and can, yet it cannot do without the notion of revelation.