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cission would appear to me to be if my own case had to be presented to a
Hindu or Mussalman Judge."

Asad’s major theoretical concern—showing how subjects are constitu-
ted within the realm of the secular—rightly addresses the place of nature
in imagining the human. However, instead of proposing a simple oppo-
sition between the sacred and the secular, the private and the public, the
sexual contract and the social contract, it invites us to see the problem-
atric relation between the state and the family. Since the sovereign, within
the regime of the secular, is seen to give life to the political community
and to receive life from it, the father becomes the key figure in establish-
ing the grounds for the social in the political. Asad’s book has opened up
for me the entire issue of the duality of the individual with regard to the
constant struggle to reimage nature in the context of Western theories of
liberalism. In working through his essays, I came to understand why cer-
tain types of family—e.g., the African American family—were considered
problematic within American culture, because of their supposed lack of
strong paternal figures, as stated in the famous Moynihan report. I also
began to understand the problematic character of white paternity with re-
gard to interracial sexual unions. I am aware that I have not been able to tie
all the threads of my argument together, but I now see that the story of the
secular is much more enmeshed within the theological imagination than I
had thought. I look forward to taking this conversation further.

On General and Divine Economy:
Talal Asad’s Genealogy of the Secular
and Emmanuel Levinas’s Critique of
Capitalism, Colonialism, and Money

Hent de Vries

In recent years, we have seen increasing attention to the importance,
the incredible opportunities, and the considerable downsides of globaliza-
tion, global capital, and new technological media, and at the same time an
unexpected, increasingly unpredictable return of religions—indeed, a turn
to the religious—as a political factor of worldwide, indeed global, signifi-
cance. The result seems to be an ever more globalized and, I will suggest,
“global” concern with “religion”—one that is dislocated, mediated, media-
tized, virtualized, yet also deprivatized or politicized, and whose implica-
tions and consequences extend well beyond the assumptions concerning
differentiation, disenchantment, and rationalization held by most theo-
ries of modernization, which until recently remained unquestioned. Such
“global religion” seems at least in part inaccessible to established empiri-
cist scholarly approaches, which seek to explain this renewed—and oft-
tentimes quite novel—presence of “religion” in terms of a turn to given
imagined communal commitments or values and hence tend to privilege
“local”—that is to say, national, ethnic, or otherwise identitarian—con-
texts of origin, including diverse forms of authority, legitimacy, and so on. By and large, these approaches, which have typified both contemporary religious studies and even the more classical modern approaches to confessional theology (including those of the progressiveism-empiricism variety, as in the liberation and so-called genitive theologies), leave in place an all too naive and often downright essentialist—or, which comes down to the same, historicist, sociological, psychologistic, and, more recently, culturalist—definition and understanding of their referent, "religion." The recent collection entitled *Global Religions* (in the plural) and edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, seems an exception to the rule. It seeks to "think globally about religion," queries "religion in a global age" and "in global perspective," investigates "the global future of religion," the "global resurgence of religion," "the global religious scene," and, against this background, discusses also the implications of an opposed tendency, namely that of "antiglobal religion." But this book does not theorize the structural features of "globality" and "the religious" that interest me here and instead presents itself as a guide to understanding the "state of worldwide religion in the twenty-first century," while emphasizing the diversity—indeed, plurality—of religions even (or especially?) today. It seems to shun the temptations of generalization and abstraction by organizing its chapters into sections devoted to three major monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), Hinduism, and Buddhism, adding two chapters, "African Religion" and "Local Religious Societies."

Yet, the return of "religions" and "the religious" on a "global" scale could, perhaps, be philosophically approached quite otherwise—along with the apparent simultaneous *empring out* of the concept, if not the practice, of "religion" (its increasing formalization and apparent universalization, but also its reification and even commodification). Such a change of perspective can, I believe, provide insight into the more protracted yet highly volatile process of what emerges as an ongoing and ever increasing profanization, by contrast to previous notions of an undisturbed and fairly linear narrative of secularization. Even more than the concept of secularization, this category of an observed no less than professed profanization—like all idolatry, blasphemy, fetishization, superstition, and kitsch, including the critique that accompanies them—remains irrevocably tied to the very tradition it tends (or intentionally seeks) to subvert or substitute for once and for all, according to a logic and dynamic whose workings and effects we have hardly begun to understand. Here contemporary philosophy, in "solidarity with metaphysics at the very moment of its downfall," as Adorno diagnosed the task of thinking today, still has important contributions to make, even though it cannot make them alone. In order for such philosophical thinking to—quite literally—*work out* its concepts, that is to say, give them the material of or, if you like, materialist (I am not saying: naturalist) grounding, as well as sufficient leeway to fit nonidentical contexts, it must engage with and learn from the very same disciplines (history and anthropology, political science and economy, studies of new media and recent biology) whose conceptual schemes it begins by pointing out.

In what follows, I will turn to some of the most telling analyses of these questions available in contemporary philosophy and anthropology in order to illustrate where such philosophical inquiry might lead us. The result is not so much a formal (a priori and transcendental) analysis or reconstruction of religion, let alone its essence, "as such," nor an apologetic (and by definition dogmatic) justification of any of its historical truth claims but, I would suggest with an ironic appreciation of one of Theodor W. Adorno's central intuitions, a *minimal theology* at most. But what could this mean? And how does such theological *minimalism* pair with the supposed *globalism* and, indeed, *globality* of its object or reference, that is to say, "of religion," the religiosity of religions and, perhaps, not of religions alone? In what sense might "the secular," "secularization," and "secularism"—religion's antipode and mirror image, as Talal Asad reminds us—be said to obey the same logic?

The task of answering these questions is enormous, not least because whenever we speak of what Derrida, in "Faith and Knowledge," calls this "single word, the clearest and most obscure: religion," we "act as if we had some common sense of what 'religion' means through languages that we believe . . . we know how to speak." Indeed, Derrida goes on to say:

We believe in the *minimal* trustworthiness of this word. Like Heidegger, concerning what he calls the *Faktum* of the vocabulary of being (at the beginning of *Sein und Zeit*), we believe (or believe it is obligatory to believe) that we pre-understand the meaning of this word, if only to be able to question and in order to interrogate ourselves on this subject. Well, nothing is less pre-assured than such a *Faktum* . . . and the entire question of religion comes down, perhaps, to this lack of assurance.1
In the opening chapters of *Genealogies of Religion* as well in his critical review of Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and the End of Religion*, Talal Asad has convincingly demonstrated that such (partly linguistic or terminological and etymological, partly ontological and existential) uncertainty extends to the scholarly definition of "religion"—and hence to the very epistemology of the field of religious studies and anthropology—as well. Moreover, the same would hold true for its counterpart, its shadow concept, of the secular in its distinction of and intrinsic relation with the process of secularization and the societal project of secularism, which form the central themes of *Formations of the Secular*. This constellation would imply two central assumptions: first, that modernity "is neither a totally coherent object nor a clearly bounded one, and that many of its elements originate in relations with the histories of peoples outside Europe"; second, that the same project of modernity is "not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world," and since, Asad immediately adds, "this is true of every epoch, what is distinctive about modernity as a historical epoch includes modernity as a political-economic project." Indeed, the latter reveals itself as intrinsically "related to the secular as an ontology and an epistemology." These philosophical—or, in Wittgenstein's sense, "grammatical"—questions would be central to anthropology, that is to say, "the discipline that has sought to understand the strangeness of the non-European world," and that seeks to capture the meaning and effect of "religion" not least by way of a genealogy of the formations of its "other," namely the "modern" and the "secular."

It would be naïve, Asad suggests, to assume that "today," after the Cold War, "no single struggle spans the globe," and to believe that the last "universal historical teleology" could be attributed "solely to a defeated Communism." We should not disregard, Asad continues, "U.S. attempts to promote a single social model over the globe": "If this project has not been entirely successful on a global scale—if its result is more often further instability than homogeneity—it is certainly not because those in a position to make far-reaching decisions about the affairs of the world reject the doctrine of a single destiny—a transcendent truth—for all countries." The global aspirations of a certain politico-juridico-economic model, therefore, should not be underestimated, nor should we overlook that its intellectual-cultural conditions require a genealogical study in their own right. Hence a major premise of Asad's work: the assumption that "the secular" is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of "secularism," that over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form "the secular." With regard to the secular, secularism, and secularization, a critical anthropological genealogy—hardly a "substitute" for "social" or "real history" but a "way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties"—would aim at "questioning its self-evident character while asserting at the same time that it nevertheless is something real." The task of anthropology thus conceived would depart from the fixation on the "research technique (participant observation) carried out in a circumscribed field," that is to say, the method of so-called fieldwork geared toward local particularities and their "thick description" (a term introduced by Gilbert Ryle and adopted by Clifford Geertz), and move (back) in the direction of Marcel Mauss's original program of a "systematic inquiry into cultural concepts." Indeed, Asad notes, such "conceptual analysis" is, in fact, "as old as philosophy": "What is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time and space. The important thing in this comparison is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or enable." Both "the secular" and the religious, Asad concludes, constitute such "embedded" notions, whose implications and varying features have lost nothing of their relevance in the present day and age.

With the term "global religion," I seek to designate the way in which, in modernity, within political liberalism and its cosmopolitan or, if one prefers, expansionist empire no less than in its economic infrastructure, religion's proper names, rituals, and institutions continue, on a globally increasing scale, to mark the present, though they do so as voided—or empty—signifiers, as mechanical gestures or petrified structures whose historical origin and meaning, contemporary function, and future role have become virtually unclear, irrelevant, or obsolete. The religious legacy, it would seem, has not quite ceded its place to secular terms, mundane practices, autonomous individual agency, laic-republican political formations (as was long expected). "Religion" thus retains a seemingly diminished yet abiding presence, intelligibility, even an explanatory force, not least in the socio-juridical, multicultural, transnational, and postcolonial realm—
in short, wherever the problematic of the theological-political periodically gains new prominence.

If, on this view, the religious and theological legacies can no longer master their current valence yet have not quite faded into oblivion, what use might we still have for terms such as "religion" in describing contemporary geopolitical, globalization, and globalizing trends? Why risk an even more excessive expression, "global religion," in an attempt to capture religion's continued or renewed manifestation and significance—displaced yet recited and recycled, evanescent yet ever more insistant, at once promising and pernicious? Redescription of historical "revealed" or "positive" religion—marked by the utmost respect and disrespect at once—can still, I believe, be of strategic use in bringing out some of the problems and aims that "secularism" variously sought to theorize and realize, without falling prey to its reductionist naturalism, in epistemology and method no less than in politics.

I thus offer the term "global religion" as a heuristic and, admittedly, provisional understanding in order to account for and respond to the simultaneous pluralization and, as it were, virtualization of public spheres and lifeworlds said to be taking place today, within the circulation and concentration of capital, the "informationalism" of the "network society" (as Manuel Castells would have it). This term, understood here in an emphatic as well as slightly ironic sense, seeks to capture the qualities of a dislocation and deterritorialization that increasingly characterize a terrain that has lost all fixed boundaries (such as, say, Europe or the West) and that we—for both historical and analytical, conceptual, and, perhaps, sentimental reasons—can begin to explore under the heading of "religion."

In saying this, I am not referring to some self-evident historical phenomenon, an abstract assertion about the world, but picking up on a recognizable and compelling problematic in twentieth-century European thought, one that makes itself heard, for example, in Jürgen Habermas's arguments concerning modernity. Habermas, basing himself in large part on the theory of rationalization detailed by Max Weber, keeps circling around the fact that there was something precious in modernity's "universalizing" tendencies, however violent their effects.

According to Habermas's formal pragmatic, modernity has been characterized by a "linguistification of the sacred" that comes down to what he calls a "liquefaction [Verflüssigung] of the basic religious consen-
sus." Habermas holds the rationalization of worldview to be marked by an irreversible development "in which the more purely the structures of universal religions [Universalreligionen] emerge, merely the kernel [Kernbestand] of a universalistic morality remains." That is to say, a certain globalization—an expansion, generalization, and universalization—of the religious goes hand in hand with a formalization of its historical, positive, and ontic content. He posits that in this historical process a procedure of reconstruction and quasi-transcendental reduction empties or thins out the original referents of religion, revealing its "kernel" to be morality. The result, as in Kant, is a purely moral religion, but one whose features are now naturalized, reformulated in formal—that is, no longer substantialist but interactive, indeed pragmatic—terms.

Interestingly, such transposition and translation of the religious into the secular, the profane, the exoteric, and the public constitutes at once a purification and intensification of its supposedly ultimate concern and the trivialization or profanation of religion itself: a global or globalized religion, but a merely global—that is, a minimally theological—sense of what "religion" once meant. Yet there are no historical or conceptual means for deciding whether this "secularization" does not, in the very process of mini-
mizing religion, realize it in a more fundamental and promising way—that is to say, whether heterodoxy is not, after all, the "kernel" and final consequence of orthodoxy. Conversely, there are no historical or conceptual means for deciding whether this process—by merely repeating the same in a seemingly senseless, nonformal tautology—does not produce something radically new as well: the heterology of some undeterminable, as Derrida would say, undecidable (now religious, then nonreligious) other.

The Disorientation and
De-Europeanization of the West

Only the play of the world permits us to think the essence of God. In a sense that our language—and Levinas also—accommodates poorly, the play of the world precedes God.

—DERRIDA, Writing and Difference

Some of the more surprising aspects of Emmanuel Levinas's con-
cepts of ethics, sociality, and the political can further illuminate the global
trends that are all too often—and all too globally—described using such terms as "Enlightenment," "disenchantment," "secularization," "rationalization," "differentiation," "privatization," "democratization," "liberalization," and perhaps even "globalization"—that is, as tendencies whose basic premises are unambiguously and undialectically conceived and whose linear, teleological, and salutary, not to say redemptive, outcomes are taken to be all but certain.

In Levinas, as in Husserl and Heidegger—who, after Bergson, were his main sources of philosophical inspiration—we find, as Derrida has noted, a "recourse [recours]" to tradition—but one "which has nothing of traditionalism." Even though in these authors the "entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source," this does not imply an "occidentalism" or "historicism," which is to say, "relativism." The reason for this has everything to do with the transcendental—if not necessarily metaphysical and ontological, phenomenological or genealogical—argument upon which such inquiry relies. In Derrida’s view, the conceptual strategies of Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, and Levinas make their mark at once from within and from beyond the tradition and the intellectual or even political history of the West and its expansion—and do so in complex, paradoxical, and aporetic ways: "The truth of philosophy does not depend upon its relation to the actuality of the Greek or European event. On the contrary, we must gain access to the Greek or European eidos through an irruption or a call [appel] whose provenance is variously determined by Husserl and Heidegger—and, we could add, still differently by Bergson and Levinas. Nonetheless, for all four thinkers, this "irruption" of the philosophical—its "Aufbruch" or "Einbruch," as Husserl calls it in _The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology_—remains the primary feature of a certain "Europe" and its "spiritual figure." It would be impossible to philosophize outside the "element" of the fundamental categories of Greco-European thought, even—and especially—in the most radical attempts to dislodge their hegemony.

Yet, in this very fidelity, the "archeology" of reason such thinkers pursue "prescribes, each time, a subordination or transgression, in any event a reduction of metaphysics. Even though, for each, this gesture has an entirely different meaning, or at least does so apparently." As we will see, in Levinas the "category of the ethical is not only dissociated from metaphysics but subordinated to [ordonnée à] something other than itself, a previous and more radical instance [instance]." Levinas’s thought, even more radically than that of his teachers, summons us "to a dislocation of the Greek logos, to a dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general; it summons us to depart from the Greek site [lieu] and perhaps from any site in general, and to move toward what is no longer a source or a site (too welcoming to the gods), but rather an exhalation [une respiration], toward a prophetic speech already emitted not only nearer to the source than Plato or the pre-Socratics, but inside the Greek origin, close to the other of the Greek."

Confronted by an interviewer with the question of the multiplicity of cultures, and hence the centering and dis-orientation (literally, in his own idiom, the un-Easting, dé-orientation) of the West—or of Occidental rationality, as Max Weber or Habermas would prefer to say—Levinas responded, therefore, ambiguously: To be sure, he acknowledges, there are many cultures, most of which can rightfully claim to play a significant role in the "general economy of being" and whose "national literatures" contribute to the ontological pluralism and ontic "separation" without which no responsible ordering of the political beyond mythic participation in the primitive collective—and also beyond totalizing ideologies in their affinity with totalitarianism—would ever be possible. But, he insists, "It is Europe which, alongside its numerous atrocities, invented the idea of de-Europeanization."

This, he concludes, ultimately "represents a victory of European generosity," "The European [L’Européen]," as the "convergence" of the tradition of Greek philosophical thought and the Bible—"Old or New Testament—but it is in the Old Testament that everything, in my opinion, is born"—would thus remain "central, in spite of all that has happened to us during this century, in spite of the savage mind [penètre sauvage]."

Indeed, Levinas continues, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s classic _La Penètre sauvage_, dedicated to the memory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is only able to make its point (and impact) by way of a performative contradiction of sorts:

The "Savage Mind" is a thinking that a European knew to discover, it was not the savage thinkers who discovered our thinking. There is a kind of envelopment [une espée d’enveloppement] of all thinking by the European subject. Europe has many things to be reproached for, its history has been one of blood and war, but it is also the place where this blood and war have been regretted and constitute a bad conscience, a bad conscience of Europe which is also the return [retour] of Europe,
not toward Greece, but toward the Bible... man is Europe and the Bible, and all the rest can be translated from there.21

A little later, the incomprehension of—and impatience with—the structuralist anthropological view is repeated once more:

No, structuralism, I still do not understand today. Of course the most eminent mind of the century is Lévi-Strauss, but I do not at all see where the target of his vision is. It certainly responds, from a moral perspective, to what one calls decolonization and the end of a dominating Europe, but my reaction is primary—it is, I know, worse than primitive: can one compare the scientific intellect of Einstein with the "savage mind," whatever the complications, the complexities, that the "savage mind" may gather or accomplish?

How can a world of scientific thinking and of communication through scientific thinking be compared to it? No doubt I have not read as I should.22

But then, could one not arrive at a feeling of similar generosity and "comparative compassion" starting from, say, the practices and texts of Buddhism just as easily as from Western monotheism? Levinas is careful not to make exclusionary claims when he immediately adds: "For me, of course, the Bible is the model of excellence; but I say this knowing nothing of Buddhism." Like so many other of his contemporaries—like most of us today—it would thus seem that he owes his philosophical position as his own, from a position that is unique to him, not pretending otherwise, and in this he remains worthy of emulation.

However, for Levinas, "de-Europeanization" also has a completely different face: a contrary movement or perverse side, in a reverse transcendence that, again, finds an unexpected ally in Occidental rationalism and its technology. Indeed, the best, the better, and the worst—more precisely, the possibility of the best, the better, and the worst (that is, both "religion" and the deprivation of all meaning and sense, of every norm and law)—correspond in secret, troubling, and incalculable ways. This conviction constitutes the radicality and the radical modernity of Levinas's propus, as well as the modernism of its rhetorical strategy, its aesthetic preoccupation, its "down-to-earth morality" (indeed, economy), and so on.

Just as the relation to the other—essential, for Levinas, in the definition of religion, creation, revelation, messianism, and eschatology—protects us from the obscure realm of diffuse nondifferentiation as well as from the imperialist luminosity of organicist or mechanistic forms of his-
far from unproblematic either: "No one is mad enough to fail to recognize technology's contradictions," Levinas goes on to say. True, this acknowledgment falls short of proclaiming the "dialektik," let alone the "kritik" of instrumental reason that neo-Hegelians or neo-Marxists such as Adorno and Horkheimer empirically diagnose and rhetorically exaggerate, or that the later Heidegger turned into a drama of almost (or more than) ontological proportions. In Levinas's words:

The balance of gains and losses that we habitually draw rests upon no rigorous principle of accounting. The condemnation of technology has become a comfortable rhetoric. Yet technology as secularization is destructive of pagan gods. Through it, certain gods are now dead: those gods of astrology's conjunction of the planets, the gods of destiny [fatum], local gods, gods of place and countryside, all the gods inhabiting consciousness and reproducing, in anguish and terror, the gods of the skies. Technology teaches us that these gods are of the world, and therefore are things, and being things they are nothing much [pas grand chose]. In this sense, secularizing technology figures in the progress of the human spirit. But it is not its end. 21

Not the end, it has, again, no value in and of itself—but, in its solidarity with the iconoclasm of critical thought, it helps. Its function is limited, an insufficient but necessary condition of moral progress, if ever there was one. More careful, since no precise "rigorous principle of accounting" can help us here, its affinity with the "religion of adults" is not causally determining but merely elective, happy coincidence.

In this speaking of "secularizing technology," Levinas adopts a position almost diametrically opposed to that of Marx. Instead of analyzing—and deploring—the reification of human relationships having theological, godlike qualities, Levinas envisions a process of reverse reification in which gods, fetishes, magic, and the sacred are immobilized and turned into things, no longer able to relate to human beings or to enchant their ways. By contrast, the self that singularizes itself in being made responsible to the point of substitution for the other—to the point of suffering, testimony, and martyrdom, as Levinas says—is described as subjectivity "prior to reification," and Levinas adds: "The things we have at our disposal are in their rest as substances indifferent to themselves. The subjectivity prior to this indifference is the passivity of persecution." 26

There is a sense, however, in which this process of reification can go into reverse, that is to say, can run amok and end up in a different form of "de-Europeanization"—one that dehumanizes, in a contrary movement in which transcendence is perverted in a Faustian dynamic. Dialectically put, when left to themselves, Occidental rationalism, as well as Western science and technology, will almost inevitably produce their opposites and thereby contribute to their own disintegration, disqualification, and ultimate demise. The perfectibility of Western axiology (of its epistemology and the general categories of experience, perception, and action) implies rather than excludes a reversal, whose ultimate possibilities Levinas sees exemplified by the atrocities committed during the twentieth century and all other expressions "of that very same antisemitism" (his words). Referring to the testimony of Vasili Grossman's great Russian novel Life and Fate, 27 he speaks of the retrospective projection of the principle of "organization" and its inevitable culmination in "de-humanization"—from the Holy Roman Empire to Orthodox czarist Russia and Stalin, from modern Europe to Hitler—back into its earliest origins. Grossman projects the seeds of this development into the event of Christ's speaking where he "preaches, there is already this first organization." 28 From here on, Levinas paraphrases: "There is nothing to be done!" 29

In Levinas's view, Grossman, outside his value as a great writer, is witness to the end of a certain Europe, the definitive end of the hope of instituting charity in the guise of a regime, the end of the socialist hope. The end of socialism, in the horror of Stalinism, is the greatest spiritual crisis in modern Europe. Marxism represented a generosity, whatever the way in which one understands the materialist doctrine which is its basis. There is in Marxism the recognition of the other [autre]; there is certainly the idea that the other must himself struggle for this recognition, that the other must become egoist. But the noble hope consists in healing everything [tout réparer] in installing, beyond the chances of the individual charity, a regime without evil [sans mal]. And the regime of charity becomes Stalinism and Hitlerian horror. That's what Grossman shows, who was there, who participated in the enthusiasm of the beginnings. An absolutely overwhelming testimony and a complete despair. 30

But then, even when carried to its extreme, this process touches as well upon something "indestructible" (as Blanchot would say)—or, in Levinas's words, on "something positive . . . modestly consoling, or mar-
vellous.”

Even where the worst violence seems the sole possible consequence of the principle of organization as such, Grossman’s novel, in its history of the “decomposition of Europe” in the camps, succeeds in presenting a “fable” of acts of “small goodness [la petite bonté]” that are not completely vanquished. Levinas speaks of a “justice behind justice” that, not least in a “liberal State,” one “must [il faut]” take into account: “goodness [la bonté] without regime, the miracle of goodness, the only thing that remains,” appearing in “certain isolated acts,” “exterior to all system,” alone. This, then, would be the “terrible lucidity” in Grossman’s Life and Fate: “There isn’t any solution to the human drama by a change of regime, no system of salvation [salut]. The only thing that remains is individual goodness, from man to man [d’homme à homme]. . . . Ethics without ethical system.”

Or, as Levinas formulates it in another interview: “The essential thing in this book is simply what the character Ikonnikov says—‘There is neither God nor the Good, but there is goodness’—which is also my thesis. That is all that is left to mankind.” There are acts of goodness that are absolutely gratuitous, unforeseen. “There are acts of stupid, senseless goodness. . . . The human pierces the crust of being. Only an idiot can believe in this goodness.” And the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s The Idiot exemplifies nothing else. Levinas continues: “Grossman writes that all organization is already ideology. When Christ begins to preach, there is already the Church, and with the Church the whole organization of the good. The opposition of Ikonnikov to Christianity is not directed against this or that part of the teaching of Christ, but against the history of Christianity and of the Church with all the horrors it allows.”

Grossman, Levinas summarizes,

thinks that the little act of goodness [la petite bonté] from one person to his neighbor is lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and universality and system, as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, and even a church. Yet it remains the sole refuge of the good in being. Unbeaten, it undergoes the violence of evil, which, as little goodness, it can neither vanquish nor drive out. The little goodness going only from man to man, not crossing distances to get to the places where events and forces unfold! A remarkable utopia of the good or the secret of its beyond.

Capital Revisited

Essence . . . works as an invincible persistence in essence, filling up every interval of nothingness which would interrupt its exercise. Etre est interdit, essence interest. This being interested does not appear only to the mind surprised by the relativity of its negation, and to the man resigned to the meaninglessness of his death: it is not reducible to just this refutation of negativity. It is confirmed positively to be the conatus of beings. And what else can positivity mean but this conatus? Being’s interest takes dramatic form in egosisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allegoric egosisms which are with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence’s interest. . . . Does not essence revert into its other by peace, in which reason, which suspend the immediate clash of beings, reigns? Beings become patient, and renounce the allegoric intolerance of their persistence in being; do they not then dramatize the otherwise than being? But this rational peace, a patience and length of time, is calculation, mediation, and politics. The struggle of each against all becomes exchange and commerce. . . . Commerce is better than war.

—LEVINAS, Otherwise than Being

The example of money (as opposed to economy, a term Levinas uses in a somewhat idiosyncratic, etymological, and almost Batallian way) can help clarify this point. On several occasions, most directly in an invited (and thus far untranslated) lecture given to the collected Belgian national banks (the Groupement Belge des Banques d’Epargne) in 1986 and entitled “Socialité et argent [Sociality and Money],” Levinas sets out two seemingly contradictory viewpoints. Speaking of the “institution” of money in its “empirical” nature and “planet-wide extension,” which it has derived from the “sciences and technologies of the European genius,” Levinas asserts, this time following a basic thesis of Marx’s Capital, that money is “the universal equivalent” mediating natural and acquired needs, objects, goods, services, and, last but not least, persons. He adds the insight that this equivalence—like technology—rids the world of false equivocities in which selves are drawn into diffuse totalities (in Levinas’s words, “mythical” and “primitive” ones), into realms of otherness not yet severed by acts of divine creation and ontological (that is to say, Greek) separation.

By contrast, he also puts forward the view that equivalences—hence a fortiori the universal equivalent of global capital, money—equalize the unequal, undo the differentiation of what is different, and, in short, re-
press and violate the other, who (or that?) has neither use value nor exchange value but in his (or its?) uniqueness regards me uniquely. Hence, for Levinas, a first important axiom, an "axiology of saintliness" or "gratuity"—and, ultimately, of offering and sacrifice—is that the other is not for sale, not exchangeable in any currency, irreducible to and unrecognizable by any measure of comparison. The relative and limited separation and hence transcendence that economy—precisely as a "community of genre"—invests in the general economy of being is, in the end, to be distinguished from (and is dependent upon) the relationship between two unique instances (the self and the other, the other and the other), which is an "extraordinary ontological event of dis-interestness" irreducible to any economy; an anomaly of "expenditure" in the general economy of being whose dominant principle, the conatus essendi, the perseverance of all beings in their being (to cite Spinoza), it divests of its ontological value. Hence also the limitation of the universal principle and form of equivalence, the minimal margin—the internal and external others figured by the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, the "proletarian"—from whose perspective capital and capitalism, like history in its finiteness and totality, can be criticized, indeed judged, at every instant long before having run its course.

Yet in this insertion of the "value of saintliness" and "gratuity" into the circulation of goods, services, things, and people, the value of equivalence—that is to say, of money—reasserts its place and function: "All the values of interest retain their signification at a higher level, that of dis-interestedness, in giving [le donner]. Conversion [retournement] of interest into dis-interestedness in the realm [or in view] of transcendence." Conversely, there is a sense in which justice—the comparison between unique others—requires the "spontaneity" and "totality of dis-interestedness" a surprising formulation) what Levinas calls "a first violence" and "first injustice"—in other words, a "necessity in justice to come back to economy." This (ontological? logical? axiological? theological?) "necessity" to respond to two different and even contradictory requirements—the ambiguity of persons at once submitted to an axiology exterior to that of need and integrated in the economy as market value—would impose an intrinsic "limit" upon all "charity," the "necessity of a sharing and splitting [partage]" of justice that would be "justified" and "the very structure of spirituality itself." Paradoxically, justice—doing justice to more than one other—carries itself out "against the integral inequality of the devotion [devouement]" that characterizes the relationship between the self and one other, without whose corrective asymmetry all symmetry would become total, totalizing, and totalitarian. By the same token, the "totality of dis-interestedness," in its "integrality" and hence integrity could not stand on its own and requires a "return to knowledge, research, inquiry, organization, a return also of institutions that will come to judge and thereby the return to a political life," to the "good" or "best" politics (la bonne politique). Last but not least, this referral back to a certain economy—in the restricted sense—requires a return of "money, to be administered for the other," as well as the "homogeneity of everything that has a value and thus to a justice that remains a just calculation [un juste calcul]," in short: the "State." This, Levinas says, occurs whenever there is a third person and, "beginning with the third, who is not third but a billion [qui n'est pas tiers mais qui est milliard]—the whole of humanity." Yet even the most just state ought to "recognize what is already lost in the relation to the compassion [miséricorde] and spontaneity of charity in [the process of] calculation." For the state to recognize the discrepancy of this primary and inevitable—empirical and transcendental—violence is to acknowledge that "the universal rule of justice it discovers [is] not definitive," that there are always other possibilities that "approach more" the "first spontaneity" of the face-to-face. The "liberal State" would be the state that "admits the reprisal [la reprise], the possibility of changing existing laws, of finding in human inspiration and in the future of the human [de l'humain] a better justice." Implied in this, Levinas says, would be the insight that the "idea of charity" cannot be fully "exhausted [or satisfied, satisfait]" by "justice." Insisting on this irreducible discrepancy, Levinas continues, would mark the distinction between "public justice" and the "temptation to construct a-regime-of- justice [un-régime-de-justice]" that would be "definitive." This was the temptation of Stalinism, as well as all other regimes that are premised on "not allowing [laisser] justice in its permanent renewal [dans son permanent renouvellement]." The difference between the Greek polis, the totalitarian "regime," and the liberal state would thus be a certain relaxation of the "rigor," "deduction," and "administration" of justice, precisely because justice, in political liberalism, is "not complete." The biblical examples of kings criticized by prophets who, being "just," put into question the "just political act" and, in that respect,
are echoed in the presence of "love in Marxism [il y a de l'amour dans le marxisme]," testify to this.

A poignant example of this "love" and, indeed, its metaphysical, that is to say, anti-ontological and antinaturalist, implications Levinas views in the protests of the "youth" who marched in the streets of Paris and elsewhere in late 1960s and early 1970s:

It is interesting to note the dominance, among the most imperative "sentiments" of May 1968, of the refusal of a humanity defined by its satisfaction, by its receipts and expenditures, and not by its vulnerability more passive than all passivity; its debt to the other. What was contested, beyond capitalism and exploitation, was their conditions: the individual taken as accumulation in being, by honors, titles, professional competence—ontological tumefaction weighing so heavily on others as to crush them, instituting a hierarchical society that maintains itself beyond the necessities of consumption and that no religious breath could make more egalitarian. Behind the capital in having weighed a capital in being.

But then, the very same contested state—and the same movement of the money of interest to this money's dis-interested use for the other, and back—could help to mediate and mitigate problems and relationships, not of possession or dispossession but of "irreparable," even unspeakable "crime." In the means that money and the state provide, we could find a "possibility of overcoming violence" by way of another "pay-back [rabat]" than that of "death itself." With this "bloodless redemption," Levinas goes on to suggest, money could "substitute for the infernal or vicious circle of vengeance and universal pardon, which always constitutes an inequality with regard to the third" and an "encouragement to crime and, consequently, a possibility to be feared by the third." For all the justice that one might attribute to the biblical prophet Amos, in his condemnation of treating the other as merchandise (see Amos 2:6, as well as its echo in the Communist Manifesto) there lies an even greater justice—and, perhaps, Levinas writes, an element of "charity"—in seeking in pecuniary retribution for the in fact (and in principle) "incomparable crime" another way out of the dilemma between the "impunity of pardon" and the "cruelty of revenge."

Here we would confront the "necessity to compare, to compare the incomparable, to introduce calculation and, in consequence, all the rest"; here, moreover, "the whole of Greece is present [toute la Grèce est là]." Aristotle already speaks of all this." But neither Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (cf. Book IV, chapter 1) nor the whole of Greece provides any understanding of the "modality" under which this comparative compassion (miséricorde) can—indeed, must and ought to—become truly "universal." Here, Levinas suggests, following a classical and modern—in fact, almost Hegelian topos—the contribution of the great monotheisms of the West remains essential.

Toward a Critique of Political Idolatry

I have been drawing on an author (Levinas) and on commentators (Derrida, in particular) in the fields that I know best, but I trust that despite this inevitable limitation my remarks will speak to the central problem and questions that concern Talal Asad's multifaceted and profound genealogies of the formation of "religion" and "the secular."

Levinas's thought distinguishes itself from any form of rationalization of religious salvation or even any hermeneutics of faith. Indeed, "to be Jewish," in Levinas's view, is "not a particularity; it is a modality," to which he provocatively adds: "Everyone is a little bit Jewish, and if there are men on Mars, one will find Jews among them. Moreover, Jews are people who doubt themselves, who in a certain sense, belong to a religion of unbelievers"; more specifically, Levinas refers to the passage in which "God says to Joshua, 'I will not abandon you' [and, in the subsequent phrase]: 'nor will I let you escape,'" thus evoking the possibility of a dwelling in contradiction that is not merely a paralyzing double bind—easy though it would be to read God's words to Joshua thus. Dwelling in contradiction—this and nothing else is the "modality" of the spiritual life, the religion of adults, beyond myth and participation, "primitive" fusion and overrationalized totality, in its differentiation, privatization, and the like. Nothing more—and nothing less—than an inflection of the intersubjective, public, and political realm, "religion" (in its very concept and, increasingly, its practice) would not so much designate a set of beliefs and prohibitions, imageries and hopes, but the destructuring movement, always and everywhere to be found, away from identity (whether semantic, propositional, political, or national).

What use, then, could we have for such a formal—a global—def-
inition of religion in terms of its "modality"? How should we evaluate this generalization and universalization of "religion," of its concept and practice, into meaning nothing more or less than the structuring and dislocation—the "curvature"—of what Levinas, following Durkheim, calls "social space"? Doesn't this stretching and emptying out of the concept entail a trivialization of its historical meaning and its axiological weight? Yet such a substitution of "religion" for almost every relationship between humans—and, ultimately, between them and anything else, repeating the term, if not all of its connotations, if not for the infinite's sake then at least ad infinitum and ad absurdum—also, paradoxically, intensifies "religion" as well. For good and for ill. Only the turn—and repeated return—to religion would prepare the possibility of its eventual demise. For good and for ill.

Levinas is, I have been suggesting, a case in point. His de-essentializing and detranscendentalizing concepts and arguments, couched in a rhetorical language punctuated by figures of speech that can sometimes be maddening, go hand in hand with an attempt to concretize and hence, as he says, deformalize the various themes of "religion" (such as creation, revelation, messianism, and eschatology). Yet in the process the central referent—religion itself—remains unconquered, unoccupied. The result is what, to borrow a term from Raymond Aron,67 I would like to call a critique of the idolatry of (political) history, indeed, of political economy, which does not allow its rationale and objective to be fixed in any determinate way, which resists context and identity, and which enhances our hospitality with respect to otherness and strangeness, both within and without.

Talal Asad seems to envision a similar task for anthropological critique as it emancipates itself from an all too unmediated—"pseudo-scientific"—conception of fieldwork and local knowledge and moves in the direction of an "epistemology" or even "ontology" of "religion" in its relation to the broader historical category of "the secular" and its differentiated yet overlapping practices and forms of life. His emphasis on a more "complex space" and "complex time" (adopting and expanding on a terminology introduced by John Milbank), that is to say, of "embodied practices rooted in multiple traditions" and "simultaneous temporalities" implying "more than a simple process of secular time," seem to come close to what Levinas—not accidentally taking his first intellectual leads from Durkheim and Lévy-Bruchl—ultimately chooses to articulate with the help of the phenomenological idiom that he helped introduce into the French philosophical debate. Do the notions of "complex space" and time, on the one hand, and the "curvature of social space" convey a similar insight in the structuring and destructuring of culture and economy, of justice and the law? Does Levinas's singular evocation of exteriority and transcendence, of intersubjectivity and disinterestedness let themselves be mapped on Asad's use of Wittgenstein's categories of "grammar," "practices," and "forms of life"? Perhaps not. But the "systematic inquiry into cultural concepts" introduced in modern anthropology by Mauss and the conceptual—Levinas will say, intentional—analysis proper to philosophy from its earliest beginnings to twentieth-century phenomenological, existential, and hermeneutic phenomenology nonetheless yield a similar result: a complementary interrogation of the historical and structural relationship and, indeed, co-implication of the religious of the secular, of seemingly singular identities and the sociality imposed or enabled by the universal equivalent. Money and whatever comes to take its place would form only the most significant example of this more general economy—the "play of the world"—whose enabling and disabling function reveals the divine for what it is, must and can be.
in their previous community was indeed a complex one. I find it curious, though, that the kinds of anxieties that Justice Perry repeatedly expresses when he imagines situations in which a Christian wife’s husband has converted to Islam and the case comes before a Muslim judge do not find any place in Viswanathan’s thesis about conversion. In general her observations on the rights of the converted spouse do not take up the kind of issues I have treated here, since she takes categories like family and patriarchy to be self-evident in her analysis. See Gautri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).


CHAPTER 7

3. Ibid., 14.
4. Ibid., 21.
5. Ibid., 22.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 17.
12. Derrida, Writing and Difference, 81 and 311n.4/120 and 120n.2.
13. Ibid., 311n.4/120n.2 (translation modified).
14. Ibid., 311–120n.4/120n.2.
15. Ibid., 81/120 (translation modified).
16. Ibid., 81/121 (translation modified).
17. Ibid. (translation modified).
18. Ibid., 83/122.
21. Is It Righteous to Bet 64–65; Poirié, Emmanuel Levinas, 136.
22. Ibid., 78–89/161–62.
23. Emmanuel Levinas, Dieu, la mort et le temps (Paris: Grasset & Falguerolle, 1993), 190; translated by Bettina Bergo under the title God, Death, and Time (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 166. Levinas’s reference is to the classical fable of the belly and the attempted rebellion of the other parts of the body against it (a fable repeated in this chapter of Pantagruel).
24. Ibid.
25. God, Death, and Time, 166; Dieu, la mort et le temps, 190–91.
29. Ibid., 47.
30. Is It Righteous to Bet 80–81 (trans. modified); Poirié, Emmanuel Levinas, 165.
31. Ibid.
32. Burggraewe, Emmanuel Levinas et la sociabilité de l’argent, 47.
33. Is It Righteous to Bet 81; Poirié, Emmanuel Levinas, 165.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 81/166.
36. Ibid., 89–90.
37. Ibid., 90.
38. Ibid., 207.
40. Ibid., 72 and 73.
41. Ibid., 73.
43. Burggraewe, Emmanuel Levinas et la sociabilité de l’argent, 74.
44. Ibid. (emphasis added).