

The Cultural Function of Monotheism On Cassirer's Late Political Philosophy

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*In memoriam
John Michael Krois
(1943-2010)*

Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms does not deal with issues of law and morals as extensively as with myth, language or religion.^{1,2} However, one notable exception is his study of Axel Hägerström, one of the most important Swedish philosophers of the first half of the 20th century. This work, which Cassirer wrote during his time in Gothenburg, discusses in detail the relationship between law and myth, thus grappling with no less than the creation of legal thought and action as an elementary component of human culture.³ Cassirer discusses therein

central questions of moral philosophy. For example, he subjects Hägerström's moral emotivism to radical criticism by insisting on the necessity of an universalist perspective in ethics.⁴ Otherwise, he argues, one cannot overcome the stage of particularistic customs. Just how unjustified the accusation of a disinterest in questions of social and moral philosophy is, also becomes obvious in Cassirer's inaugural lecture at the University of Gothenburg. Here, the philosopher of culture explores Albert Schweitzer's cultural ethics, subjecting himself to criticism in the process: "While endeavoring on behalf of the scholastic conception of philosophy, immersed in its difficulties as if caught in its subtle problems, we have all too frequently lost sight of the true connection between philosophy and the world."⁵

In the following article, I want to focus on another, similarly neglected aspect of Cassirer's work: his function as an alert contemporary of (everyday) political events. Politics and social life do not seem to feature prominently in it until

¹ This paper was given as a Lecture at the University of Gothenburg on February 12, 2010 during my stay as an Ernst Cassirer Fellow (founded by *Volkswagenstiftung*) at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies (SCAS) in Uppsala. I am very grateful especially to Christiane Andersen and Ola Sigurdson from the Swedish Ernst-Cassirer Society for a warm reception in Gothenburg, and to Martina Dommer for her help by translating a revised version of this text.

² One of the best accounts of Cassirer's work was written by John Michael Krois: *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1987).

³ Cf. Birgit Recki, *Kultur ohne Moral? Warum Ernst Cassirer trotz der Einsicht in den Primat der praktischen Vernunft keine Ethik schreiben konnte*, 58-79, in: *Kultur und Philosophie: Ernst Cassirers Werk und*

Wirkung (ed. by D. Frede & R. Schmücker; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

⁴ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Axel Hägerström. Eine Studie zur schwedischen Gegenwartsphilosophie* (Wettergren & Kerbers: Göteborg, 1939).

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem* (1935), in: *Symbol, Myth and Culture. Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945* (ed. by D.P. Verene; New Haven/Yale: Yale UP, 1979), 60.

the late 1920s. However, no other aspect touches upon Cassirer's external life circumstances more strongly. Or maybe this actually is the reason for his years of silence? In any case, from the time of his Hamburg rectorate in 1928/29⁶, instead of the recluse, we get to know the public intellectual Cassirer with his decided and pointed judgments. While he actually had touched upon questions of political freedom and human rights during World War I, in the final phase of the Weimar Republic, his ideas take on a new, different quality.⁷

The whole drama of this awakening to political realism can be traced along the lines of Cassirer's family history. Born in 1874 to a secular-liberal family in the Wilhelmine era, he experienced increasing anti-Semitism, which thankfully caused him, unlike many others, to escape on time. While Cassirer never disavowed his Jewishness, Fritz Stern's self-characterization also applies to him: "Hitler made me 'a real Jew'." Even though Cassirer later faced his own Jewish tradition with great awareness, he still stayed true to his fundamentally distanced attitude towards any religious creed. Unlike his teacher Hermann Cohen, who had been a stalwart of the Jewish religion throughout his life, Cassirer, from the 1930s on, was more interested in honoring Judaism as a culture and a tradition in its significance for world history and the history of ideas. At the same time, it is notable that, besides the political unrest of these years, it was most of all the permanent impression of his academic mentor which moved Cassirer to contemplate the *role of Judaism* more intensely. From Cohen, he will adopt essential aspects of his *understanding of ethical monotheism and the role of the prophetic-messianic faith for moral universalism*. Thus, Cassirer lives through a process that can be found in similar form in thinkers like Martin Buber, Gerschom Scholem, Emanuel Lévinas or Walter Benjamin: the deeper realiza-

tion of one's own (religious) origin in the face of crisis.

Hermann Cohen's Philosophy and his Influence on Cassirer

Cassirer's philosophical thought has to be understood from the background of Marburg neo-Kantianism School and its most important representative.⁸ Cohen's work represents a system that is formed on the basis of a consistently developed Kantian philosophy. Accordingly, the writings about Kant's *Theorie der Erfahrung* [Theory of Experience], about his ethics and aesthetics, correspond to the systematic writings on the *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* [The Logic of Pure Cognition], *Ethik des reinen Willens* [The Ethics of the Pure Will] und *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* [The Aesthetics of Pure Feeling]. The analogy to the triad of Critiques is obvious. But like Cassirer after him, Cohen uses philosophy for the critical foundation of human culture. Thereby, cultural theory and history of philosophy are intertwined. Unfortunately, Cohen was unable to write the conclusion of his system. It was supposed to represent a psychology of human consciousness which was to justify in detail the specific transformation of Kantian epistemology into a principle of origin for human experience. We cannot go into any further detail here and thus will proceed to focus on the role assigned to the philosophy of religion within this system. Looking at this issue, we can see even more similarities and differences between Cohen and Cassirer.

As a true Kantian, Cohen naturally emphasizes the primacy of practical reason in his cultural philosophy.⁹ Therefore, the one-sided reduction to questions of science theory or epistemology,

⁶ Cf. David R. Lipton, *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany, 1914-1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

⁷ Cf. Hans Joas, *A German Idea of Freedom? – Cassirer and Troeltsch between Germany and the West* (Occasional Papers of the Swedish Ernst Cassirer Society Vol. 2: Malmö, 2006).

⁸ A descriptive portrait of Cohen and his philosophy was written by Cassirer himself: Ernst Cassirer, *Hermann Cohen 1842-1918*, 161-173, in: *ECW 24: Aufsätze und kleinere Schriften (1941-1946)* (ed. by B. Recki; Meiner: Hamburg, 2007).

⁹ For a general perspective of the three most leading figures in the tradition of Marburg-School see: Ursula Renz, *Die Rationalität der Kultur. Zur Kulturphilosophie und ihrer transzendentalen Begründung bei Cohen, Natorp und Cassirer* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002).

which the neo-Kantian schools (both the Marburg and Southwest German type) are frequently accused of, turns out to be a myth and a misrepresentation,¹⁰ for which Heidegger is at least partly to blame. Instead Cohen's own endeavors can more aptly be understood as an attempt to justify an ethics of autonomous humanity. Only before this background are we able to understand the ambiguity of the role of religion in the triad of logics, ethics and aesthetics. More simply put: why do we need religion if morals can do without religious motives or even reasons?

In two volumes, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* [The Concept of Religion in the System of Philosophy], 1915, and in *Religion des Judentums innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*¹¹ [Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism] (posthumously published in 1918), Cohen asks for the status of religion in his philosophical system. Already the titles themselves reveal his endeavor of continuously advancing his critical approach in Kant's footsteps. So, he insists on the strict autonomy and self-sufficiency of the three rational faculties of thought, volition and emotion. Therefore, his work does not allow for any religious A-priori like Ernst Troeltsch developed the same time. In this sense, religion does not have any autonomy within human culture and in the philosophical system reflecting on its conditions. But in order to preserve and maintain the cultural significance (and also necessity) of religion, Cohen introduces an additional differentiation, a differentiation between independence (in the sense of autonomy) and particular nature [*Eigenart*].¹² While religion cannot attain the former, its particular nature, by which it sets itself apart from other spheres, lies in the fact that the awareness

of the *correlation of God and individual* is articulated in it. This, however, at the same time applies to all other *gestalts* of consciousness, so that Cohen cannot allow any special province of religious consciousness: "The human self achieves its integral unity in correlation with or in relation to God. The world is one integral whole and human history is, at least prospectively, the history of the whole humanity,"¹³ as Wendell S. Dietrich aptly describes Cohen's position. For this reason, the function of religion can be considered as integral of culture. God and individual mark the vanishing points of a philosophical concept of the unity of reality that encompasses both evaluative and normative aspects. Before this background, Cohen's critique of Spinoza and his pantheism can finally be understood.¹⁴ Only where *God's uniqueness and the human being's individuality* are not ultimately withdrawn again can humanity be sustained. This is what *monotheism without monism* stands for.

But the cultural significance of Jewish monotheism cannot be fully understood as long as we don't see that for Cohen, God as a philosophical idea is predominantly a moral one. "Only by our own action can morality become a true reality. For this action God means nothing else than, so to speak, the possibility of an ideal pattern and scheme."¹⁵ Thus, God is a question for the *Ethics of the Pure Will*.¹⁶ Monotheism, both in its

¹⁰ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933* (transl. by E. Matthews, Cambridge/London: Cambridge UP, 1984), 106.

¹¹ Cf. H. Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (with an Introductory Essay by L. Strauss, transl. and ed. by Simon Kaplan; Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1995).

¹² This is commented on critically by Troeltsch in his review of Cohen's book on religion from 1915: Ernst Troeltsch, Review of: H. Cohen, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915), in: *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 43 (1918), 57-62.

¹³ Wendell S. Dietrich, *Cohen and Troeltsch. Ethical Monotheistic Religion and Theory of Culture* (Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1986), 62.

¹⁴ Cf. Z. Levy, Hermann Cohens Kritik an Spinoza und dem Pantheismus, 69-83 in: *Rationalität der Religion und Kritik der Kultur: Hermann Cohen und Ernst Cassirer* (ed. by H. Deuser & M. Moxter, Würzburg: Echter, 2002). A critical analysis in the 1912 publication includes also the (early) Schleiermacher: cf. Hermann Cohen, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1915), 94f.

¹⁵ Hermann Cohen, *Religion und Sittlichkeit*, in: *Jüdische Schriften Bd. III*, (ed. B. Strauß; C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn: Berlin, 1924), 138 [= translation according to: Cassirer, *Hermann Cohen*, 168].

¹⁶ Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Werke 7: System der Philosophie, 2. Teil: Ethik des reinen Willens (2. Aufl. 1907)* (ed. by H. Holzhey; Olms: Darmstadt/New York, 1981), e.g. 402ff. 428ff.

theistic and pantheistic version, can only be justified as such if it furthers the ethical-moral progress of religion within human cultural development. And this is exactly what happened, according to Cohen and many exegetes of that time,¹⁷ during the period of Old Testament prophecy. The very moment when God demands mostly love and justice from his people instead of sacrifices (cf. Hos 6: 6), the belief in one God turns into an ethical monotheism that will later be enhanced by a messianic dimension; for the “new Heaven and new Earth (cf. Jes 65: 17) represent, with the assertion of peace and justice, the final moral goal, the destiny of humankind as a whole in every single individual. “The goal of messianic humanity is an ideal goal of social justice toward which human ethical and social action is eternally directed.”¹⁸

When we now return to Cassirer, it is interesting to note that almost all of the papers and articles he published regarding questions of religious philosophy deal with Cohen. In a text published in 1933, Cassirer himself summarizes his teacher’s theory of religion by drawing attention to three points:¹⁹

(1) Cohen’s understanding of religion attests to a *universalist perspective* with a *liberal attitude* that *transgresses the boundaries of denominations*, and in a way even religions, in which monotheism brings together *faith and reason*;

(2) Cohen understands the *idea of God as a pure ideal of unity*. Thus, he combines *Platonic* and *Kantian motifs* while placing himself in the tradition of the medieval thinker

¹⁷ However, the differences, e.g. compared to Julius Wellhausen’s emphasis of prophecy, (contrasted against the later developments towards law and messianism), should not be overlooked here.

¹⁸ Dietrich, *Cohen and Troeltsch*, 17.

¹⁹ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, Hermann Cohens Philosophie der Religion und ihr Verhältnis zum Judentum, 355-364, in: *ECW 18: Aufsätze und kleinere Schriften (1932-1935)* (ed. by B. Recki; Meiner: Hamburg, 2004). See also: Thomas Meyer, *Kulturphilosophie in gefährlicher Zeit. Zum Werk Ernst Cassirers* (LIT: Hamburg, 2007), 41ff.

Maimonides and his doctrine of negative divine attributes;²⁰

(3) The building blocks of Cohen’s philosophy of religion originate from *Jewish prophetism*, with its *correlation of God*, the *(absolute) individual* and the *messianic idea of humankind*.²¹

For Cohen and Cassirer alike, as we will discuss in more detail below, this process represents the decisive step *from mythos to ethos in the history of religion*.²² With this representation, Cassirer pinpoints the crucial aspects of Cohen’s concept, which stays true to the Kantian ideal “within the limits of pure reason” and may therefore be called strictly anti-metaphysical (in the traditional sense of the word). God, the absolute, and the ethical ideal of humanity as the goal of mankind coincide in a way, and as we will see in the next steps, Cassirer ties in with this idea as he develops his own thoughts on the *cultural function of monotheism*.

Judaism and Stoicism: Two Concepts of Monotheism

In addition to his papers on Cohen, the most important source for reconstructing Cassirer’s integration of monotheism in the Western history of ideas are his texts published in the 1940s. Maybe the most important writing on this topic is found in his last book, *The Myth of State*, published posthumously in 1946. In the following, I will mostly focus on this book. Only towards the end will I take a systematic point from volume II of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* [Philosophy of Symbolic Forms] and critically turn it against Cassirer. However, we have to skip over

²⁰ On Cohen’s perspective on Maimonides see his book: Hermann Cohen, *Ethics of Maimonides* (transl. with a commentary by A. Sh. Bruckstein, University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2003).

²¹ Cf. Cohen, *Religion und Sittlichkeit*, 139: “The idea of humanity is the fruit of and issue of the unity of God.” (transl. according to Cassirer, *Hermann Cohen*, 171).

²² Cf. Cohen, *Religion und Sittlichkeit*, 119 (= transl. according to Cassirer, *Hermann Cohen*, 171).

the question of religious evolution within the development of human culture.²³ Thus, the subtitle of my paper becomes clear: *On Cassirer's late political philosophy*, insofar as it springs from the connection between *Judaism and the Modern Political Myth* [1944]²⁴.

If we ask for the function of a religious idea, which monotheism most certainly is, this does not imply a functionalistic understanding. Cassirer, the historian of ideas, is primarily interested in a political analysis of his time and its philosophical interpretation, but without any metaphysical extrapolations. This question also points to another aspect. If we focus on the cultural functions of an idea, this already implies that there are other functions, or at least one other function. And exactly this is the case. For monotheism has its origin primarily in a religious or philosophical-sapiential world view. *The belief in the existence of the one God* and the *trust in him* spring from *religious experiences of transcendence*, as they are passed on primarily in *ritual practices* and *mythical narrations* and not in the cognitive concepts of metaphysics. The homeland of monotheism is and always will be the *symbolic form of religion*, and nothing else. Nevertheless, Cassirer in no way ties his interpretation of the cultural role of monotheism to a (public) avowal of his Jewishness in the sense of a denominational creed. He still remains in an agnostic position, which is not to be equated with a secularistic attitude.

In *The Myth of State*, the central passages on monotheism can be found in the chapter about *The Religious and Metaphysical Background of the Medieval Theory of the State*: "The deepest and preeminent source of their philosophical conceptions and religious ideals was Jewish monotheism."²⁵ Here, Cassirer adopts the classical view of the middle ages as an era of symbi-

otic harmony between faith and reason. Thus, in their very own way, the medieval thinkers carry on the legacy of classical antiquity, Hellenistic culture and Christianity. In it, Cassirer sees articulated the social matrix and unity of Western civilization. Even though he is interested in making a distinction between the various cultural sources of the middle ages, he by no means intends to open a rift between "Athens" and "Jerusalem". In fact, the result of his can be viewed as a differentiation of the various traditions and concepts of the idea of God as he locates it in the Hebrew Bible on the one hand and Greek philosophy on the other.²⁶ "These words mark, as it were, the watershed between Greek and Jewish thought, between the God of Plato and Aristotle and the God of Jewish monotheism (...) His essence is his *will*; his only manifestation is the manifestation of his personal will. Such a personal revelation which is an ethical and not a logical act is quite alien to the Greek mind."²⁷ This "will" is one that gives the commandments to his people and accordingly demands them to obey. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Mi 6: 8), Cassirer quotes the prophet Micah.²⁸ And a few pages later, he notes that we are dealing with two different forms of monotheism. For the God of the Bible is not a term, but has a name as a person: "I am who I am. [...] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." (Ex 3: 14-15). A statement that hardly applies to the God of Plato and Aristotle who stands beyond earthly affairs as an absolute *nous*.

Based on the way he usually is portrayed, we could speculate that Cassirer would try to harmonize these two concepts. But indeed he does no such thing. In fact, he emphasizes his problems with the Jewish concept of God instead.

²³ In *Essay on Man*, Cassirer himself talks about the religious evolution in the course of the breakthrough of ethical monotheism in ancient Israel and in the Zoroastrian religion, see: Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1944), 103.

²⁴ See his essay of the same name in: Cassirer, *ECW* 24, 197-209

²⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of State* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1946), 81.

²⁶ All things considered, I would insist on the antagonism of Greek and Jewish monotheism (and the anthropology implied in them) in Cassirer's work, more strongly than e.g.: Thomas Stark, *Symbol, Bedeutung, Transzendenz. Der Religionsbegriff in der Kulturphilosophie Ernst Cassirers* (Würzburg: Echter, 1997), 638ff.

²⁷ Cassirer, *Myth of State*, 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

From a modern perspective, the main point primarily pertains to the idea of a moral law that is commanded and prescribed by a higher power “beyond the world.” Such an idea contradicts the ability of human reason and its autonomy, including dialectic thinking. “In contrast with this Greek *intellectualism* prophetic religion is characterized by its deep and resolute *voluntarism*. God is a person – and that means a will. No mere logical methods of arguing and reasoning can make us understand this will.”²⁹ So Cassirer harbors more sympathies for those *Stoic forms of monotheism* that are characterized precisely by being able to combine even elements of Jewish thought, the *individualism* of the commandments, and *universalism* regarding the commandments’ addressee with a *belief in reason*. In any case, for the Kantian Cassirer, the *Stoic concept of an ethical monotheism* is the preferable model for a long time. The prioritization of his Stoic variant, however, does by no means render obsolete the significance of monotheism as such for the history of political ideas. In fact, Cassirer seems to argue for the necessity of a complementary correlation of both forms; for it was only through the effect of the *Jewish belief in one God*, with its *emphatic insistence on the primacy of the divine will, the moral autonomy and free will of human beings*, that monotheism was able to become socially relevant in wide circles in the first place. In all this, Cassirer remains reticent regarding his own concept of a philosophical idea of God. It is not surprising that he did not write his own philosophy of religion, and that his own discussion of religion as a symbolic form refers a lot to religious studies and cultural science, but hardly deals with any metaphysics, no matter how post-critical it is. His cultural philosophy represents a paradigmatic form of post-metaphysical thought.

The Dynamics of Myth and the Ambiguities of animal symbolicum

As is widely known, Cassirer begins his book about *The Myth of State* with a short summary of its results and insights about the nature, function

and role of myth in human cultural history. For Cassirer, myth represents a kind of “common matrix”³⁰ of culture. Unlike in many other parts of his expansive oeuvre, he now emphasizes much more insistently the impossibility to ever overcome myth altogether. Not only primitive cultures and societies “cannot live in the clear and cold light of rational thought”³¹ – neither can their modern successors.³² “It is the deep desire of the individual to be freed from the fetters of its individuality, to immerse itself in the stream of universal life, to lose its identity, to be absorbed in the whole of nature.”³³

In this respect, mythical thought, feeling and action remain a part of human history, even though their character is changing. This self-clarification, which certainly emerged under the impression of the triumph of fascism and National Socialism, causes Cassirer to conduct another inquiry into *the significance and nature of myth*. At heart, he stays true to his arguments in PhSF II. Myth creates a whole universe in which human beings live by feeling at home in it in an emotional way. In a *mythical world*, human beings feel the encompassing *solidarity of life* in a very intense manner. “[R]eligion and myth begin with the awareness of the universality and fundamental identity of life.”³⁴ It is the *social and emotional aspects of myth* that give it such a strong impact on everyday life. Through *habitualization, cult and ritual* help to *stabilize and renew* the bond among human beings in their *societies*. However, something has changed in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries; myth

³⁰ E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth* (transl. by S. Langer, New York: Dover Publ. Inc., 1953), 44.

³¹ E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. A Philosophical Anthropology* (1942/3), in: *ECN 6: Vorlesungen und Studien zur philosophischen Anthropologie* (ed. by G. Hartung and H. Kopp-Oberstebrink; Hamburg: Meiner, 2005), 491.

³² Conversely, it is also true that even in so-called primitive cultures, not everything was magical: “Even the uncivilized man cannot live in the world without a constant effort to understand that world. And for this purpose he has to develop and to use some general forms or categories of thought.” (Cassirer, *Myth of State*, 14, also see *ibid.*, 278ff.)

³³ Cassirer, *Myth of State*, 41.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81f.

in its traditional form or in its religiously transformed guise slowly loses its power. When Cassirer describes his own era as an era of ideologies, it is the loss of functionality of the mythical form of life that is to blame. What does this mean?

In modernity, political myths are by no means passed on or handed down, but consciously created by human beings. From the very start, modern political myth represents a method of attaining and staying in power, and not a product of free human imagination. This is the reason why Cassirer sees concepts very critically that consider contemporary political ideologies as a pure return to irrational myth which seems to stand in contrast to an economical way of life and technical rationality. Indeed, it was in a certain sense both logical and innovative that the Nazi-regime rediscovered the relevance and significance of myth for people's everyday lives. The need for myth to ascertain one's own position in one's social surroundings, as well as in society as a whole, could thus be adapted according to one's own ideas. The exploitation of myth through the creation of new rituals, narratives and customs such as Germanic solstice celebrations or the Hitler salute were only a first but nevertheless sweeping step towards the creation of a new society: a nation of new, "pure-blooded" people. Soon, this was followed by the purgation of the language and the auratic-messianic staging of the political in the Führer cult. It is a sign of Cassirer's brilliant analytical ability when he remarks that the actual seizure of Nazi-power [*Machtergreifung*] began long before 1933, when a new myth was inaugurated in the legend of the Aryan master race.

However, the *most fatal effect* and most enduring aftermath of the *Nazi period* was the *loss of everyday responsibility of the citizens* among each other and for each other. This is the only satisfactory explanation of why the social marginalization and ultimate annihilation of fellow citizens was tolerated without resistance, and why the readiness to blindly follow and obey the Führer soon knew no more boundaries. Of course, this development was boosted by the skepticism prevalent in Germany towards individual human rights, seen as mere products of Western European or American ideology. But

where human freedom is negated or politically delegated, its counterpart – mutual responsibility – also loses its significance and acceptance. Thus, the respect for the individual vanished along with the knowledge about the dignity of each human being, in everyday life as well as (and even more so) in politics.

We have to take into account this very pessimistic attitude, which was espoused in *Myth of State* several weeks before the end of the war, to recognize Cassirer's greatness when he nevertheless does not take leave of all hope for humankind. Even in his last work and under the impression of an incomprehensible mass murder, he continues to attempt to control the political myth – both in its traditional and its instrumentalized form – and to control it through rationality in social and political questions. Here, he also applies his knowledge about the *strategies of the political myth* as a tool of the modern political regime. We have to be aware of the deep *ambiguities of the animal symbolicum*, otherwise we get easily into danger losing any sense for humanity. But in "place of positivist elimination of the myth, Cassirer pins his hopes on its immanent overcoming within the higher symbolic forms (...) As an alternative to (...) abrupt disenchantment of politics, he invokes the gradual transformation, under the influence of ancient Stoicism, of the medieval natural law tradition into the modern doctrine of natural rights."³⁵

The Dialectics of Mythical Consciousness and Religious Critique of Religion

Be that as it may: Cassirer's thesis on the future of myth in the development of human cultures implies an ambivalent result. It depends on how we evaluate the role of monotheism, especially in Judaism, in this drama of social life, when the dangers of anonymous powers of new myths – understood as political tools of dominance – are yet to be tamed completely. "Can religion sur-

³⁵ Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton UP, 2008), 227.

vive myth?”³⁶, a worried Cassirer therefore asks in 1944. Religion, too, cannot do without myth, even if it transforms it. At this point, the question arises why, in *The Myth of State*, Cassirer did not expand the potentials of his own cultural theory, which he had developed in Volume II of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* regarding social reality and religion.

After all, in PhSF II, he precisely describes the transformation of mythical life and mythical religion through the dynamics that the birth of ethical thinking has triggered in them. He talks about the *dialectics of mythical consciousness*³⁷ creating new symbolic forms of religion first and foremost out of itself: that form of *symbolic self-consciousness* that knows about *its own symbolicity*; an interpretation of the images of the divine as symbolic and therefore securing the transcendence of the supramundane reality (sc. God's or gods') that cannot be overcome again. While according to this concept myth fashions itself in the immediate relationship between things, linguistic signs and words, and the world, *religion* is focused on the *irreducible tension between the symbol and the symbolized*. And yet again, the Old Testament here represents a crucial step in the development of religious thinking. Thus, it comes in handy for the Kantian Cassirer that Kant himself, in his *Critique of Judgment* (cf. KdU § 29), praises the Jewish prohibition of graven images as the only true form of symbolism and as the most important legacy of Judaism and Islam. Even though every religion continues to rely on mythical narratives and ideas, the negation of the immediate image character of myth makes religion exhaust itself permanently in it. Religion is “working on the myth,” we could say with Hans Blumenberg. Therefore, the *consciousness of the symbolic constitution of the entire human culture* comes into its own in religion in an exemplary manner. In this sense, *religion* indeed is the truest form of

cultural self-communication, the *self-consciousness of culture*.

Finally, we can answer the question of what is significantly new and worthy of protection about the *ethical monotheism* of Old Israel, but also e.g. the Zoroastrian religion. The *dominance of personal will* that shapes the *idea of the divine* is not merely a reflection on *human self-awareness*. This also works the other way around, and more poignantly so: it is only through his *theomorphic structure* that a human being achieves awareness of his own constitution as an “I”, a “soul”, a person carrying responsibility for himself as well as for others. Along with the *universalization of the divine will in exclusive monotheism*, then, *the universalization of the moral demands* laid down in the divine law also is transferred to humankind. “The great prophets of Israel did no longer speak merely to their own nation. Their God was a God of Justice – and his message was not restricted to a special part of mankind.”³⁸ Monotheism, then, is not mere anthropomorphism, which, once understood, can be set aside. Only the correlation of human “I” and divine “You” gives human beings the irreducible horizon for their sense of responsibility and their moral duties. “Religious thought and feeling is suddenly taking a new turn; it changes from individualism to universalism. Nevertheless there is no real contradiction between these two views.”³⁹

Here, the *Jewish belief in one God* is characterized by the fact that it, unlike many of the modern political myths, but also unlike its Stoic counterpart, will *not allow for any fatalistic understanding of human beings*⁴⁰ or *of history*. Thus, it seems strange that Cassirer refrained from subjecting the countercurrent tendency in Stoicism to more criticism despite all of his admiration. In any case, *the legacy of Jewish monotheism insists on the non-delegable responsibility of human beings for their own life*, even though its limitations are not negated, either. Under no circumstances can moral individualism or its universal claim be relinquished. The God

³⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Judaism and Modern Political Myths*, in: *Contemporary Jewish Record VII* (1944), 115-126, 117.

³⁷ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. II: Mythical Thought* (ed. by Charles W. Hendel; New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1955), 233-261.

³⁸ Cassirer, *Essay on May*, 103.

³⁹ Cassirer, *Judaism and the Modern Political Myth*, 123.

⁴⁰ Cf. the role and return of fatalism: Cassirer, *Myth of State*, 290ff.

of the prophets is not only the lord of history, but also participates in human affairs with solidarity, affection, but also with fervor and a desire for justice.⁴¹ Trust in his presence is as important as becoming aware of his demands through the commandments. It is only through a content analysis of the respective monotheistic images of God, which already transgresses the limits of a purely philosophical external perspective on religion, that we can find enough reasons for why Cassirer's own preferences for a (neo-)Stoic-enlightened monotheism and its repression of divine transcendence must be regarded critically. For if myth continues to be an important force in the social and political life of the human present, then cultures need specific forms of self-criticism of the myth, like they are articulated paradigmatically in religion as a symbolic form. The persistence of myth implies that we need a *religious criticism of political and other myths* even today. But a neo-Stoic monotheism that is based entirely on the universalizing power of human reason seems hardly up to this task.

In conclusion, *Judaism* did not only inject *more rationality into the history of religion*, but also played a crucial role in shaping the *revolution of the mythical-religious consciousness of humankind*. The invention of human rights cannot be understood in an exclusively Stoic context. Without the work and the message of Amos, Hosea or Jeremiah, such developments would be unthinkable; for their influence on the history of religion was much more broad and powerful. However, these two tendencies do not contradict each other. In fact, both early Judaism and early Christianity appropriated Hellenistic and particularly Stoic ideas, and the latter kept coming back with full force, e.g. in the theories of social contract and human rights concepts of early modernity. Thus, allegations that would only see a sheer functionalization of religion in all of this miss the historical and present-shaping realities of such mixtures of ideas. For most thinkers in the Western history of ideas, religion was not consumed by its ethical consequences. However, *religious consciousness* indeed resulted from becoming aware of the *structure of ra-*

tionalty, the *unconditionality of moral demands*, and a feeling for the *profound sense of humanity*.

Can these insights help us in our present debates about the global implementation of human rights or in the struggle for a rationalization and moralization of political and social life? I am not sure if a more adequate and public appreciation of our historical and cultural heritage will be enough. Of course, as our current experiences show, much depends on structural and economical circumstances. But without continuously making ourselves aware of our deeper cultural and religious resources, a defense of moral universalism is not very convincing, either. For where else can we find good, or indeed better reasons for why we should not limit our social behavior to our self-interest and the well-being of our personal relatives (and be it our own nation). *Why be moral?* – The Jewish vein of our history answers this question in a way that is both provocative and humane: *because we as human beings owe it to all human beings*. And this is why Judaism is too important to be consigned to the archives of intellectual history.

The Cultural Heritage of Monotheism: Political Resource or Burden?

Since 9/11, the role of religion in violent conflicts has been fervently disputed in cultural studies. Aside from a few very thoughtful studies, especially from the ranks of the empirical social sciences, the stage is mostly taken by sweeping global theses about the inherent connection between monotheism and intolerance, religious fervor and an increased disposition for violence. So, do religions foster peace or endanger it? Would the world actually be better off if there were no religions anymore? What good are traditions that turn “friends into enemies” because of religious belief?

The power of suggestion inherent in these questions can already be taken as a warning against looking for all too simple answers. Evidently, religious convictions are an ambiguous issue, even for the individual believer: Often, God or the divine powers are both, *tremendum* and *fascinosum*; that which is both feared and

⁴¹ Of course, this perspective has been perceived more acutely by Cohen than by Cassirer.

adored. And this is exactly why, in every individual case, the statements of the respective belief-systems must be taken into account when the question of how religions act politically and socially is asked in different regions of the world. So far, there is a dearth of studies that are sufficiently comparative and empirically inclusive. However, general theses such as the one that Buddhism is a peaceful religion, or at least more peaceful than Islamic, Jewish or Christian monotheism, simply because of its polytheistic or holistic concept of nirvana, is (with all due respect) absurd.

Thus, one should be careful when attempting, as the eminent German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has done, to establish a typology assigning political theories to religious traditions.⁴² Assmann basically distinguishes between *two different monotheistic world concepts*: one that is more *inclusive*, which he considers prevalent in *Old Egypt* and which might be more aptly named “*cosmotheism*,” and a more *exclusive* one that goes back to the *invention of Old Testament prophets*. This monotheism is characterized by dealing in *hard duals of true and untrue, God and idol*. According to Assmann, it is only in the face of such convictions that the devotee of another faith can be typecast as an unbeliever or an enemy of the truth. The ›*Mosaic distinction*‹⁴³ first generated *ideas of sin and mercy, truth and error*; semantic structures without which we would not be able to live today, but whose intrinsic susceptibility to violence is also obvious.

In contrast, Cassirer and Cohen see the social dynamics of monotheism in a distinctly more positive light. Even though their views partly overlap with Assmann’s diagnoses regarding the revolutionary step in the history of religion

through Old Testament prophecy, both put a much stronger emphasis on the *semantic potential for criticism inherent in the universal ethics of a monotheism that binds God as well as his creatures to the norm of mutual responsibility for each other according to the standard of justice* (cf. Ps 82). “God is the God of truth and as such he is the ground of consciousness of the self’s unity.”⁴⁴ *Human dignity and autonomy, ethical socialism and moral universalism* cannot be disconnected from this process without them ultimately losing their power of motivation and orientation. The establishment of moral universalism cannot be explained, much less understood, without the culturally, and thus essentially religiously, impregnated background of Jewish (and Stoic) monotheism. This, and this is what Cassirer reminds us of in his late contemplations on Judaism as a cultural force, must also be acceptable and understandable for secular ears. From the belief in the one living God whom morality, universality and freedom inhere Judaism, despite or indeed because of its exemplary particularity, unfolds its effect on the history of humankind and safeguards the truth of this notion to this day. “From this universalism there arises the ideal of perpetual peace. In its origin that is a purely religious, not a philosophical, ideal.”⁴⁵ As a witness of the destiny of humankind, which recognizes God’s likeness in every human being as a person created by God, it seems to me to be the much more radical effect of monotheism, despite its possible susceptibility to violence. Even though all social and religious movements in history until this day may have antagonistic traits, without the religious tradition of monotheisms, human civilization would lack a crucial resource for completing its mission. According to Cassirer, this mission consists of nothing less than “man’s progressive self-liberation.”⁴⁶

⁴² Cf. Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

⁴³ Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford/Ca.: Stanford UP, 2009), esp. 8-23, 35-48.

⁴⁴ Dietrich, *Cohen and Troeltsch*, 64.

⁴⁵ Cassirer, *Judaism and the Modern Political Myth*, 123f.

⁴⁶ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 228.