

GUY G. STROUMSA

Religion as Intellectual
Challenge in the
Long Twentieth Century

Mohr Siebeck

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Twentieth Century

Selected Essays

Mohr Siebeck

Guy G. Stroumsa, born 1948; 1978 PhD; Martin Buber Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Professor Emeritus of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, and Emeritus Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford.

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For Lucy and Sari Nusseibeh

فانّ الأنبياء هناك يقتسمون
تاريخ المقدّس ... يصعدون إلى السماء
ويرجعون أقلّ إحباطاً وحرناً، فالمحبّة
والسلام مُقدّسان وقادمان إلى المدينة.

محمود درويش، في القدس
Mahmoud Darwish, *In Jerusalem*

Preface

Most of the essays published in this volume were written in the last twenty years (the earliest ones were first published in 1998). They mirror, first of all, my way of managing (rather than overcoming) both my puzzlement and my anxiety in front of the multiple faces and evolving status of religion in societies throughout the world.

It is through reflecting on a number of major intellectual figures and crucial problems in the study of religion in the twentieth century that I have chosen to approach the questions at hand. These essays were written on various occasions, for different publics, side by side with my core work on the religious worlds of late antiquity and on the history of the modern study of religion. Each of these essays deals with a figure or a problem that long preoccupied me, or, at least, that I had long desired to reflect upon. Most of these figures (I note with regret that a single woman, Simone Weil, appears here) were not primarily what we usually call historians of religion. Their calling, or *Beruf*, rather, was psychology, anthropology, sociology, history or philosophy.

In two books, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009) and *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford, 2021), I have discussed major problems of the history of religions as a discipline in the making, from early modernity to the start of the twentieth century. Although the present volume does in no way represent a full-fledged sequel to these works, it nonetheless collects my reflections upon a more recent scholarly past up to the present, and upon a number of leading thinkers who developed their own specific, original approaches to the nature of religion and its status throughout history.

I am lucky enough to have met, over the years, a number of the scholars dealt with here. During my last two years of high school, at the École Normale Israélite Orientale in Paris, the principal, Emmanuel Levinas, introduced me to Plato, Descartes, and Kant. Under his guidance, I also started to decipher the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, together with some of their medieval commentaries. I met Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem (where I arrived a year after Buber's death); Morton Smith in both New York and Jerusalem; Arnaldo Momigliano, a few times, oddly enough always in Germany; Marcel Detienne in both Paris and Jerusalem; and Carlo Ginzburg on many occasions and on three continents. Throughout the years, following the Talmudic adage on the lion's tail and the fox's head (*Avot* 4:15), I also had the privilege of intellectual encounters with distinguished scholars of religion and intellectual historians. Let me recall here the names of the late Carsten Colpe, Walter

Burkert, Cristiano Grottanelli, Jacques Le Brun, Shlomo Pines, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Jonathan Z. Smith, Fritz Stolz, Jean-Pierre Vernant and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; as well as my friends Jan Bremmer, Jan Assmann, Nicole Belayche, Corinne Bonnet, Philippe Borgeaud, Rémi Brague, Hubert Cancik, Giovanni Filoramo, Bruce Lincoln, Charles Malamoud, Lorenzo Perrone, John Scheid, Shaul Shaked, David Shulman, Mark Silk and Christoph Uehlinger.

Like the essays in its twin volume, *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity: Selected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), those collected here have been only slightly edited, also in order to provide some unity in the pattern of references. I have not attempted, however, to update these references. Today, I should formulate the problems, and express my own thought, rather differently.

I am grateful to Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, Director of Mohr Siebeck, for his kind offer to publish these two volumes. At Mohr Siebeck, Elena Müller skillfully accompanied the project. I am deeply indebted to David L. Dusenbury, for his close and generous collaboration on the copy editing of these two volumes, throughout the long and difficult period of various limitations and lockdowns, in Jerusalem as elsewhere, during the Coronavirus pandemic.

This book is dedicated to two dear friends, met in Cambridge (Mass.), across the ocean, almost fifty years ago. In Jerusalem, it is through crossing another, more insidious divide between East and West that we meet. In tragic circumstances, theirs is the face of dignity and wisdom.

Jerusalem, May 2021

Guy G. Stroumsa

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Prologue

Religion terminable and interminable

Throughout the twentieth century, many leading European intellectuals, perceiving the rapid decline of religion in their secularizing societies, thought that it was condemned to soon become marginal, and to eventually disappear, also throughout the rest of the world. These thinkers and scholars embodied the core heritage of the Enlightenment: religion, largely associated with traditional societies, was counterposed to reason, mainly responsible for the achievements of modern science. Religion, for them, essentially belonged to the past of humankind, while reason pointed to its future. This radical dualism ignored the polyvalence characteristic of the very concept of religion, which refers to a number of phenomena quite different from one another, individual as well as collective, in societies and cultures very dissimilar from one another. In any case, this opposition sought to erase, or at least significantly weaken the status and impact of religion in society. There was much wishful thinking in that approach: religion was doomed by progress and liberalism: »Écrasez l'infâme!« often remained the order of the day. Customary rituals were to be expunged together with traditional beliefs. For the French Ernest Renan, for instance, at once a leading scholar of religion and public intellectual throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, science was on its way to replace Christianity, while the history of religions, denoting a new fusion of history, philosophy and philology was poised to become a core discipline of the humanities.

To be sure, such a simplistic view of things did not convince everyone. In the wake of Romanticism, various postures rejected the intellectual heritage of the radical Enlightenment, thus allowing a broad array of possible bonds between religion and reason. Essentially, one argued, myth and ritual, together with faith and beliefs, could not be simply perceived as belonging to the infancy of humankind. On the contrary, religious phenomena would always remain, part and parcel of the very essence of human societies. More precisely, mythologies of all peoples offered a perception of the cosmos and insights on human nature that went deeper than the achievements of rationalist thought. At most, traditional myths and rituals could morph into new forms of belief and praxis. Religions could certainly undergo mutations in history, but were not going to really disappear.

Throughout the twentieth century, political religions have represented the most brutal mutations of religion. Fascist and communist revolutionary regimes have been equally apt in devising both potent myths and powerful rituals, meant to encompass many aspects of society, and involving most of its members. From right

and left alike, the era of political religions rebuffs the naïve view of a fully rational heritage of the Enlightenment confronting the wholly irrational reaction of traditional religion. And yet, throughout the twentieth century, philosophers, historians and scientists alike have too often remained prisoners of this opposition, struggling in their search for rational discourse on religion. While the new political religions retain a deep ambivalence toward traditional ones, they have often managed to reach various kinds of *modus vivendi* with them. Moreover, imagined collusions, such as »Judeo-Bolshevists« and »Judeo-Plutocrats« a century ago, or »Islamofascists« and »Islamofascists« today, always function as powerful scarecrows.

If thinking about religion has remained so challenging in our secular age, this may be because traditional forms of religion, for us, are neither close enough to warrant an immediate sense of intimacy nor distant enough to permit fully detached observation. To use terms coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s, and now common among anthropologists, one may argue that convincing ways of negotiating between the emic and the etic approaches of religion remain rare indeed. Religion, thus, has remained throughout the long twentieth century, and up to our own days, a deep, unavoidable intellectual challenge, one which is also reflected in various attempts to recapture the power of the traditional *numen*, in modern thought patterns. I refer here to a vast array of intellectual trends seduced by irrationalism. Such trends, in particular, blossomed in the first half of the twentieth century. These »neo-Gnostic« trends sought redemption, or its secular equivalent, in the flight from the material world of daily experience, and often advocated radical patterns of behavior.

To a great extent, »neo-Gnostic« movements (typical, in particular, of the Weimar Republic) petered out with the denouement of the Second World War and its sequels. By the last decades of the twentieth century, they had largely been replaced by New Age phenomena, and their associated eschatological attitudes. In the globalized planet of the early twenty-first century, it is the very persistence of viable societies that is fast becoming the core issue. A major aspect of the global world is the infinite ways in which we are all connected to one another and to the universe of data. As noted by the leading historian of Greek religion Walter Burkert, in such an interconnected world, the traditional ways of religion (etymologically stemming from Latin *re-ligare*) are no longer valid. That certainly does not mean, *pace* Burkert, that religion cannot anymore play a role in our world. Rather, it points to new meanings of religion in the world of tomorrow.

Together with the crumbling of the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the naïve perception of religion as a phenomenon on the wane finally collapsed. While violence and religion have always cohabitated, religion often appears today to have been hijacked by »thugs for God's sake,« coming in various shapes and colors, but all equally murderous in their intentions, and often also in their acts. Having lost, like us all, the key to creative hermeneutics of traditional scriptural traditions, it is only in the most literal, pedestrian way, that these

thugs read their scriptures, displaying their brutalist reading in order to recoil from acknowledging the other. As particularly vicious and distorted versions of all religions (certainly not only Islam, as the media would want us to believe) are threatening everywhere, reassessment of religion and of its avatars has become the imperative order of the day. Despite appearances, »thugs for God's sake« are not to be found among monotheists alone. Buddhist monks and Hindu mobs are as effective as any at massacring their miscreant neighbor. Where, and why, have leading thinkers gone so utterly wrong?

An element of answer may reside in the concept of cognitive dissonance. Scriptures are traditionally edited and interpreted by scribes and, more broadly, religious elites. These, at first devoid of any political power, may at some point find themselves in a new political situation, in which they suddenly walk the corridors of power, without having first found the time or the will to offer new hermeneutical approaches, develop literalist readings of their scriptures. This is, for instance, what happened to Christianity in Constantine's days, and also what happens to many religions, almost everywhere, in our own, tragic times. Obscurantism is active at all times, in all religions, everywhere. Intolerance and violence are both endemic to the human condition, and religion acts here more as fuel than as root.

Throughout the twentieth century, many, perhaps most intellectuals, it seems, found themselves without adequate tools to explore and gauge phenomena that seemed, *prima facie*, inexplicable. We are struck, today, by the complexity of religious transformations in our globalized world. More than ever, we realize that no religion is an island, and that religious violence circulates as in a whirlpool, leaving us unable to monitor its trajectory.

The essays in Part I mainly deal with ideas developed in the first half of the century, while those in Part II reflect more contemporary approaches and debates. The three essays of Part III focus on problems rather than on figures. From Arthur Balfour, a leading British politician who dabbled in philosophy, to Carlo Ginzburg, an outstanding early modern historian searching for traces of ancient patterns of thought and behavior, each subject of my investigations is a *sui generis* intellectual. When I try to determine how these figures were chosen, and these essays written, it is serendipity that first comes to mind. Other occasions could of course have led me to write additional essays, on different topics. In any case, there is no need to belabor the fact that this book does not attempt in any way to present an overview of twentieth-century intellectual confrontation of religion. It reflects, rather, how a small number among them perceived religion as a problem, a challenge that could not be ignored. These intellectuals confronted religion from their different disciplinary viewpoints – and even though some of them could say, like Max Weber, that they were »*absolut unmusikalisches*« concerning religion.

Today, post-colonial, post-modern and feminist approaches, side by side with cognitive methods, seem to be almost *de rigueur* in the study of religion, as in much else. Very little of these approaches will appear in the following pages. This does not

mean that I have no views on those matters. It highlights the fact, rather, that the essays collected here, rather than providing milestones of the disciplinary study of religion, only reflect my own trajectory.

Intellectual daring and courage (as well as, often, courage *tout court*) is needed in order to probe religion in a critical way. Nineteenth-century heralds of modern scholarship on religion such as Ernest Renan, Julius Wellhausen, William Robertson Smith, together with many others with and after them, paid a high personal price for crossing the boundaries of their own religious communities. For others, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who sought to approach all religions and societies with the very same tools, equanimity demanded constant, almost infinite intellectual and psychological pains. If Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Emmanuel Levinas, and also Henri Bergson and Simone Weil, who all appear in these essays, had to refashion, in so many different ways, their own Jewish selves, this was directly linked to their reflection upon the nature of religious phenomena.

The problem of religion for twentieth-century European intellectuals has been reflected in a vast spectrum of disciplines, much larger than those directly implicated in the academic study of religion. These essays, it should be noted, do not discuss thinkers from Asian and African developing societies. American scholars too, on their side, shine by their (almost total) absence from the following pages. Both in the New World and in the Old ones, important and original approaches of religion have been, and still are developed, offering insights which at times elude European scholars. Their absence here reflects – and highlights – my limitations. But in any case, it is the long history of European intellectual involvement with religion – an involvement starting with Herodotus, and transformed with Christianity – that still constitutes the background of any present-day reflection on religion. Serious intellectual engagement with religious phenomena can be found among philosophers, historians and philologists; sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists; and today, cognitive scientists and historians of science. It is not the historian's role, of course, to imagine and sketch the future of religion. Today, however, we know at least that historical forms of religion are not vanishing, and are not being replaced by science.

Is there one overarching concept comprehending religion as a universal phenomenon, without becoming lured by its seductive powers? Any such organizing principle runs the immediate hazard of any ideology: overly simplifying – and hence falsifying – reality's infinite complexity. And yet, if pressed to propose one approach that might be particularly useful to us for understanding religion, in its countless manifestations, I would suggest to look at it from the perspective of cultural memory. As a concept, cultural memory was forged by the art historian Aby Warburg and the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Like all aspects of memory, it involves the individual, but focuses on societies throughout time. The concept, recently applied to the study of religion and its multiple impact on individuals and societies, in particular by Jan Assmann, provides a way to assess the continued significance of religion in the plurality of cultural traditions in a globalized and secularized world. Perhaps for the first

time in history, a world in which cultures, societies and religions are interconnected as never before creates new syncretic beliefs and practices. It also prompts new forms of cultural memory, which actively involve intertwined religious history. In the new key of cultural memory, religion does not need to be declined in the singular. Pope Pius XI could exclaim, in dark times, »Spiritually, we are all Semites.« One aspect of globalization impacts deeply on our perception of religion: it has made us all, culturally, heirs to multiple religions, not to a single one. Embracing the new complex inheritance of cultural memory may hold a key to the growth of religious expression less toxic than those which threaten today the very fabric of our societies.

In studying religious phenomena within their whole historical background, the scholar of religion plays the role of a *Kulturkritik*, often unwillingly. Today, if traditional religions intend to retain their significance as a key part of our human cultural heritage, they must radically transform themselves, reject claims for absolute truth, and accept non-violence as an imperative. The humanist's perception of religion demands its relativization, not its disappearance.

In the Epilogue and the Envoi, I briefly describe my own route as a historian of religion, and reflect on both the interface and the antinomies between dispassionate scholarship and involved citizenship. In method, the student of religion must wear the mask of the agnostic. At the end of a career, however, one may, and perhaps one should, reveal one's true face.

Part I

Intellectual traditions

1. A Victorian Intellectual and His Religious World: Arthur James Balfour

Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930), »the last Grandee,« as one of his biographers called him, cuts a rather interesting figure among British politicians.¹ Although, as Prime Minister (1902–1905), he secured the Entente Cordiale with France, his greatest claim to fame remains the letter he sent to Lord Rothschild on behalf of the British Government on 2 November 1917, supporting the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Lord Balfour’s personality was a particularly complex one. Side by side with the gifted Conservative politician was the intellectual whose curiosity seems to have had few equivalents among British prime ministers. This complexity did not necessarily gain him intellectual respect. There is a persistent image of him as a dilettante, touching a number of ideas and topics without seriously engaging them and their implications² – a judgment that might seem to be confirmed by his famous *obiter dictum*: »Nothing matters very much, and few things matter at all.«

The following pages propose to test this judgment, through a review of some of Balfour’s most important writings. Throughout his life, and side by side with his political career, he published extensively on a large number of topics, from the philosophy of history,³ literature (Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson), music (Handel) and painting (the Pre-Raphaelites), to the supernatural (he was among the first members of the Society for Psychical Research, eventually becoming its President).⁴ In many ways, he was what one would today call a »public intellectual,« expressing himself, orally and in writing, on a vast array of issues. In focusing here on his religious and intellectual world, I wish to ask whether a link can be seen (and if so, of what kind) between that world and the pronouncement of the famous Declaration bearing his name. Was Balfour, in transmitting this letter, acting solely as a British politician in the interest of his country, or was he also, or mainly, inspired by his own beliefs about the Jews and their role in history?

¹ R. Q. J. Adams, *Balfour: The Last Grandee* (London, 2007). I am indebted to Simon J. Cook for his comments on a draft of this text, which was read at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities on the hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration (November 2, 2017).

² J. D. Root, »The Philosophical and Religious Thought of Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930),« *Journal of British Studies*, 19 (1980), 120–141.

³ See A. J. Balfour, *Decadence: Henry Sidgwick Memorial Lecture* (Cambridge, 1908).

⁴ This society scientifically investigated the popular late Victorian mediums, reports of ghosts and the like.

A brief description is in order of some religious and intellectual trends in Britain dealing with the return of the Jews to their land, which bear upon the formation of Balfour's spiritual and intellectual world. The politician and social reformist Lord Ashley (1801–1885), who became the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury after his father's death, was a leading figure of nineteenth-century Evangelical Anglicanism. A President of the British and foreign Bible Society from 1851 to his death, he was also a strong supporter of the movement for the »Restoration of the Jews« to their land, which would be the prelude to Christ's Second Coming. Shaftesbury was also President of the Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. »Who will be the Cyrus of Modern Times, the second Chosen to restore the God's people?« he wrote in his diary already in 1826.⁵ It is to him that we owe the famous (or infamous) phrase, »a country without a nation [for] a nation without a country,« penned in 1843 and picked up much later, in 1901, by Israel Zangwill.⁶ Together with Lord Palmerston (1784–1865), Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the mid-1880s, Shaftesbury insisted on the congruence between Christian Restorationism and British imperial strategy.⁷ Palestine, he argued, was a major gateway to India and the East, and giving British protection to the Jews in the Holy Land (i. e., liberating it, in some way, from the hands of the Ottoman Turks) could be strategically advantageous.⁸ A policy along these lines was outlined by the *Christian Herald* in its issue of 26 April 1877:

The solution to the Eastern question, whenever it comes, will be the overthrow of Turkey. The overthrow of Turkey will be the liberation of Judea. The liberation of Judea will mean its colonization by its own people. And the restoration of the Jews will mean the imminent nearness of the Second Advent of Christ.⁹

And yet, as noted by Eitan Bar-Yosef in his excellent book *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799–1917*, »while Evangelicalism became part and parcel of Victorian culture, Christian Zionism did not. Christian Zionist ideas stayed in constant circulation throughout the nineteenth century, but always remained marginal to mainstream Christian culture and life.«¹⁰

Daniel Deronda (1876), George Eliot's last, »Zionist« novel, was set in Cambridge more or less when Balfour was a student there. Eliot had written her book, she said, in order »to ennoble Judaism« and to pay a moral debt to the long-suffering Jews,

⁵ Sic. See G. Himmelfarb, *The People of the Book: Philosemitism in England, from Cromwell to Churchill* (New York, London, 2011), 120.

⁶ It is to Zangwill that Edward Said attributes its paternity. See E. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, 1980), 9.

⁷ On Restorationism, see P. C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism (1891–1948)* (London, Portland, 1998), ch. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

⁹ Quoted in E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture 1799–1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism* (Oxford, 2005), 206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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