

*Interdisciplinary Journal of
Research on Religion*

Volume 19

2023

Article 4

Book Talk:

*Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology
to Jewish Philosophy*

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(2022, Oxford University Press)

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One way of narrating the political import of the canon of modern Jewish Western European philosophy might be to frame it as a protest against Christian hegemony. Christians, so this story would go, screw up politics because of their Christianity; the path to a better politics lies in allowing Jews and Jewish ideas to circulate within Europe. This is a long tradition. Moses Mendelssohn suggested in *Jerusalem* (1783/1983), for example, that only the emancipation of Jews could keep Christian culture from its own tendency to fall into idolatrous practices. Hermann Cohen (1918/1972) wrote that Jewish messianism, as opposed to the individualized eudaemonism that he thought typified the Christian West, has the unique ability to create a better world. In 1968, Emmanuel Levinas (1998) argued, to an audience of Catholic intellectuals, that Christian conceptualizations of incarnation—in contrast to Jewish ones—failed to provide the urge to ethical action necessary to minimize the suffering of the oppressed.

This long tradition is still living. In Charles H. T. Lesch's *Solidarity in a Secular Age*, Christian (or a secularized Christian) Europe is again the problem, and Judaism the solution. The first half of the book articulates the problem. How is it that fellow citizens in a state can come to feel solidarity with one another, or with strangers inside and outside the state? Lesch thinks this is a question that liberal political theory, qua theory, has always been bad at answering. And this makes some intuitive sense, given that theory does not always generate the affects that give rise to actively caring for fellow citizens, especially those with less political power. In the three problematic theorists Lesch takes up—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Jürgen Habermas—the strategy is for theory to harness a social force that already generates affects of care: that of religion.

If Rousseau argues both that the general will is something that I (as a citizen) freely will and also that it is always the will of the sovereign, this fails to fall into contradiction only because Rousseau is secularizing an occasionalist Christian theology (from Malebranche) so that the body politic becomes an ersatz church. But because citizens are not autonomously invested in the body politic (as we might claim they are in their churches), Rousseau ends up arguing in *The Social Contract* that the state can force allegiance to the general will, and so a state's policies meant to enable solidarity between citizens become sites of unfreedom. If Kant believed that the human will's deep-seated tendency to choose evil required the construction of a public moral culture that would inculcate rational habits among citizens, well... the frequency of man-made mass death in the twentieth century showed that this really was pie-in-the-sky utopian thinking. Kant's problem, for Lesch, was that the work of this public culture was analogous to the miraculous work of divine grace in transforming the heart. But how can a miracle possibly be secularized? Finally, while Habermas argued in *Theory of Communicative Action* that the norms of rational argument have a kind of sacred power that generate the commitment to others fundamental to solidarity, Lesch suggests (and, in my view, the recent rise of authoritarian leaders around the globe confirms) that Habermas's view is deeply fragile. For if these norms have a sacred power, then we citizens see them as *not* ours, even though they arose through our own discourse. The operation of reason becomes, over time, something supra-rational, something that we can no longer explain, which seems "in principle beyond our capacity to rationally grasp" (p. 109). In all of these thinkers, the turn to religion makes liberal politics risky and dangerous places.

Lesch's answer is not simply to make a *better* turn to religion, but also to make a turn to a *better* religion: Judaism. It is in the philosophy of Levinas that we find a kind of negative theology that *cannot* be secularized, but only imitated. For Lesch, that means that "we discharge our otherworldly yearning"—what Levinas called "metaphysical desire" in the opening pages of *Totality and Infinity* (1969)—"through ethical action" (Lesch, p. 132). This distinction between secularization (what Christians do) and imitation (what Jews do) reappears in his chapter on the thought of Martin Buber. There, Lesch argues that when we "look to God not as a source of grace, but as a model for *chesed* [lovingkindness]," we can think of our social bonds as ones constituted by solidarity with others (p. 178). While we will have to live our lives with authority structures (leaders and followers, bosses and underlings), we will be self-conscious of the arbitrariness of those structures and refuse to naturalize them. Authority hurts less when those in authority know they have no natural right to it. Finally, in order to vivify these philosophical accounts, in his conclusion Lesch turns to a non-Jewish author writing about Judaism and Jewishness—George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*—and makes Deronda the hero, someone who can show solidarity both interpersonally (in his care for Mirah Lapidot, whom he marries) and politically (in appropriating his own Jewishness, and committing to settle in Palestine).

Lesch's political vision is compelling. Allying it to the Jewish tradition, however, is not always successful. There are at least three questions readers might have.

First, what are the stakes of the difference between secularization and imitation? It seems that Lesch wants to say that in a broadly negative-theological model, in which we can only imitate God's actions (but cannot know the kind of being that God is), we cannot arrogate our knowledge of God over others. Action generates solidarity in a way that systematic theology does not, for Lesch. But can we not say that bad systems of authority also arise from people who arrogate over their fellow citizens their knowledge of how to imitate God? And Jewish authorities have not always imitated divine *chesed*, as the history of feminist Jewish thought and the struggle for increasing women's leadership in liturgical and organizational settings over the last decades has shown. Does the fact that often citizens *say* they are acting with *chesed*, but are not actually *doing chesed* toward some of their fellow citizens (women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ folx) mean that Buber is just as utopian as the Christianized thinkers whom Lesch has criticized in the first half of his book? And if not, what are possible strategies for ensuring that those who value *chesed* live out their commitment to it?

Second, do Buber and Levinas really say what Lesch says they do? His portrait of Levinas is, to my mind, the best part of his book, and his descriptions of Levinasian thought are lyrical. For example:

It is the stranger, the neighbor, the vulnerable person who becomes the target of my metaphysical longing. He, not some hypostatized 'sacred,' becomes the recipient of my nonrational psyche's energies. Instead of yearning after the God of another world, I will long to improve the well-being of my fellow man in this one. And the reason I will do it, Levinas suggests, will not be because it makes me feel good or because other people are watching. I will do it because I will see in him—in the person standing right in front of me—the very higher reality I have been seeking (pp. 131-132).

This is beautiful. But I fail to see how it is Levinas. (Indeed, in this respect, I prefer Lesch to Levinas!) Lesch seems to be spinning out Levinasian claims such as “ethics is the spiritual optics” (1969, p. 78). Yet what this optics sees is nothing in this world; it is a phenomenological “seeing” of the conditions of the possibility of various phenomena (e.g., discourse). This is clear from other Levinasian sentences, such as: “The other person is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed” (1969, p. 79). It is because the other’s “face”—a figure for Levinas’s phenomenological claim that others have meaning before I constitute them through any intentional stance on my part—is never a percept, and never linked to any aspect of the other person’s flesh (this is why the face “disincarnates” the other person), that I gain the right to make claims about that which transcends, claims that transcendence grounds me, claims that transcendence cannot be represented in language or in bodily form. Lesch describes Levinas as he does because his attention to solidarity means that he must always show his reader how, and how readily, his representative Jewish philosophers *motivate* acts of solidarity with others. But motivation was always the single most mysterious aspect of Levinas’s thinking.

Similarly, in the writings of Buber, it is puzzling as to what acts of solidarity actually accomplish. In his chapter on Buber, Lesch claims that “Buber insists that human beings themselves, without divine assistance, can bring about an ethical solidarity” (p. 178). For how long? In Buber’s *I and Thou* (1923/2023), Buber was clear that fully reciprocal relationships necessarily came to an end: “Every You must become an It in our world” (p. 19). *Chesed* therefore has its limits. And relationships of solidarity are not necessarily happy ones. Lesch writes about Buberian “lives shared together in fate and destiny” (p. 180) without a bad sovereign who would lord authority over them. But Buber’s description of this world is not merely a description of people who see themselves as prophetically oriented against centralized power; it is also a description of suffering, of failure with regard to the people, of national disaster on its way (1949/2016, pp. 223-227). If Buber saw solidarity as worthwhile, wasn’t it only because a people’s commitment to God would eventually lead to redemption? How would that be in line with Lesch’s negative-theological view?

Lesch’s *Solidarity in a Secular Age* aims to inspire a transformation in how its readers see the relationship between God and politics, and in how they might see a better politics grounded in imitating divine *chesed*. It assumes that anyone can make this transformation, and Eliot’s Daniel Deronda appears to embody this “anyone” for Lesch, for whom Deronda “personifies the reality of choice that we have as liberal citizens but we often fail to see” (p. 188). Nonetheless, Deronda is no ordinary citizen. Lesch writes about a key scene early in *Daniel Deronda*, in which Deronda, rowing on the Thames, sees Mirah Lapidot about to commit suicide and saves her. One should spend more time here. Shortly before he sees her, he begins to sing to himself the gondolier’s song from Rossini’s *Otello*, which begins with a line from Dante’s *Inferno*: “There is no greater sorrow than thinking back upon a happy time in misery.” This song, Eliot tells us, “haunted his throat all the way up the river” (p. 165). Deronda is miserable because he does not fit in to the world around him. In part this is because Deronda, as an adopted child, does not know his ancestry; but in part it is because he is so often reminded by others that he looks different from everyone else. Deronda therefore is no standard liberal

citizen; he is not like his fellows, he knows it, and every time he looks in a mirror he cannot but wonder who he really is: “His own face in the glass had during many years been associated for him with thoughts of some one whom he must be like” (p. 165). Even though Eliot writes that Deronda takes note of Mirah because of her beauty, these prior sentences about Deronda’s own pain matter for why he saves her. Eliot’s first description of her is as “a figure which might have been an impersonation of the misery he [Deronda] was unconsciously giving voice to [in his singing]” (pp. 165-166). Deronda attends to her because she is miserable, like him. The scene suggests, *contra* Lesch, that solidarity is most easily accomplished across bonds of similarity, not relationships of difference.

If my differences from Lesch matter, it is because it is striking just how oddly his compelling vision of politics fits with his data. Lesch says that he is resisting one tradition of political theory with another, that he is resisting the bad effects of secularized Christian politics with a Jewish one. But this Jewish political tradition is one that Lesch conjures out of thin air. There are good reasons for scholars to conjure; academia is disempowering, and this can lead us to believe that we have no power unless we claim to speak in the name of something greater than ourselves, a tradition. But the block quote from Lesch cited above, purportedly about Levinas, suggests that we do not need a Jewish politics. We need a Leschian one.

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Author’s Reply by Charles H. T. Lesch The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

I am grateful to Martin Kavka for his thoughtful comments and kind words about my book. Kavka places *Solidarity in a Secular Age* in a tradition of Jewish philosophy extending from

the Enlightenment through Weimer Germany and into the late 20th century. Simultaneously, he suggests that the book transcends it, concluding “We do not need a Jewish politics. We need a Leschian one.” I think Kavka gives the book’s thinkers too little credit. Marking our divide is an important but sometimes overlooked distinction between intellectual history and political theory. Kavka and I do diverge about certain matters of interpretation. Where we disagree most, though, is about why we should study Jewish philosophy.

Theorists, like historians, want to get past thinkers right. But our chief aim isn’t to embed them in context; it’s to show how, properly interpreted, they can still speak to us today. Following Jürgen Habermas, we might call this method rational reconstruction: By offering the best possible version of a thinker’s argument, we can see how it informs our own questions. Notably, such questions may not have been those the thinker himself asked, or could have even anticipated. Rousseau drew from Machiavelli’s ideas on religion, who himself drew from Livy, although neither the Renaissance Florentine nor the Early Imperial Roman would have recognized the Enlightenment Genevan’s quandaries about self-rule in market society. There are risks to reading this way. Instead of engaging past ideas on their own terms, we might just go looking for fancy words to meet our present needs. Philosophy might get turned upside down, appealing to authority instead of questioning it. Yet there are also risks to *not* reading this way. Interpreting old texts as artifacts gives them all the normative force of museum pieces. It suggests that our own moral discourse is self-evidently right, with nothing to gain from its outmoded predecessors. It constricts our normative vision. The best political theory, by contrast, broadens it. Like participant-observers, we immerse ourselves in alien worlds; we learn from people who thought very differently than we do; and, with all the cautions of a good ethnographer—humility, self-awareness, and vigilance against romanticism—we try to render their insights into tools for understanding, criticizing, and improving the present.

This is what I seek to do in *Solidarity in a Secular Age*. The book begins with a pressing dilemma: As religion retreats, what should provide for our social bond? Can liberal democracies avoid authoritarianism and xenophobia? Contemporary political theory does propose answers to these questions, often based on nationalism or constitutional loyalty. Yet these answers miss what a host of thinkers—from Tocqueville to Durkheim to Bellah—saw as religion’s unique motivational power. So, I undertake political theory’s equivalent of fieldwork. In the book’s first part, I look closely at several canonical western thinkers. European political thought is usually narrated as a secularization story: Divinely-ordained kings were replaced by profane sovereigns, who were then constrained by natural rights and democratic elections. My findings challenge this account. Rousseau, Kant, and Habermas each developed theories of solidarity not by secularizing politics, but by modeling it on elements of religion. They built their thought on shaky, even aporetic foundations. *Pace* Kavka, the problem wasn’t Christianity. It was the attempt to use theological concepts to construct political systems, what Carl Schmitt famously called “political theology.” Now the question is: If we think something about religion is important for our social bond, is there an alternative to political theology for harnessing it? What led me to assemble Levinas, Buber, and Eliot into a distinctive tradition is their shared answer: a solidarity realized not through the appropriation of theological concepts, but through the imitation of religious experience. Part Two of the book shows how this approach can help tackle liberalism’s solidarity dilemma.

One aspect of this dilemma is motivational: What will inspire us to act against our self-interest and give to others? Political theorists typically respond by appealing either to reason (Kant, Rawls, Habermas) or affective psychology—to sympathy (Smith), love (Nussbaum), or national identity (Tamir). Levinas, by contrast, looks to religious life. Human beings desire not only satiety and recognition; they also crave transcendence, a higher reality, what Rudolf Otto called the “numinous.” Such metaphysical desire can be dangerous: People sometimes discard their moral judgment for collective effervescence in congregation, mob, or nation. Yet to ignore it, as theorists often do, would be a mistake. Even as organized religion declines, metaphysical desire remains a permanent part of our psyche. Levinas’s solution is to channel it into ethical life: Vulnerable human beings, not theological abstractions or imagined communities, become conduits for our metaphysical longing. Levinas’s deep concern for solidarity has been plain to readers since Derrida. What I show is how the moral psychology underlying it—which can be hard to pin down in Levinas’s philosophical texts—is clarified in his writings on Judaism. Kavka suggests that Levinas’s “optics” are otherworldly. Some careful intertextual work reveals the opposite: “Ethics is not a corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God...must find an ethical expression.” The “ethical relation,” Levinas insists, must be conceived “*as a religious relation.*” The link to metaphysical desire is plain, too: “...Through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God” (Levinas, 1990, pp. 16-17).

While talk about ethics might seem starry-eyed, Levinas and Buber see it as vital for facing a hard-nosed political problem: dependence on the will of others. Morality is plainly not a sufficient condition for limiting power; we need laws for that, too. But it is just as plainly a necessary one. Archetypically, slaves depend on masters. More subtly, workers depend on bosses, students on teachers, children on parents, and prisoners on wardens. The radical’s response is to dissolve civil society: Through a powerful, interventionist state, true equality can be achieved once and for all, in every domain. For those of us committed to liberal democracy, however, this solution would merely consolidate domination in an even more terrifying form (and still fail to eliminate dependence). It would cast us into a Nietzschean universe in which power can be met only with power. Levinas’s alternative is to make solidarity a prerequisite for attaining full selfhood—for earning our “I.” We sacrifice for others and put their vulnerability first. We work to raise our consciousness of the coercive webs in which people are enmeshed. We then try to free them—or barring that, to at least loosen their fetters.

For Buber, this requires *chesed* (loosely translated as “kindness”). *Chesed* isn’t about being nice; it isn’t about papering over power relations and acting like everything’s OK. It is precisely about lifting the moral blindness which accompanies modernity’s compartmentalization of life into different domains (political, economic, ethical, aesthetic), the space it provides to be a conniving politician in the morning, an apathetic consumer in the afternoon, and a caring parent at night, the sanction it gives to see the beggar we pass as just another beggar, the refugee on TV as just another refugee, the laborer sweating in the hot sun as just another laborer. Kavka criticizes *chesed* for neglecting categories of people and for the hypocrisy of its practitioners. Yet were we to apply these standards consistently, it would impoverish our normative vocabulary. Democracy—which in Athens was limited to a cabal of citizens ruling over a much larger number of slaves, and has historically excluded women,

racial minorities, and others—would have to go. So would “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” words remarkable for both their stirring moral clarity and utterly deficient realization. *Chesed* is associated in Judaism with imitating God because, like the deity’s work of creation, it involves a selfless, ever-expanding flow of goodness. Normative concepts change over time. Sometimes, like with democracy, they take millennia to realize their potential. Political theorists (and civilians) can still use them.

To whom are we especially obligated? This is the second part of liberalism’s solidarity dilemma. Contemporary political theorists often answer it in one of two ways: by drawing our moral commitment around specific nations, or by removing particularism’s stencil and obligating us to all of humanity equally. Judaism’s tradition of moral phenomenology rejects each of these positions. Levinas emphasizes that sacrifice has to be for real human beings, not abstractions; Buber stresses that *chesed* has to exist in a concrete context, among people we actually know. At the same time, both are moral universalists: Particularism is a practical concession to human limitations, not a principled chauvinism. Indeed, Buber reserves his fiercest criticism for the “‘We’ of group egotism, of national conceit,” for a nationalism that marches for its own interests on the backs of prostrate barbarians (Buber, 1967, p. 211).

Buber finds his alternative to nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Biblical Israel. This was a manifestly flawed group of people. It was also one whose members were committed to each other, shared one another’s fate, and who worked, however fitfully, toward diminishing domination. Here, as with the conditions of liberal pluralism, Kafka seems uncomfortable with solidarity’s non-idealism—that it allows for imperfection, that it is a work in progress, that it hovers between reality and utopia. Yet this, for Buber and the Bible’s prophets, is what defines the human condition. Solidarity won’t solve all our problems. But neither will God. Contra Kafka, the idea that we need divine grace is a Christian one, based on an original sin which only a miracle can transfigure. For Buber, by contrast, we are placed into this world with the freedom to perfect it. We bring God in through our commitment to one another.

In “Science as a Vocation,” Max Weber quotes Tolstoy to raise two questions scholarship alone can’t answer: What shall we do? How shall we live? There are good reasons that today’s academy divides labor between intellectual history and political theory. Both are valuable: While we might study the same texts, we often ask different questions and come to contrasting conclusions. Yet the academy is also in crisis—the humanities most of all. And in my experience, when students pick up Plato, Hobbes, or Marx, they’re less interested in judging them by our current morality than in seeing how they can help answer Tolstoy’s questions. Historians of philosophy aren’t wrong to detach themselves from their research subjects; critical evaluation requires distance. Too much detachment, however, falsely implies that critique is all people need. It suggests that our latest normative ideas are indisputable, that past thinkers have nothing to teach us, that once the old faiths fade into secularity, our existential dilemmas will fade away with them. Weber knew differently. Tolstoy’s questions are still, and will ever be, ours.

I believe these questions find compelling answers in Jewish philosophy. By concluding *Solidarity in a Secular Age* with *Daniel Deronda*, I want to suggest that there are compelling answers to be found in Jewish life, too. It’s true, as I note in the book, that the egoistic Gwendolen might be a more realistic model of liberal solidarity than Deronda. Eliot’s hero really is a moral exemplar. But I’d like to think that many of us were drawn to philosophy

not because it holds up a mirror, but because it envisions a radically different world, and were drawn to literature not because it illuminates the cave, but because it shows us a path out of it. Deronda isn't looking for sameness; he's after transcendence. He thinks about his life as a moral quest—a search for the Good and a way to live it out. He gives us a standard—a rigorous, challenging, but attainable one—for how to form genuine solidarity with others. In light of that, perhaps Eliot, describing Deronda's encounter with Mira, should have the last word:

The light was not such that he could distinctly discern the expression of her features or her glance, but they were distinctly before him nevertheless – features and a glance which seemed to have given fuller meaning for him to the human face (p. 233).

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