



## From Creation to Encounter

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*The aim of the narrative of Creation is . . . the instauration of a radical separateness of man from God.*

*The other's difference must be preserved.*

**T**here is a known side to Creation and a dark side. There are things that are revealed to humans, and things that remain hidden. Jewish mysticism has attempted to wander through things unknown. Hence two different accounts of Creation, the biblical account, that which reveals to us the way the world was created, and the account as it is exposed in the medieval tradition of the Kabbalah, which inquires into the dark side of Creation, that which has not been revealed. It is these two accounts that we would like to briefly consider in this essay. Two accounts which constitute two different *Weltanschauungen*, two different ways of conceiving the universe, and which will have consequences on the way we understand human relationships, and especially in this particular context, the Jewish-Christian rapport.

### The Risk of Creation

Let us first go back to the biblical version of events of which we shall cite the main sequences: "The earth was formless and empty . . . God *separated* light from darkness . . . God made the earth and *separated* the waters above the earth from the waters beneath the earth . . . And God said: May the earth produce the green, the grasses bearing seed, the fruit trees bearing fruit *according to their species* . . . God said:

Let there be luminaries in the sky so as to *separate* night from day . . . God created the great fish *according to their species*, and the winged birds *according to their species* . . . God created the living beasts *according to their species* . . . Then God said: let us make man *in our image and in our resemblance*." (Genesis 1:1-26). The first thing one notices in this version of events is the emphasis that the narrator puts on the notion of separation. Creation occurs through differentiation and individuation. This is true of the earth, the vegetation and the animals of the earth. Is it true of man? Is not man, inasmuch as he was created in the resemblance of God, an exception to the natural course of events? What we forget in making such an observation is that God Himself is defined in the Bible as separate. God is defined in the Bible as holy, which means separate. Image of God, man is himself also a separate being. Separate from the rest of the universe, but also separate from Him that made him: "Ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2), which may be reworded: "Ye shall be separate, for I am separate."

The aim of the narrative of Creation is thus paradoxically not the account of men and women's affiliation to God. It is not yet a covenant between them. It is on the contrary the instauration of a radical separateness of man from God: "It is certainly a

great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is only as a separate being that man may hope to enter into an interlocutor relation with God: "The uniqueness of the human person makes him or her impossible to remain locked in a definitive category. Man is always free to be different and can say 'no' even to God."<sup>2</sup>

### The Risk of Production

But let us turn now to the darker side of Creation. According to the *Zohar*, the origin of the world, as exemplified in the tree of the *sephirot*, occurred through a series of successive emanations from God. The world as an emanation, or derivative of God, is thus not separate from its creator, but is His production, and as such, partakes of His same substance. This version of events is further developed in the philosophy of Spinoza.

According to Spinoza, there is but one substance: God. The rest of the universe, man and beast, are but modes of this same and unique substance,<sup>3</sup> that is, they are expressions or manifestations of the same substance. The world came to be, according to Spinoza, not by creation, but by production. The difference between the two is as follows: in creating, God exerts a causality which is transcendent, a causality which produces something different from itself. In the case of production however, we are dealing with immanent causality, a causality for which the effect is already present in the cause. The Spinozist universe partakes then of the same divine substance. The different beings of the universe are but different manifestations or expressions of the same substance.<sup>3</sup>

Such a view is not entirely unbiblical and can be found in the New Testament. In the Gospel of John, the Christ is compared to the "vine" and his church to the "branches." The purpose of such imagery is to show the complete dependence of human beings on God, who are thus called to dwell in God who acts and thinks through them: "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It is in this sense that both Spinoza and Malebranche understand

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the fact that we comprehend and "see only through God."

Such are the two accounts of the coming to be of the universe that we wanted to touch on. Our purpose is however not to examine either their validity or their truth, but to suggest lessons in regards to Jewish-Christian relations.

### The Lesson of Otherness

Let us then begin with the first account of Creation. The universe, people and beasts were created as separate beings, separate from each other, but also from God. The very existence of each created being depends on its being separate. Without this separateness, there would be no created beings, only a vast formless void. This is why Levinas says that to deny another

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person's difference or distinctiveness amounts to killing that person. The preservation of God's Creation demands that one respect the separateness and distinctness of created beings. To encounter the other on a mode different than that of his or her separateness is to kill him or her. Respect for God's creation refuses assimilation or integration of the other to myself. The other's difference must be preserved. How then are Jews and Christians to encounter each other without losing their specificity and distinctness?

According to Levinas, the only mode of encountering others without them giving up their separateness is through discourse. But why discourse? Because it is the only occasion when the others can speak for *themselves*, thus breaking the preconceptions and prejudices we have accumulated about them: "*The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation . . . the manifestation of a face over and beyond form. Form—incessantly betraying its own manifestation . . . alienates the exteriority of the other. The face is a living presence; it is expression. . . .*

The face speaks."<sup>4</sup> The face, when it speaks, breaks through its plastic form. It breaks through the idea we have of it, through the conception we have of it, and reveals with time the real other—the one that hides behind our first impressions.

### The Lesson of Togetherness

But let us now turn to the second account of Creation. According to the Spinozist version, we are modes of the divine substance. We are thus all different expressions and manifestations of the same God. In New Testament terms, we are all branches bound to the same vine, or body parts bound to the same body (John 15).

To reject the other's expression of God is to reject a facet of God's image. It is to mutilate the divine substance of one of its modes or manifestations. It is to produce an incomplete picture of God. As modes or body parts, we must respect the other's different way of expressing God without which our understanding of God would remain inadequate. The truth about God is not one-sided. It is too complex to be so. We cannot come to the truth about God alone. We need the other's viewpoint.

Only when we understand this can we begin to talk about effective Jewish-Christian relations. As different modes or expressions of the same God, we need each other in our quest for God. Only by working together can we ever hope to gather all the broken sparks of the dispersed glory of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 58-59.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 209.

<sup>3</sup>Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 1, especially Proposition 15 (trans. White, rev. Stirling, *Great Books of the Western World*, 31:355-372, especially 360-361).

<sup>4</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65-66 (his emphasis).