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# Secularization in Modern Jewish Thought

*Zohar Maor and Ori Werdiger*

This article discusses the main challenges that secularization presented to Judaism and to Jewish thought, and maps the key strategies and central thinkers who responded to this challenge, from the eighteenth century up to the turn of the twenty-first. Attention is also given to some secular theologies, to Zionist thinkers embracing secularization, and to the challenges of post-Holocaust Jewish theology. In particular, the entry highlights the frequent questioning of a religious/secular divide that figures within modern Jewish thought. In the dominant European context of Western secularization, it argues that eighteenth-century Hasidism effectively opposed the creation of separate secular and religious spheres, and it presents a view of Hasidic and other Orthodox leaders as modern thinkers whose engagement with secularism included openness to key secular notions. In addition, paying attention to responses to secularization within Sephardi Jewry, who lived among Muslim-majority societies primarily in North Africa and the Middle East, the entry suggests that Sephardi rabbis viewed Judaism as an inclusive whole, and tacitly rejected an assumed division of Judaism into religious and secular elements. Finally, the entry also claims that, for key modern Jewish theologians, the secular served as a theological category that is employed within projects of criticism of 'religion'. For such thinkers, secularization then becomes a step, and even a foundation stone, for broader spiritual, religious, and even messianic global futures.

**Keywords:** Secularization, Post-secular, Hasidism, Orthodox Judaism, Sephardi traditionalism, Haredi Judaism (Ultra-Orthodoxy), Zionism, Post-Holocaust theology

# **Table of contents**

1 Introduction

2 1750–1850: Enlightenment (Haskalah), modernity, piety, and resistance

3 1850–1950: Celebrating, affirming, and denying the secular

4 The death of God? After the Second World War and the Shoah (Holocaust)

4.1 In North America

4.2 In France

5 Recent developments, Judaism, and the post-secular

6 Conclusion

# 1 Introduction

The confrontation with secularization, as a concept and as a set of social, historical, and political processes, has been central to religious life and to religious thought in recent centuries. Jewish thought, especially since the eighteenth century, presented multiple responses to secularism and the secular, ranging from vehement rejection to creative adoption and adaptation.

The cluster of terms related to 'secularization' is primarily derived from a Christian, Western context. Its current uses are of a modern coinage, retain much ambiguity, and often stand for earlier terms (cf. Chadwick 1990: 90–92). Consequently, before addressing the theoretical context of the discussion, as well as the focus and scope of this entry, a working definition of terms in this cluster is in order. In this article, 'secularization' refers to the historical and cultural processes marginalizing religion; 'secularism' refers to ideologies justifying or promoting these processes; and 'secularists' refers to thinkers creating these ideologies and activists implementing them (see Weir 2014). 'Secular theologies' refers to systems of thought rooted in pantheism or Gnosticism that seek to challenge mainstream religion by offering alternative meaning and answers to core theological concepts and issues. Finally, 'the secular' is a descriptive concept denoting the expanding realm outside the fold of religion, often characterized as worldly, critical, autonomous, anthropocentric, non-traditional, and rationally constructed (Taylor 2007).

Many academic as well as public discussions of religion and secularity in the twentieth century may be related to the so-called 'secularization thesis' which was predominant among social scientist of religion from the 1950s to the 1990s. In broad brushstrokes, the secularization thesis assumed that the processes of secularization, as accompanying processes of modernization that European and other societies underwent, were linearly directed and irreversible. The thesis predicted that everyday life, which, so it was presumed, was formerly loaded with religious meaning and ruled by religious politics, will become increasingly rationalized, secularized, and, to use Max Weber's term, disenchanted (Weber 2004; Hughey 1979). Consequently, humanity will ultimately occupy a world lacking religions, their gods, and related non-scientific beliefs (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002). During the same time, several ambitious studies of changes in European ideas pointed to the 'secularization' of formerly Christian-dominated culture, philosophy, and theology, beginning in the early modern era (Blumenberg 1985; Funkenstein 1986; Löwith 1970).

Since the 1990s, challenges to the secularization thesis began to mount. Some studies pointed to the continuance and even resurgence of religion in seemingly secularized locations and contexts (Casanova 1994; Berger, Grace and Fokas 2008). Others questioned the assumptions of the thesis, such as too-strict definitions of religious

affiliation (Davie 1994), or a biased view of premodern culture as more 'religious' than it actually was (Douglas 1988). Other scholars questioned the very dichotomy of the religious/secular divide and developed a critique of the political uses of such binary structures (Assad 2003). While the secularization thesis as an ideologically-led prediction is broadly considered debunked, the debate around secularization, both at the social and the cultural level, is still ongoing.

This debate notwithstanding, there are several elements that are distinct to Jewish secularization. First, being a practice-oriented religion, where the Halakhah (as Judaism's legal code) applies to all aspects of life, the practical aspects of becoming 'secular' were central to debates between Jewish secularists and anti-secularists. The question whether Halakhah, or specific aspects of it, was a harmful relic from the past, an irreplaceable asset, or a social tool that should be rationalized, was part and parcel of such debates. Second, with Judaism being a minority culture, secularization – at least in its early phases – meant leaving the formal social and political institutions of the Jewish community, and was thus bound up with questions of personal identity: can a Jew remain a Jew without religion and belief, and without formal affiliation with a Jewish community? Such issues were crucial to Jewish individuals and to community leaders alike. Third, Jewish secularization was connected with questioning the meaning and definitions of Judaism in the modern era. Is Judaism a religious confession, an ethnic minority group, or a dispersed nationality? Recently, some scholars argued that this type of question itself was informed by dichotomies constructed within modern European thought. Such dichotomies have imposed on Judaism the legal status of a 'religion' as separate from, or complimentary to, the majority, non-Jewish nationality (Batnizki 2011), or split Judaism into a 'religion' and an 'ethnos' (Raz-Krakotzkin 2015).

Last but not least, it is important to note that Jewish communities around the globe have experienced varying trajectories in their encounters with secularization. This followed from Judaism's status as a diasporic community at least up to the second half of the twentieth century, with particular differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewries. The former, living predominantly in societies with Christian majorities – and since the seventeenth century consisting of the majority of global Jewry – were directly exposed to, and often participated in, Western secularizations. The latter, living among societies of Muslim majority, either under direct Islamic rule or under Western colonial rule, have trodden their own paths, sometimes with active involvement of their Ashkenazi brethren (cf. Rodrigue 1990).

Having touched upon terminology, theoretical context, and specificities of Judaism within the discussion of secularization, what follows will consider the place of secularization in modern Jewish thought. Following a temporal rather than thematic structure, and providing a historical background, this article will explore key modern Jewish thinkers whose works

offer consistent reflection on and responses to secularization. It will also touch upon some prominent Jewish secular theologies, and Jewish theological responses to the emergence and growth of the secular realm. Notably, many of the thinkers to be discussed did not employ the terminology of the 'secular' cluster. Rather, they used terms anchored in traditional Rabbinic discourse, such as *Kefira* (heresy), *Kofrim* (infidels), and *Epikorsim* (ideological heretics). Nevertheless, all thinkers were aware of the challenges posed by what is called today secularization, and sought to answer these challenges in their own way.

## **2 1750–1850: Enlightenment (Haskalah), modernity, piety, and resistance**

Historians of Judaism have located the early precedents of so-called secular life in the seventeenth century (Israel 1985; Katz and Cooperman 1993), with some focusing on the aftermath of the Sabbatian movement (Scholem 1973). It is in the eighteenth century, however – at least in the European context – that Jewish secularism as a practical and ideological option emerged, in parallel to similar patterns of secularization among the majority societies in Europe. For Jews, processes of civil emancipation and integration into general society came hand in hand with a weakening of Rabbinical and communal authority. In turn, this entailed further exposure to the world of European ideas, as well as new paths of individual and non-traditional conduct, much of which could be defined as secular.

Within Jewish society, the movement that is predominantly associated with secularization was the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*). It originated in central Europe and spread to most Jewish urban centres across Europe and beyond. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), considered the paragon of the early Berlin Haskalah, championed religious toleration and a non-dogmatic, non-coercive Judaism, yet he saw every Jew as obligated by the Halakhah. In his *Jerusalem* (1783), Mendelssohn argued against enforcement of religious beliefs, and suggested that the state support only the element of natural religion which he deemed the foundation of social order and norms (Mendelssohn 1983: 63). As central Jewish figure in what Sorkin (2008) called the religious enlightenment, Mendelssohn and his early students promoted a moderate form of religious change, seeking a positive balance between faith and reason, in accordance with the emerging Enlightenment ethos. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Haskalah, especially in Eastern Europe, became more radical and anti-clerical, with the boundary lines between 'secular' and 'religious' being further demarcated (Sorkin 2008: 311–314). Its promoters, an emerging intelligentsia, criticized the Rabbinical establishment, renounced rituals and beliefs for their perceived irrationality and immorality, and demanded that Judaism undergo systematic reform which would enhance human wellbeing (Feiner 2010; 2012). Later movements that dominated Jewish politics in the following centuries – such as Reform Judaism, the

socialist Bund, and Zionism – were all arguably ideologically grounded in the secularizing elements of the Haskalah.

Hasidism emerged almost simultaneously with the Haskalah, in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. It quickly became a mass movement, and its effective response to secularization is therefore important to discussions of secularization and Jewish thought. Hasidism was often seen by its classic scholarship as anti-modern and as hostile to modern ideals, especially the Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century Hasidic leaders, according to that view, identified the secular edge of Enlightenment and modernization and guided their followers to stick to Jewish tradition and renounce any modern influences (Bartal 1996; Graetz 1975; Mahler 1985). Contemporary scholarship, however, suggested a more complex and nuanced account of Hasidism's response to modernity and secularization. Implementing Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's concept of 'multiple modernities' (2002), Haviva Pedaya (2005) and others have argued that Hasidism shaped its unique version of modernity, rather than denying it altogether. Hasidism presented a distinct take on the then-prevalent pantheist secular theology: God's immanent presence is complemented by a transcendent aspect that still enables divine command and intervention (Biale et al. 2018). At the same time, the immanent aspect of the divine is used to sanctify the mundane, hence the Hasidic ideal of '*Avoda Be-gashmiut*' (devotion through corporeality), intended as a counterweight to secularization as the limitation of 'the religious' to certain ritual realms. Furthermore, Hasidism based Jewish identity on an inner, often unconscious, divine layer of the soul, regardless of the practical level of one's observance of the Halakhah. This concept, although originally developed to integrate large numbers of illiterate Jews back into Judaism, was later applied by some Hasidic leaders to secular Jews as well (Piekarz 1990). Thus, Hasidism not only resisted secularization but also ventured to embrace some of its traits.

A Hasidic thinker who expressed direct and conscious concern with the emerging secular ethos of the Haskalah was Rabbi Nachman of Breslaw (1772–1810). His engagement with atheistic and rationalist-scientific ideas markedly differed from mainstream Hasidism, especially in his emphasis on faith and its non-rational character (Feiner 2020; Mark 2009), and in his affirmation and reclaiming of the secular image of a Godless world in his portrait of an 'empty void' created by divine contraction (the *tzimtzum*; Magid 1995). This void enables human agency and generates heresy – arguably two distinct secular traits. Rabbi Nachman is also famous for his forecasts that (secular) heresy will take over the world. Obviously he did not welcome this development, but rather advocated unwavering, paradoxical belief to counter it (Weiss 2002).

By the early nineteenth century, Jewish secularism became a distinct phenomenon which demanded sustained theological and practical responses. What to previous Rabbinical thinkers may have formerly appeared as episodic cases of hedonism, atheism, or

general laxity in religious practice was now perceived as part of a broad development endangering Judaism's very foundations. Orthodox Judaism, as a European Ashkenazi movement which entails a resistance (in varying intensities) to secularism, emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its radical element, which today is often called ultra-Orthodoxy (or, in Israel, Haredi Judaism) is characterized by strict separation from and defence against secular Jews and ideas (Samet 1988), and has come to consist of most Hasidic groups (especially conservative Hasidic streams) as well as communities identified with Hasidism's Jewish Lithuanian opponents (called *Mitgandim*).

A central figure associated with the staunchest Orthodox defence against secular dangers was Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762–1839), better known (after the acronym of one his books) as the *Chatam Sofer*. Sofer was a charismatic leader and Halakhist, based in Hungary, who spearheaded firm political and ideological opposition to reform rabbis and lay Maskilim (members of the Haskalah). As Maoz Kahana has shown, Sofer was not averse to scientific knowledge, nor did he shun conversation with rabbis affiliated with the Haskalah. However, Rabbi Sofer, like Rabbi Nahman of Breslaw, was keenly aware of the challenge of the scientific-rationalist (and in this sense secular) ethos promoted by the Haskalah. Sofer's intellectual response lay in the insistence on the exclusive Rabbinic ability to arrive at renewed understandings of the sacred texts and mores of the tradition, informed by divine inspiration (Kahana 2007; 2010). Among Sofer's descendants and followers, the nuances of his approach gave way to strict and absolute rejection of everything secular following his death (Samet 1988; Schreiber 2002). Accordingly, Sofer's anti-secular Orthodox project is largely associated with a slogan he introduced, 'the Torah forbids innovations' (a rereading of the Hebrew Rabbinic dictum, *Hadash Asur min Hatorah*). This slogan is understood, especially in Haredi circles, as Sofer's legacy of blanket rejection of any modern change in Jewish ideas or practice.

### **3 1850–1950: Celebrating, affirming, and denying the secular**

During the long nineteenth century, nationalism took the place of Haskalah as the main conduit of secularization for Jews and non-Jews alike. Yet, as Anthony D. Smith and others have shown, the relationship between religion and nationalism was complex and varied from one nation to another (Smith 2003). Accordingly, two approaches to the Jewish religious tradition can be traced in the main Jewish national movement, Zionism, at the beginning of the twentieth century. One approach is associated with Ahad Ha'am (pseudonym of Asher Ginzberg, 1856–1927), one of the most prominent Zionist thinkers and ideologues, who offered a secular theology committed to the religious tradition. He highlighted Judaism's ethical and national dimensions and conferred immanent, human, and often national meanings upon classical religious concepts such as prophecy. For Ahad Ha'am and his followers, like poet Haim N. Bialik (1873–1934), secularism consisted in

the freedom to reinterpret, recontextualize, and develop Judaism, including its Halakhic aspects, rather than in its critique or renouncement (Bialik 1944).

Conversely, a more radical approach was espoused by the Zionist writer and activist Yosef H. Brenner (1881–1921). The meaning of the Zionist revolution, Brenner argued, is that Judaism should become a national identity and no longer a religion. The Jewish religious past should be considered aesthetically, as a catalyser of lofty feelings, and assessed from a national perspective. From this perspective, for Brenner, early Christianity – as the fruit of Jewish national spirit, just as Rabbinic Judaism – should not be condemned. Brenner advocated a complete withdrawal from the Jewish religious past: ‘For our free soul, for our true selfhood [...] our religion and faith [...] are foreign and unnecessary’ (Brenner 1911: 14–16). He rebelled against religious notions of solace and redemption yet demanded in an almost religious manner total authenticity and dedication to the holy labour of establishing a Jewish secular culture (Sagi 2011).

Drawing near the end of the nineteenth century, as part of the renouncement of the Enlightenment typical of fin-des-siècle Europe, secularism was also called into question and new thoughts on secularization emerged. In Germany during the interwar period, philosophers and theologians Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) ventured to think beyond the religious/secular distinction.

Prior to the First World War, Buber’s thought was secularist, in the sense that it promoted a pantheist secular theology – in the Jewish-Zionist context as well as European contexts in general. Buber’s approach to religion was based on Georg Simmel’s famous distinction between ‘religiosity’, as the individual’s religious perspective, and ‘religion’, its social manifestation (Simmel 1997). Buber added a critical tone to the latter term, arguing that religion tends to petrify ‘true’ religiosity, which is chaotic and dynamic in nature. Buber’s cultural mission was to create novel immanent and subjectivist religiosities, beyond the fold of established religions. In the Jewish realm, Buber argued that renewal of ‘authentic’ Jewish religiosity is essential for Zionist national renaissance. Secularized ideas of Hasidism were at the core of Buber’s rebellious creed, as in his assertion that ‘every man, by living authentically, shall himself become a Torah, a law’ (Buber 1967: 92). Halakhah and traditionalism, conversely, were conceived as ‘religion’ and thus despised (Buber 1967; Mendes-Flohr 2019).

Yet Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s mature interwar theologies, as presented in their respective masterpieces, *I and Thou* (1923) and *The Star of Redemption* (1921), ventured to suggest an anti-secularist alternative to secular theologies, including Buber’s earlier creed. In their dialogic approach, God’s revealed word, and especially the human response to it, enable life beyond the secular/religious and (bad) religion/(good) religiosity dichotomies, and resistance to the secularist narrative of a religious past superseded by a secular

present. Rosenzweig vehemently opposed the very term 'religion' as circumscribing Christianity or Judaism into limited realms. He and Buber dovetailed Hasidism in the blurring of borders between the 'secular' and 'religious' domains. By hearing God's abiding revelation (for Rosenzweig) or by relating to man or nature as 'thou' (for Buber), everything can be hallowed. As Buber put it, 'in every you we address the eternal You' (1970: 57). In particular, Rosenzweig's concept (following Joachim of Fiore and F. W. J. Schelling) of the Johannine Church as the third age of Christianity denotes an age in which language will fully convey God's word, thus erasing the gap between the religious and the secular. According to Rosenzweig, the modern world has the potential to materialize this Johannine epoch. In the Jewish context, Rosenzweig argued that Judaism is not a 'religion' which sanctifies certain aspects of life while leaving out others to secular dynamics; rather, Jews aspire that all their deeds will be sanctified. Furthermore, Jewish collective identity is grounded in unique holy language, homeland, and law (Rosenzweig 2005; Maor forthcoming).

In 1904, Rabbi A. I. Kook (1865–1935), a Halakhist and mystic who is considered the key theologian of Israeli religious Zionism, arrived in Jaffa from Eastern Europe. Serving as chief Ashkenazi rabbi in British Mandate Israel/Palestine, Kook encountered the most radical representatives of secular Zionism and of the Orthodox community. Kook is known for his sanctification of the secular but his actual approach to secularization was ambivalent. On the one hand, he followed the Hasidic orientation in a search to go beyond the religious/secular divide. Embracing the secular aspiration for freedom from the shackles of divine law, Rabbi Kook aspired for a messianic religious revolution that will replace the commandments with 'life' and make Judaism's ideals and norms fully internalized as a national culture (Kook 1969: 106 [vol. 3]). Similarly, in his essay 'To the Process of Ideas in Israel' (1912), Rabbi Kook presented the 'religious idea' as only a partial manifestation of God. In the redemption Kook envisioned, both the 'religious idea' and the 'national idea' will be raised into the 'Godly idea' wherein the secular and the religious unite (1985). On the other hand, in other writings, Rabbi Kook accepted and even championed the secular – albeit in terms of its support for religion. First, Kook saw secularization's critique of tradition as crucial for provoking religious self-reflection and regeneration (Kook 1985). Second, for Kook, the modern delimitation of religion into circumscribed realms was seen as a positive development, since not only is the secular thus freed from religion, but belief too is freed from the yoke of rational and empirical constraints (1985).

Unlike the previously mentioned rabbi and theologians, there were Jewish thinkers who actively objected to the erasure of borders between the secular and the religious. Instead, they opted to highlight the theological and mystical meaning of the secular as a 'void', a meaning which may correspond with their shared Hebrew roots (secular, *hol*; and void, *halal*). Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the towering twentieth-century

scholar of the Kabbalah, self-identified as a secular Jew not as part of discrediting religion but rather based on a claim that God should be distanced from the world (Maor 2013). Scholem viewed writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) as the apostle of this conception. While Kafka was no theologian, his stories, parables, and aphorisms nevertheless offered a terrifying portrait of a godless modernity and a theology of this divine void. For instance, his short story ‘The Great Wall of China’ (1919) is often interpreted as a parable of the inaccessibility of God and of God’s ‘imperial message’ (Kafka 1946; Schreiber 1986). In a 1918 diary entry, Kafka described the inner godly commandment as ‘incoherent, for I don’t know whose command it is and what he is aiming [...] it is not communicable, because it is not intelligible’ (Kafka 1954: 106). In Scholem’s famous interpretation of Kafka’s parable ‘Before the Law’ (1915), the gate of the law which the protagonist cannot enter denotes God’s inaccessible revelation. The highest divine manifestation (*sephira*) is called in Kabbalah nothingness (*Ayn*). Thus for Scholem, following Kafka secularism when conceived theologically as affirming the divine nothingness and void paves the way for God’s highest revelation (Maor 2013).

Outside the Central and Eastern European Jewish spheres, a distinct pattern of destabilizing the secular/religious dichotomy was suggested by the tacit rejection of this dichotomy in what is called Sephardi traditionalism (cf. Yadgar 2011). This approach was mostly formulated by rabbis who lived in, or originated from, Muslim North Africa. In this region, which by the mid-nineteenth century was predominantly under French colonial rule, Jews in the urban centres had undergone a quickened modernization and secularization process. This secularization occurred in part under direct French influence, and, even more, as an outcome of educational initiatives of the French Jewish organization Alliance Israélite Universelle. To take one prominent example, Rabbi Moshe Kalfon Hakoheh (1874–1950) of Djerba, Tunisia, advocated Jewish nationalism, universalism, and humanism without identifying them as secular values. At the same time, when such values were presented as secular by teachers of the Alliance, Hakoheh vehemently opposed them (Zohar 2002).

More broadly, unlike their Ashkenazi European brethren, many Sephardi rabbis refused to institute clear boundaries between Jews who observed and those who did not observe the Halakhah, and they did not seek to mark the latter as ‘secular’. Rather, Sephardi rabbis intentionally included in the Jewish ‘religious’ fold all who did not identify themselves as ideologically secular. The mass migration of Sephardi communities to Israel, Europe (especially France), and North America in the 1950s and 1960s brought the Sephardi traditionalist approach into direct contact with the quotidian reality of Western secular culture. In response, some Sephardi rabbis adopted more militant anti-secular Orthodox (originally Ashkenazi) views, while others maintained their inclusive approach, most notably in Israel and France. Yet, as Nissim Leon argued, even the more stringent Haredi

Sephardi elites in Israel have approached secularism and secular Jews in a more nuanced way than their Haredi Ashkenazi colleagues (Leon 2009).

## **4 The death of God? After the Second World War and the Shoah (Holocaust)**

During the second half of the twentieth century, especially the two decades immediately following the end of the Second World War (WWII), the question of secularism and secularization became more urgent. For many thinkers, and for Jewish thinkers in particular, the unprecedented global violence – and more specifically the Nazi project of annihilation of the Jewish people – raised the issue of God's existence and providence in the most dramatic way. Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) gave literary expression to the pressing existential questions of his generation, such as: where was the benevolent and providential God in Auschwitz? Is it possible for one to keep believing in God after the Holocaust? (Wiesel 1960: 70–75). At the strictly theological level, Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the death of God became a prominent challenge for post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers. Following the destruction of Central and Eastern European Jewries, France and North America emerged as centres of postwar Jewish thought in the West.

During the same years, the young state of Israel, dominated by secular Zionism, was focused on a state building project. In the cultural sphere, under the leadership of prime minister David Ben Gurion, the state enacted an expansive process of secularization. This process was accompanied by casting the Hebrew Bible as the main source of Jewish Zionist legitimation and meaning, while ignoring its ritual aspects and their interpretation by the Rabbinic tradition (Shapira 1997). This secularization project further alienated non-Zionist Orthodox factions, who similarly focused on rebuilding the social and institutional forms of traditional Judaism decimated in the Shoah. At the same time, religious Zionists became increasingly open to Rabbi Kook's approach of finding religious meaning in secular Zionism, an ideological process in which Rabbi Kook's son, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, played a pivotal role (Schwartz 2002). Accordingly, in the immediate postwar years – side by side with new voices coming from France and North America – it was mostly the Zionist thinkers Gershom Scholem (who arrived in Jerusalem in 1923) and Martin Buber (who arrived in 1938) who continued to be intellectually present outside Israel.

### **4.1 In North America**

Among the earlier Orthodox responders to secularism and the Shoah was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichick (1903–1993). Arriving in the US in the 1930s, Rabbi Soloveichick developed a set of dichotomous typological models of human personalities (with their particular Jewish manifestations), a model from which Soloveitchik offered response to secular life. Emphasizing the existential loneliness of human individuals and drawing

on the biblical accounts of the creation of humanity, Soloveitchik described a scientific, cognitive, human type who lives in a secular, scientifically-informed environment (though he saw the proper function in this setting as a religious vocation). A second type of human persona described by Soloveitchik is more religiously inclined and is sensitive to the mysterious aspects of life. While both types coexist in each person, Soloveitchik called on religious Jews (and non-Jews) to seek God and form faith communities in the midst of a dominant scientifically-focused and materialistic culture (Soloveitchik 1992). In this sense, he comes close to Buber in seeing the existentialist, I–Thou approach to life as sacralizing the seemingly secular. Moreover, in the Jewish context, Soloveitchik presented the Halakhic perspective and praxis as tools of sacralizing secular life (Soloveitchik and Kaplan 1991).

In a seminal reflection on the Holocaust and the State of Israel, Soloveitchik similarly contrasted a speculative philosophical type of person who seeks in vain an answer for the reasons or meaning of evil and suffering, with a Halakhic-cum-Jewish type. For Soloveitchik, rather than the why question, the latter's approach focuses on *how* humans should morally conduct themselves in response to evil and suffering. This response included self-searching, attunement to God's calls, and, relatedly, the duty to exercise public responsibility, care, and empathy towards one's fellows (Soloveitchik 2006). Thus, Soloveitchik sidesteps the secular challenge implied by the Shoah, by focusing on the existential and moral response in a world which he assured was still governed by God.

Hailing from a Hasidic dynasty, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) left Europe for the US at the very beginning of WWII. One of the central theologians and human rights activists of US Jewry, Heschel published numerous works aimed to counter what he took to be the prevailing secular mode of Western thought, and to retrieve the prophetic – and to a large degree Hasidic – religious experience (Heschel 1962). For Heschel, modernity should not be about the human rebellion against God, but rather taking responsibility for Him. In his book *Man is not Alone* (1951), Heschel described post-WWII humanity as a modern collective Cain (see Gen 4). Like Cain, Heschel suggested, people prefer to blame God for horrors committed by humans rather than accept human responsibility. Against secular arguments for God's demonstrated absence and nonexistence, and true to his general insistence on human agency in the relationship with the divine, Heschel wrote that, during the Holocaust, humans have silenced and expelled God; our challenge today, he concluded, is to reclaim divine presence (Heschel 1951: 152–153).

Among the most radical Jewish proponents of a 'God is dead' theology, who also debated Heschel's interpretation of the Shoah was US-born Richard L. Rubinstein (1924–2021). Rubinstein held that, after Auschwitz, the traditional Jewish tenets such as election and covenant with God, providence, and redemption must be rethought (1966). For Rubinstein, the transcendent God was indeed dead, and he searched for a new concept of God close

to Kafka's. While Rubinstein denied religion's function as either God's revealed will or a useful tool to improve human character, he held that religion is an indispensable human need to cope with the meaninglessness of the world.

A very different approach was advanced by Emil Fackenheim (1916–2003), an immigrant from Germany to Canada, who took the Holocaust as challenge for what he called the 'secular Jew' even more than religious Jews. Inspired by Buber, yet working within an analytical philosophic orientation, Fackenheim argued that, from a strictly logical perspective, religious and modern secular worldviews are rooted in belief and are thereby mutually infallible. This is the case even though, in the modern world, the faithful are those who have had to accommodate to the dominant secular world and not the other way around. However, Auschwitz forces the secular Jew to modify their universal beliefs in the face of the most irrational and devilish manifestation of Jewish annihilation and its particularism. For Fackenheim, the 'voice' emanating from Auschwitz adds to the traditional Mosaic-Rabbinic 613 commandments an additional modern one: to invest and maintain their Jewish faith and ethnic loyalty and refuse to 'give Hitler the victory' through letting go of Judaism (Fackenheim 1970).

Arguably the most radical reaction to secularism and the Shoah, on the Orthodox Jewish side, was formulated by the Hasidic Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979). Having fled from Hungary to British Mandate Palestine during the war, Teitelbaum later settled in New York state and revived his Hasidic court. Continuing the ultra-Orthodox view of all secular movements in Judaism as heretical deformations of the tradition, Rabbi Teitelbaum was further convinced that not only assimilation in general but also secular Zionism in particular was a cause for the Shoah. Accordingly, in a lengthy homiletical essay, Teitelbaum suggested that Zionism – perceived first and foremost as a secular project – is the work of the Devil, endangering the Jewish people at a crucial time close to redemption (Teitelbaum 1959).

## **4.2 In France**

Based in Strasbourg then in Jerusalem, André Neher (1914–1988), drew on his biblical scholarship to offer an existentialist account of Judaism as a humanistic religion that does not shy away from conflicts and doubts. In a piece titled 'Sacred and Profane Secularism' (Neher 1950; cf. Serero 2018), Neher argued that the strict religious/secular division replicates that of sacred/profane and is primarily a Christian issue. For Judaism, in contrast, beginning with the biblical prophets, the profane and sacred are not mutually exclusive. Following Rabbi Kook, Neher hoped that in the State of Israel there will emerge a renaissance where both spheres will harmoniously unite (see Neher 1950). In his *Exile of the Word* (1981), also countering Jean Paul Sartre's atheist argument from God's silence, Neher focused on the silence of God as a fundamental theological reality

in the Bible, which nevertheless emerged most forcefully in the Shoah (1981: 215). Notwithstanding the tremendous theological difficulties that the Shoah generated, Neher still argued for faith and hope.

The works of Lithuanian-born and French-naturalized philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) contain responses to the question of secularization and to the particular theological issue of the Shoa. In his philosophical writings, most notably in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas set the centre of meaningful human existence in ethics of interpersonal relations, in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, and the responsibility arising from such an encounter. In this way, Levinas points to human ethical failing as the ultimate source of war and violence, with WWII and the Shoah being the primary example. Theologically speaking, Levinas may be said to transpose the infinity of the divine into the infinity of the human other, thereby making the latter a precondition for the experience of the former. More particularly, in his Jewish writings Levinas described Judaism as a 'Religion for Adults' characterized by its intellectual and ethical rigour, affirmation of human freedom, and the pursuit of justice. For Levinas, Judaism is Rabbinic, and its ritual (Halakhic) laws are self-formative practices aimed at achieving justice, the key to the relationship with God's holiness (*sainteté*). Judaism stands in opposition to the sacred (*sacré*), associated with magic, mystical enthusiasm, and ethical passivity. Therefore, Judaism must pass through an atheistic, iconoclastic, secular phase, on par with Western philosophy, in order to then reach a higher monotheistic ability to hear the true God (Levinas 1991). In a similar, partially pro-secular vein, Levinas wondered in one of his Talmudic lectures if 'the world is sufficiently desacralized' so that it could receive the true holiness, grounded in ethics, whose essence 'animates the Jewish tradition' (1994: 141).

Yehuda Léon Askenazi (1922–1996), also known as Manitou, a north-African rabbi, Kabbalist, and intellectual, arrived in Paris after WWII. Askenazi developed a distinct variation on the Rabbinical notion of *Hester Panim*, the hiding of divine face, which applied to secularism as well as the Shoah. Explicating the Talmudic concept of the end of biblical prophecy, Askenazi claimed that the early decades of the Second Temple period (roughly sixth to fifth century BCE) marked a radical change in the epistemic horizons of humanity, ushering in a disappearance and hiding of God's presence from humanity's cognitive experience (Askenazi 1954a). For Askenazi, since this axial-age disenchantment of the world, religions in general and Judaism in particular are based on fidelity to past revelations, which in the Jewish case is sustained by Rabbinic scriptural reasoning (Askenazi 1954b). Askenazi thus accepted a modern secularized and scientific worldview in order to recover the authority of biblical truth claims as interpreted within the Jewish tradition.

In his later years, after he moved to Jerusalem in the late 1960s, Askenazi came to see the Shoah as an exceptional case of *Hester Panim*. As part of a broader engagement with the Shoah, Askenazi assigned to the condition of Jews under the Nazis the legal (Halakhic) category of 'Hefker', the status of an object that is declared ownerless. For Askenazi, at the very time where divine presence was returning to the Holy Land, the Shoah marked a distinct moment when, on the collective level, there existed no providential God for Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe (Askenazi 1983). Thus, Askenazi accepted secular claims on God's absence and supported Jewish (secular) nationalism, even more than Rabbi Kook, through their radical integration into a mystical framework.

## **5 Recent developments, Judaism, and the post-secular**

The theological understanding of, and the approach towards, secularization since the 1980s have changed markedly. In the West, a new age emerged, described by Jürgen Habermas and others as 'the post-secular' (Habermas 2008). It was marked by renewed insertion of the religious into the public sphere, albeit still in compliance with secular rules. So-called postmodernism, also gaining sway at that time, discredited modernism, the Enlightenment project, and secularism as their offshoot, while also criticizing the totalism of religions and of ideologies as their secular substitutes. As a secularizing element, postmodernism applied the late-Wittgensteinian notion of a language-game in order to underscore the arbitrary and constructive makeup of all realms of human life – including religion. Thus, religion lost its truth-value, together with its modern substitutes like science and philosophy (Peters and Marshall 1999).

In the specific Jewish-Israeli context, the resurgence of religion as precursor of post-secularity emerged as early as the 1970s. Among its key elements, it was related to the raising confidence and growth of the national-religious sector, following Israeli victory in the 1967 Israel-Arab war and ensuing conquest of East Jerusalem, the Holy Basin, and Judea and Samaria. The resurgence was also an outcome of a movement of religious seeking following the trauma of the October/Yom Kippur War in 1973. By the early 1980s, Jewish society in Israel also witnessed the astonishing revival and re-emergence of the ultra-Orthodox Haredi sector, after the near decimation of its predecessors in Eastern Europe during the Shoah. With the entry of Jewish religious segments of society into the Israeli public sphere, approaches to secularism of earlier thinkers such as Rabbi Kook on the one hand, or Rabbi Sofer and even Rabbi Teitelbaum on the other, similarly became more prominent.

In Israel, a distinct response to contemporary challenges raised by postmodern thought was developed during the 1990s by Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (1950–2007), known by his acronym Shagar. Shagar departed from mainstream national religious

thought among his colleagues, who, inspired by Rabbi Kook, tended to view the State of Israel as a de-facto sacred entity, and relatedly held a rejective stance toward secularism in Israeli society. Adding an idiosyncratic reading of postmodern philosophers to a novel understanding of Rabbi Nahman of Breslaw, Shagar embraced postmodern individualism and critique of totalization and ideology. He argued that postmodern renouncement of 'imperialist' secularism renders it a potential partner of religion. This is because it opens up the possibility for religion and the secular to occupy independent yet complementary realms, each with its own recognized modes of legitimacy, language games, and rules. Thus, Shagar may be thought of as a post-secular thinker, who consciously adopted a radical Orthodox position of separation, with however the belief that the separate religious and secular realms should interact and inspire each other (Rosenberg 2017; Ross 2017).

Tamar Ross (b. 1938 in the US, resident in Israel since 1956) shares in her later writings Shagar's positive approach to postmodernism. Ross identifies Shagar's stance as post-secular in the sense that the religious and the secular are two legitimate spheres that must interact. She further argues that accepting the 'hidden God' theology entails religious agnosticism and acknowledgment of the subjective character of Torah interpretation, which is the true source of religious authority (Ross 2017). Ross therefore wishes to dismantle the boundaries between the religious and the secular but, unlike Buber, Rosenzweig, or Rabbi Kook, not by including the latter within the former, rather by the opposite move (Ross 2013; 2017; Feldmann Kaye 2018).

## **6 Conclusion**

Responses to secularization within Jewish theology and thought have been diverse. They range from welcoming secularism as a needed Jewish metamorphosis (Brenner), all the way to fierce rejection of secularization (Rabbi Sofer and followers), and even to the extreme of identification of elements of secularization, like nationalism, with the Devil (Teitelbaum). Between these poles, most thinkers have adopted a middle position that accepts some secular elements and rejects others. Examples of accepted elements included Enlightenment rationalism (Mendelssohn), nationalism (Ahad Ha'am), and atheism, albeit in a qualified manner (Levinas).

Similarly, the specific theological God-question has been answered in myriad ways: some strive to make God immediately present and even immanent in the world and within everyday life (Hasidism, Heschel, Buber); others emphasize irrational means to reach the divine or divine inspiration (R. Nachman of Breslaw, Rabbi Sofer), while others insisted that only an unknown and remote God is a viable modern religious option (Scholem, Kafka). Coming to terms with this theological question following WWII and the Shoah, responses have ranged from direct questioning of the traditional views of God (Rubinstein) to affirming divine providence while extracting it from certain time and

place (Askenazi); and from highlighting divine silence as existential human condition (Neher) to finding an affirmation of Jewish faith in the horrid voice emanating out of Auschwitz (Fackenheim) – as well as shifting the question to focus, instead, on human moral comportment (Soloveichik, Heschel, Levinas).

Notably, a central pattern of response by successive Jewish thinkers in their encounter with the secular has been to try and incorporate it within a broader cultural framework informed by the Jewish tradition. Some thinkers have sought to transcend an assumed religious/secular divide and replace it with a comprehensive harmonious vision (Kook, Rosenzweig, late Buber, Neher). Others have accepted elements of a secular ethos, provided they ultimately become subservient to religious assertions or programs (Kook, Askenazi). Yet others have adopted a division of cultural life to independent yet interrelated domains, where Judaism's religious and secular realms will coexist (Soloveitchik, Shagar, Ross).

A cursory look at current social trends in the Jewish world suggests the continued relevance of questions of secularization and the post-secular. North America, where the second-largest world Jewish population resides, has seen an increase in the number of Jews who identify as Orthodox (and, in a sense, anti-secular) coupled with a sizeable growth of Jews who refuse to identify with any of the Jewish (religious) denominations (Pew Research Center 2021). A similar pattern of Orthodox growth contrasted with growing distance from official community is notable within French Jewry, currently the largest European Jewish community, which lives in a state where the issue of secularism (*laïcité*) and the republican ethos play a crucial cultural role. Finally, in the State of Israel, currently home to the largest world Jewish population, the cultural clashes between self-defined secular Jews and self-defined religious Orthodox Jews continue. This occurs side-by-side with a growing influence of Sephardi traditionalism, whose proponents dispute the secular/religious divide and seek to replace it with definitions and cultural patterns that they argue are more befitting of contemporary Judaism (Buzaglo 2008).

As noted in the beginning of this entry, the language of 'the secular' and its cognates are not derived from a Jewish, or Hebrew, context; and in the eyes of some scholars, these terms may have also informed misconceptions of Judaism within Western discourses. Indeed, for the majority of thinkers and groups considered in this article, it has been Judaism that has served as point of departure: for Judaism, secular or religious categories served an important yet secondary role as a means of description, reinterpretation, and propagation. The future of secularization or the secular in Jewish thought will depend on the degrees to which the use of this cluster of terms – alongside their older terminological kin, religion – continues to be a productive tool for self-understanding, description, critique, and rethinking on Judaism (cf. Smith 1998). More broadly, with contemporary proliferation of critical accounts of the religious/secular divide, attention to the long line of modern

Jewish thinkers who strived to overcome this binary division will benefit scholars and theologians engaged with other traditions.

## **Attributions**

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