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Tradition and Transformation: Towards a Messianic Critique of Religion

Jayne Svenungsson ©

Anyone who has experienced the less attractive sides of religious life and practice knows that the concept of tradition can be a powerful tool by which deviating ideas and convictions are efficiently quelled in order to uphold unanimity within the community. But also in the wider debate, as moral or social issues are discussed, proponents of different religious communities often underpin their arguments by pointing to tradition, to the "traditional" Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other, view. An illustrative example is the present debate on same-sex marriages in Sweden, where representatives of all the major Christian churches have renounced the proposition that the term marriage should be extended to same-sex partnership. Although the details of the arguments vary, a common denominator is the recurrent reference to "the traditional" Christian notion of marriage, built on a complementary view on the sexes.

There are, however, also other voices present in the debate. Both laypeople and professional theologians have been arguing in the opposite direction, pointing at the complexity inherent in the notion of marriage, not to mention in our understanding of the sexes. Not unexpectedly, these voices are commonly refuted as "liberal" or even "depraved" by those people who claim to represent the traditional (or "classical") view. Behind this refutation lies, of course, the conviction that there is such a thing as a tradition which speaks with a univocal and timeless voice.

Interestingly, this conviction is shared – although for quite different purposes – by much of the populist critique of religion which is presently sweeping over Europe and North America. In order to demonstrate that religion is and remains by definition incommensurate with modern democratic ideals, authors such as Michel Onfray, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins convey an image of religious traditions as static and hopelessly archaic. Religion in general and the Biblical religions in particular are consequently portrayed as inherently anti-intellectual, misogynist, homophobic and anthropocentric (posing an imminent threat to environmental consciousness). What is worthy of attention here is the way in which these authors deal with those expressions of religion

which seemingly contradict their own hegemonic conception, e.g. the strong ecologist, feminist or gay movements within all the major religious traditions. Michel Onfray offers a telling example in his scornful repudiation of those trying to articulate a moderate or feminist Islam, insinuating that they are, in fact, betraying true Islam (which by definition is anti-democratic and androcentric). Rather, Onfray argues, we have to read the texts on which the religions are based "historically" and not close our eyes to the violence and oppression which they actually encourage.[1]

This is, of course, an extremely naïve view, and a view which ironically brings Onfray close to fundamentalists within each of the Abrahamitic religions, who are generally keen on stressing the "historical" or "literal" reading of the texts as the authentic and traditional one. However, if we take a closer look at the tradition – I am in this case restricting myself to the Christian tradition with which I am most familiar, although I believe much of the same could also be said of Judaism and Islam – we will discover that what here is held to be a traditional view of the Scriptures is a thoroughly modern one, which can be traced back to 17th-century Biblicism. If we go back further in history, considering antique and medieval hermeneutics, we will, on the contrary, find a developed sensitivity for the complex nature of religious texts and their different layers of meaning.[2]

Another striking example of the same problematics is offered by the question I referred to at the outset, the supposed traditional Christian view of marriage, in the name of which same-sex marriage is rejected. Once again, if we take into account the actual nature of the tradition, we will soon discover that there is no such thing as a timeless Christian view of marriage, and even less so of sexual difference. First, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves that in antiquity and in the Middle Ages the highest ideal of the Christian life was celibacy. Only with the Reformation was marriage elevated to a rank equal to, and henceforth regarded as an equal calling with, celibacy. Still, during this period, we do not yet find an appeal to the complementarity of the sexes when marriage is argued for; rather the arguments (e.g. for Luther) are of a pragmatic nature, regarding marriage as the most suitable calling for the majority, given man's lustful nature. The complementarity argument did not appear until the Enlightenment, when the idea of a fundamental difference (biological and social) between the sexes successively took shape. From this time on, the notion of the complementary qualities and roles of the sexes serves as a major component in the understanding of the meaning and

[1] Onfray, Michel, *Traité d'athéologie. Physique de la métaphysique,* Paris: Grasset, 2005. See especially part IV, where Onfray explores what he terms "selective exploitation of the texts".
[2] For a good overview of these hermeneutical developments in the Christian tradition, see Jeanrond, Werner G., *Theological hermeneutics: Development and significance*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1991.

purpose of marriage within many Christian contexts. And it is precisely this – highly contingent – notion of sexual difference which in the present debate is being superimposed onto biblical texts (in particular the creation story in Genesis 2) written in a completely different cultural context and subsequently presented as the "traditional" view.[3]

In contrast to such a-historic notions of religious traditions – whether put forth by conservative forces within religion or by a certain kind of demagogic critique of religion – it will be the contention of this article that any serious discussion of religion has to admit that religious traditions, by their very nature, are dynamic and self-exceeding. Traditions, in other words, are evolving by being actively interpreted and reinterpreted by their adherents in every new time. This is where the notion of critique and self-critique comes into the picture. Precisely because traditions are the products of contingent choices by human individuals – individuals who always run the risk of confusing their own choices with God's will or commands – they are in constant need of critique. It is my conviction, however, that a pertinent and constructive critique of religion is most successfully achieved when undertaken from within the religious tradition itself. Such a critique from within could be carried out in various ways, drawing on the so-called prophetic vein present in the biblical religious traditions.[4] In what follows, I shall highlight one aspect of this prophetic vein, i.e. the messianic motive. In line with Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological reading of the messianic (or perhaps rather messianic reading of phenomenology), my aim is to outline what could be termed a messianic critique of religion.

The twofold idea of the messianic in Judaism

At first glance, it might seem somewhat remarkable to propose a messianic critique of religion. For many people, "messianism" rather evokes precisely those expressions of religion which most urgently need to be criticized: fanatic Judgment Day sects proclaiming the imminent coming of the Redeemer, or charismatic figures even claiming to *be* the Redeemer. One might also come to think of evangelical Christians zealously supporting (equally zealous) Jewish settlers in the occupied territories of the West Bank, convinced they are thereby bringing closer the second coming of Christ. Messianism within religion, in other words,

[3] See further Shaw, Jane, "Reformed and enlightened church", in *Queer theology: Rethinking the Western body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin, Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 215-229.
[4] Cf. Svenungsson, Jayne, "Transcending tradition: Towards a critical theology of the Spirit", *Studia Theologica*, 62:1 (2008), pp. 63-79.

seems to be linked to irrational convictions which tend to nourish violence and blind fanaticism.

That messianism carries with it a violent potential becomes clear also when one considers its secular counterparts in modern times – utopian political projects willing at any time to sacrifice the present in the name of some golden future. One could even pose the question of whether it is not precisely the messianic or apocalyptic element so deeply embedded in the religious heritage of the West which has ultimately given fuel to the totalitarian political movements of 20th-century Europe. This question has been answered in the affirmative by a number of thinkers during the last century, perhaps most notably by Karl Löwith and Eric Voegelin.[5] Löwith's famous secularization thesis – partly taken up by Voegelin – suggests that the utopian political ideologies of Western modernity could ultimately be seen as the secular outcome of the apocalyptic impulse of the Jewish and Christian theological heritages. The utopian dream of the perfect society, the pure race, etc., characteristic of totalitarian movements, are in other words nothing but previous eschatological goals turned inwards, towards history itself.

From this perspective one could, of course, rightly question the critical potential of the messianic idea. There are, however, other, more constructive interpretations of the significance of the messianic idea in the Western tradition, interpretations presented at about the same time as those of Löwith and Voegelin, but which nevertheless stand in clear contrast to them. I am referring in particular to the analyses of Ernst Bloch and Jacob Taubes.[6] Rather than drawing a direct link from messianism to the violent ideologies of the 20th century, these authors detect in the messianic idea the key to the revolutionary dynamic present in Western history in the positive sense. If what ultimately characterizes totalitarianism in its various shapes is its desire to make everything present, proclaiming heaven on earth, as it were, genuine messianism rather teaches us that there is always more to history, more to hope and strive for, and thus urges us never to grow complacent with the present state of affairs. Messianism, in this light, appears more like the counter-force to dangerous utopias, which is the exact opposite of what Löwith and Voegelin claim.

How, then, is it possible to interpret the messianic idea in so diametrically opposite ways? The answer is certainly to be found in the ambiguity inherent in the very

[5] See Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in history. The theological implications of the philosophy of history*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949, and Voegelin, Eric, *The new science of politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
[6] See Bloch, Ernst, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985 (1935), and Taubes, Jacob, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, Bern: A. Francke, 1947. Still other names could be added, e.g. Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin; see further Bouretz, Pierre, *Témoins du future. Philosophie et messianisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003.

phenomenon itself. In one of the most influential analyses of messianism in modern times, Gershom Scholem's famous essay "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," a distinction is made between the apocalyptic and rationalistic tendencies within Jewish messianism. Pointing at the experience of the exile as the soil out of which the messianic idea grows in the first place, Scholem links the origins of messianism to apocalypticism – to the urgent longing for redemption from suffering to manifest itself at any moment. There is thus an essential link between the sense of loss of historical reality and the acute expectation of a different world order to be established, which is why Scholem also states: "Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature … a theory of catastrophe".[7] This "theory" has survived throughout Jewish history, time and again inciting radical apocalyptic and utopian currents particularly deeply rooted in popular forms of Judaism.

In order to understand the more rationalistic tendency within Jewish messianism, it is important to recognize the anarchic element present in these apocalyptic currents. By proclaiming the radical novelty of the messianic times due to begin, apocalypticism creates a momentous tension with the rabbinic world of *Halakhah* – the tradition of continuous preservation and development of Jewish law. The response from those who throughout history have felt repulsed by the anarchic and sometimes violent expressions of apocalyptic messianism has thus been to stress the restorative rather than the utopian element of the messianic idea. This rationalistic tendency is paradigmatically expressed in the strongly anti-apocalyptic interpretation of messianism undertaken by Maimonides in the 12th century. In Maimonides' comments, the restorative element – understood as the re-establishment of a Davidic kingdom in which the Jewish people could finally live in peace – is pushed into the foreground, whereas the utopian element is reduced to a minimum: the prophetic promise of an expanded, universal knowledge of God. Maimonides accordingly knows nothing of messianic signs or miracles and makes it quite clear that neither the law of moral order (revealed in the Torah), nor the law of natural order should be abrogated with the inauguration of the messianic age.[8]

It would, against the backdrop of Scholem's distinction, indeed be possible to conclude that it is the apocalyptic tendency which is at the root of the utopian and sometimes violent potential that messianism contains, whereas the rabbinic, rationalistic counter-tendency alone offers a

[7] Scholem, Gershom, *The messianic idea in Judaism. And other essays on Jewish spirituality*, New York: Schocken Books, 1971, p. 7.
[8] Scholem, *The messianic idea in Judaism*, pp. 24-33. See also Lévy, René, "Le messianisme de Maïmonide", in *Cahiers d'études Lévinassiennes, n° 4: Messianisme* (2005), pp. 151-176.

conception of the messianic which could be used for the critical purposes which Bloch and Taubes, among others, point out. This would, however, be a too hastily drawn conclusion. Above all, as Scholem stresses, it is important not to overlook that it is precisely the apocalyptic form of messianism which in times of gloom and oppression has offered the Jewish people hope and strength to resist. It is thus rather within apocalyptic messianism that one finds the source of the driving force beyond the messianic critique – i.e. the recognition of something truly transcendent in the name of which the present state of affairs is contested – while, on the contrary, a too rationalistic account of the messianic, stressing the restorative element, risks becoming purely conservative, caught in a paralyzing nostalgia for the past.

Still, as a number of examples from throughout history remind us, apocalyptic messianic movements tend to run amok when cut loose from the sober halakhic tradition. One could thus conclude – in line with Scholem's own conclusion – that a critical messianism in the full sense of the word lives and thrives in the very tension between the restorative and the utopian, between past and future, between memory and hope. It is also important to note that both elements are distinctly present in the rabbinic literature. Discussing an apocalyptic and a rationalistic tendency respectively, is thus a matter of where one places emphasis, rather than of pointing out two mutually exclusive veins within Jewish messianism.[9] Even a thinker such as Emmanuel Levinas, who explicitly places his commentaries on messianism in the rationalistic tradition,[10] clearly develops his thought in the tension between both tendencies, as I shall attempt to demonstrate in what follows.

The phenomenology of the messianic

In one of Levinas' most famous comments on the messianic – one of the few which appear in his phenomenological works – he states:

> Truth requires both an infinite time and a time it will be able to seal, a completed time. The completion of time is not death, but messianic time, where the perpetual is converted into

[9] This aspect is too often overlooked in contemporary discussions of messianism. An example is the way in which Fredric Jameson pits "the apocalyptic" (exemplified by Francis Fukuyama's pronouncement of the end of history) against "the messianic" (linked to Jacques Derrida's critical re-reading of Marx), failing not only to do justice to Derrida's more sensitive reading of the messianic, but also to acknowledge the apocalyptic as an essential part of messianism itself. See Jameson, Fredric, "Marx's purloined letter", in *Ghostly demarcations: A symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx"*, ed. Michael Sprinker, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 63-64.

[10] See Levinas, Emmanuel, *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3rd edition, Paris: Albin Michel, , 1976 (1963), Le Livre de Poche: pp. 95-96, n. 1. English translation: *Difficult freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990, pp. 59, n. 1.

> eternal. Messianic triumph is the pure triumph; it is secured against the revenge of evil whose return the infinite time does not prohibit.[11]

Taking these words as a point of departure for a discussion of the messianic in the thought of Levinas, one might well ask whether he actually remains faithful to the rationalistic, Maimonidian tradition in which he inscribes himself.[12] Does not this confident announcement of the messianic triumph rather evoke the utopian impulse characteristic of apocalyptic messianism? If one transfers the question to a more philosophical level – more precisely to the post-Husserlian phenomenological tradition within which Levinas is working – one can equally ask whether he remains true to his own phenomenological premises.[13] In other words, does not the announcement of a completed time betray the dream of total presence, of a final closure of time where all desires are fulfilled and the subject enjoys unmediated self-presence?

Still, those who are familiar with the thought of Levinas know that all of this runs counter to the very nerve of his philosophy: the indisputable priority of alterity, of the other. As a matter of fact, Levinas' entire philosophical enterprise could well be summarized as an attempt to establish *subjectivity* in a different way, breaking with the dominant Odyssean conception of Western philosophy.[14] Whether in Neo-Platonic, Hegelian or Husserlian shape, the characteristic of this conception of the subject is that it ultimately comes from itself (unity, identity) and returns to itself. Levinas, however, strongly contests that there is any such original safe haven from which the subject departs and to which it returns. The Garden of Eden, to use a more Hebraic metaphor, contains inherent tensions already in its original design. Accordingly, the very presence of the other reveals the possibility to betray – ultimately, to kill. Yet this very possibility simultaneously evokes another possibility, the possibility of responding to the command inscribed in the other's face: "Thou shalt not kill." In other words, the very possibility of annihilating the other calls the subject to the responsibility *not* to do so, and it is precisely this responsibility that makes us human in the full sense in the first place. Expressed in more philosophical terminology, this is to say that

[11] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'exteriorité*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, Le Livre de Poche: p. 317; English translation: *Totality and infinity: An essay on eteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, pp. 284-285.
[12] Cf. note 10 above.
[13] Cf. Ciaramelli, Fabio, "Un temps achevé? Questions critiques à propos du messianique chez Lévinas", in *Cahiers d'études Lévinassiennes, n° 4: Messianisme* (2005), pp. 11-19. The wider question of Levinas' relationship to phenomenology has been extensively debated over the years; for an introduction to this discussion, see Janicaud, Dominique et al., *Phenomenology and the "theological turn": The French debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak et al., New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.
[14] This becomes clear in his late essay "Philosophie et transcendance" (1989), see Levinas, Emmanuel, *Altérité et transcendance*, Paris: Fata Morgana, 1995, Le Livre de Poche: pp. 27-56.

from the very beginning, alterity is inscribed in the self; it is part of the very constitution of subjectivity. In phenomenological terms, Levinas' aim is accordingly nothing less than to divulge a more original level of the transcendental self, a pre-reflexive, pre-intentional level where the self appears in the accusative, as pure passivity – as called to responsibility.[15]

Defining subjectivity in terms of pre-reflexive, pre-intentional responsibility is to suggest that subjectivity is intrinsically bound to a specific kind of temporality. This brings us back to the initial question of whether Levinas, in the quoted comment on messianic time, does not betray the phenomenological conception of the self as perpetually mediated, as never entirely present to itself. I believe the answer to this question is no, and that the key lies precisely in the sense Levinas ascribes to *messianic time*. Before I develop my argument further, it is worthwhile considering the lines which follow the already quoted words: "Is this eternity a new structure of time, or an extreme vigilance of the messianic consciousness? The problem exceeds the bounds of this book."[16]

Levinas might well be right, in that we do not find an answer to this problem within the present work – which is that of *Totality and Infinity*, one of his two major phenomenological works. If we turn to his Talmudic, Jewish works – especially the "Messianic Texts" of *Difficult Liberty* – some interesting light is shed on the problem, however. Already at the outset of these commentaries, Levinas makes it clear that messianism, in the sense which he ascribes to the concept, has little to do with belief in a person who will appear one day and miraculously put an end to the violent structures which inhere in this world.[17] This is a good indication that messianic time, as Levinas understands it, should neither be confused with the mythological idea of a different eon of eternal peace which will suddenly appear, nor with the philosophical concept of identity or unity, of a state where difference and deferral are overcome.

How, then, are we to understand messianism, and in what lies its critical potential? Levinas' answer, developed in close dialogue with a number of Talmudic passages, suggests that it is first and foremost a matter of our existence here and now, of *subjectivity* and *temporality*:

[15] Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, pp. 29-47.
[16] Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 318; eng. trans., p. 285.
[17] Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, p. 95; eng. trans., p. 59. It is worthwhile noticing that these commentaries are written at about the same time (1960-61) as *Totality and infinity* is accomplished.

> Messianism is ... not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility.[18]

The statement, which is made in connection to a rabbinic commentary on the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:4, suggests that the messianic is to be situated in the very innermost being of the singular subject. Levinas even goes so far as to claim that each self is the Messiah, in the sense that it is summoned to be the righteous servant who takes upon himself the suffering of the other. And it is precisely this status of being called to responsibility for the one who suffers which defines human subjectivity as such; thus we recognize the phenomenological argument referred to above.

Still, one can ask whether the messianic subjectivity Levinas seeks to elaborate does not run the risk of winding up at the opposite of what he aims for. In other words, does not the subject's "power" to bear the suffering of the other run the risk of being perverted into power *over* the other, the power of paternalism, where compassion is merely an expression for a hidden desire to gain control over the other? This critique, I believe, is possible to launch only if one neglects the crucial role temporality plays in Levinas' argument. It should thus be emphasized that the responsibility which Levinas situates at the heart of subjectivity is a responsibility placed on me *before* every conscious engagement or vow – before even being conscious of myself. It is, in other words, a responsibility for an *immemorial past*; for that which was never my fault, never even in my power to influence, but which nonetheless concerns me.

Levinas is hinting at the inherent tensions in human existence, pointing to the fact that my very presence in the world, the very *Da* of my *Dasein*, always already implies usurpation, the risk of occupying the place of another who is driven into exile into some "third" or "fourth" world. This picture of the human predicament would indeed be a pessimistic or even cynical one, had it not been for its correlate in a *prophetic future*, equally beyond the grasp of subjective intentionality. Thus, Levinas argues, the call to responsibility for an immemorial past ultimately derives from a prophetic future, which is to say that the responsibility which I am called to is carried out not only as commemoration of the victims of the past, but also as constant faithfulness to a prophetic promise.[19]

[18] Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, p. 139; eng. trans., p. 90.
[19] Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, pp. 49-56.

Against this backdrop, we can finally begin to decipher the full sense of "eternity" or "messianic time" in the thought of Levinas. It is an announcement of a temporality which does not allow the subject to be judged merely in relation to its present historical situation; rather, the subject is at any moment ready for *absolute* judgment. In this respect it is, as Pierre Bouretz argues in his monumental study *Témoins du Future*, possible to place Levinas in a significant line of Jewish thinkers in the 20th century, whose common denominator is that they all turned against the idealistic notion of history itself as the ultimate court of universal judgment. Among these thinkers, Franz Rosenzweig was perhaps the one who most clearly saw the potential danger in Hegel's immanent theodicy, according to which – in principle – anything could be justified in terms of its actual success on the stage of history. If there is nothing beyond the immediate historical horizon, then in what name do we question this horizon when it becomes perverted?[20]

Rosenzweig, as well as Benjamin, Bloch and Levinas, thus seek a vision which allows for the possibility of something beyond the immediate historical experience, and in different ways they all find such a vision in the Jewish messianic heritage. Messianism, in other words, points to a sort of *transcendence* in relation to the apparent logic of the events of this world – and thus to the possibility to judge rather than being judged by history. It should be made clear, however, that the transcendence referred to in this context has little to do with invoking divinely revealed Law or announcing the disruption of history by a sudden apocalyptic event. Rather, we come back once more to the distinction between the restorative and utopian elements within Jewish messianism, where the critical potential of messianism lies precisely in the tension between the two elements. Accordingly, transcendence – as the term is used notably by Levinas – is first and foremost defined in terms of temporality: the continuous disruption of the present by, on the one hand, an immemorial past to which we are called to respond, and on the other hand by a prophetic future which we cannot foresee, but which nevertheless calls us to responsibility for the yet unborn.

Messianism, as a critical philosophy, amounts precisely to this constructive restlessness – a way of thought which does not lead us to any promised land and which refuses the grandiose utopias of the last century, but which nonetheless, as Daniel Epstein remarks, could be qualified as a certain form of *utopism*: "Utopism would then not designate a

[20] See Bouretz, Pierre, *Témoins du future*, op. cit. Cf. Also Mosès, Stéphane, *L'ange de l'histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, 2nd ed., Paris: Gallimard, 2006 (1992). This critique of Hegel, articulated predominately by Jewish thinkers, can, of course, be challenged. See e.g. Jean-Luc Nancy's inspiring reading of Hegel as a thinker driven by the "restlessness of the negative": *Hegel: L'inquiétude du négative*, Paris: Hachette, 1997. I am grateful to Björn Thorsteinsson for bringing this text to my attention.

new ideology, a new land of abundance where milk and honey flow, but rather the impossibility for each and everyone to shut oneself up in one's shell, '*de demeurer chez-soi'*."[21]

Towards a messianic concept of tradition

Let me finally outline in what sense I believe this critical messianism can contribute to the contemporary debate on religion. As I pointed out at the outset of this article, this debate has serious shortcomings, in that it tends to be dominated by simplistic conceptions of what religious traditions are – whether put forth by populist critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins or Michel Onfray, or by conservative or fundamentalist voices within religion. Common to both of these factions is a desire to uphold an image of tradition as static and hegemonic. Furthermore, both develop their argument by way of a certain dialectics between the present and the past. Accordingly, a selective and often a-historic reconstruction of the past – what is held to be "traditional" – serves as justification for a restricted and exclusive definition of the present content of religion.

This abuse of tradition, where the notion is used to suppress complexity and deviating convictions within the tradition, is of course nothing new. A quick glance at the history of the Christian tradition, for example, reminds us that it, to a significant extent, has been the history of *orthodoxy* being opposed to *heterodoxy* or *heresy* – divergent interpretations, whose advocates over the course of history have been condemned, excommunicated, persecuted, tortured or even executed. Until very recently, even secular historiography has, to a large degree, continued to tell the victor's version of this tale, ignoring the fact that those other voices – the mystics, the prophets or popular movements such as the Cathars – were most often expressions of healthy reactions of the dispossessed layers of society against an all too wealthy and powerful Church. In the past four or five decades, however, an important shift in focus in these matters has taken place. A good example is the intense research which is currently being done on the Cathars. Formerly depicted as violent troublemakers, heretic movements influenced by oriental dualist ideas, the history of the Cathars is currently being uncovered as the history of simple village people who strived to live according to what they believed to be a more authentic interpretation of the Christian Gospel, closer to the ideals of poverty and charity which they found expressed in the

[21] Epstein, Daniel, "Contre l'utopie, pour l'utopisme", in *Cahiers d'études Lévinassiennes, nº 4: Messianisme* (2005), p. 102 (my trans.)

Gospel narratives, but which they believed were betrayed in the power and wealth of the present Roman Church.[22]

These important shifts in historiography can be seen against the background of more general developments in Western post-war thought, where significant changes have taken place in the way in which we regard our historical past; changes which have entailed a new attentiveness to formerly unheard voices and perspectives.[23] Against this background – against these decades of refined critical thought – it is even more remarkable to observe the turn that much of the European and partly North American debate on religion and religious traditions has recently taken. The problem with this turn resides not only in the way in which it correlates the present and the past in order to maintain the status quo with regard to contemporary religious belief and practice (thus quelling the plurality and ambiguity which actually characterize living traditions).[24] There is also a problematic correlation between the past and the future, between the claims which are made upon the historical past, upon our common traditions and memories, and the future we are to expect. To use more concrete terms, I believe the inclination towards exclusive or reductive constructions of our historical past has its correlate in visions of the future which tend to be just as exclusive and one-dimensional – be it in the form of quasi-religious visions of a renewed Christian Europe as heard in certain factions within the contemporary debate on European identity, or in ultra-secularist dreams of a society purified from religion.[25]

It is in contrast to such utopian visions, and the hegemonic account of religious traditions which they presuppose, that I wish to propose a messianic notion of tradition in line with Levinas' reflections on messianic time referred to above. More precisely, this would imply regarding traditions as inclined to *transcendence* in the temporal sense which Levinas ascribes to the concept. A tradition is thus continuously defined as being temporally open to otherness; to a historical past which will always to some extent escape us, as well as to a prophetic future which is equally out of our grasp, but which nonetheless calls us in the form of a promise to fulfill.

Considering the historical aspect, let us recall that Levinas' announcement of a messianic time in several respects can be seen as an endeavor – in the wake of Rosenzweig –

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[22] For a good overview of the present research on the Cathars, se Brenon, Anne, *Le choix hérétique. Dissidence chrétienne dans l'Europe médiévale*, Cahors: La Louve éditions, 2006. Cf. also Moore, Robert I., *The formation of a persecuting society: Authority and deviance in Western Europe 950-1250*, 2nd ed., Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007 (1987).

[23] I am referring, in particular, to the groundbreaking works of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau and the significant research which has been made in the wake of these authors.

[24] Cf. Tracy, David, *Plurality and ambiguity: Hermeneutics, religion, hope*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

[25] See further Svenungsson, Jayne, "Europa, das Christentum und die Säkularisierung", *Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S. Netzwerk Magazin*, http://www.toepferfvs.de/netzwerk-magazin.html, accessed 15 October 2005.

to break free from an idealistic view of history. The problem with this view, which to a high degree has influenced modern Western historiography, is among others its tendency to replace the multiple voices within history with the one overarching version presented as History. Being temporally open to the past in a critical way, however, implies being suspicious both of the very endeavor to grasp History (or Tradition) in any essential way, and of the belief that there exists such a thing as History (or Tradition) in the singular. In other words, confronting our historical past means confronting, in a significant way, our own finitude by recognizing that the past always remains ungraspable to a certain extent; that no matter how thorough and meticulous our studies are, we will always gain only a selective picture and one which is colored to a considerable degree by our own imaginations and expectations. Thus, in the thought-provoking words of Rowan Williams:

> Good history makes us think again about the definition of things we thought we understood pretty well, because it engages not just with what is familiar but with what is strange. It recognizes that 'the past is a foreign country' as well as being *our* past.[26]

On the other hand, this recognition must not prevent us from being attentive to the plurality of the past. Thus, an important aspect of taking responsibility for the past in a critical way is the struggle to restore formerly unheard voices and let these voices challenge and alter our image of the Tradition. The aforementioned research on the Cathars – enabled by the recent availability of the Inquisition reports since the opening of the Vatican archives – once again offers a good example, not to mention the significant historical research which is currently undertaken from feminist and queer perspectives.[27]

This work of uncovering the vast plurality of the past within the tradition makes it at once more difficult to justify a narrow and one-dimensional conception of the tradition in its present state. Rather, it teaches us that traditions – religious or other – always exist in the plural, in the present time as well as in the past. Against this backdrop, cultivating the heritage of a tradition would thus be less a matter of disclosing and preserving an authentic truth or core hidden beyond the manifold layers of history, and more about actively responding to the various forms of alterity that constantly infringe upon the limits of the tradition. A tradition, in other words, survives and thrives by continuously reinterpreting and

[26] Williams, Rowan, *Why study the past: The quest for the historical church*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005, p. 1.

[27] See e.g. Coakley, Sarah, *Powers and submissions: Sexuality, philosophy and gender*, Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002 and the excellent collection of historical essays edited by Gerard Loughlin in *Queer theology: Rethinking the Western body*, op. cit.

renegotiating its limits through the encounter with what is *other* – in the past as well as in the present; but equally, within, as well as outside, the tradition (although it is not always obvious where this line should be drawn). Considering the latter aspect, I believe the new multi-religious situation which the extensive migration of later decades has brought about not only offers unique possibilities for, but also necessarily calls for, this kind of critical renegotiation of the limits of each singular tradition. However, in order for this to be achieved in a constructive way, it is important to underline that such renegotiation not only entails the challenge of recognizing oneself in the other (and the other in oneself), but also of discovering and respecting what is essentially other in the other tradition.

Let me finally touch upon the futural aspect of Levinas' messianic argument. This aspect, I believe, reminds us that religious traditions always exist, in a certain way, on *promissory* notes. In other words, it reminds us that a tradition does not consist in a completed set of truths and convictions to preserve and guard, but rather in a promise to respond to continuously. Such a perspective has important implications for what claims we make in the name of the tradition – as well as for how we make these claims. To state that a tradition lives on promissory notes is to admit that even though we intend the perfect and infinite with our claims, most of the time they deliver the finite. This is precisely, as I pointed out at the outset of this article, why traditions are constantly in need of critique and self-critique – affirming the distance between the finitude of the present and the infinite promise which is embedded in the idea or vision which the tradition strives towards.[28]

Furthermore, there lies in this perspective an important ethical dimension, which brings us back to Levinas' refusal to accept the idealistic notion of history itself as the ultimate court of universal judgment. Stating that a tradition lives on promissory notes accordingly implies never giving in to the idea that our convictions and the acts which we draw from them could ever be justified merely by way of their seeming success or failure in a larger historical (or eschatological) perspective. The history of religion – not least of all Christianity – knows too many examples of this dangerous logic, emblematically expressed in the command of the papal legate Arnauld Amaury at the arrival in Béziers – an important nest of resistance for the Cathars – in 1209: "Kill them all – the Lord will recognize His own" (in the end, about 20,000 men, women and children were slaughtered). Contrary to this logic, the messianic conception of history emphasizes that each moment of history contains

[28] Cf. Caputo, John D., "Temporal transcendence: The very idea of *à venir* in Derrida", in *Transcendence and beyond: A postmodern inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Fordham University Press, 2007, pp. 188-203.

its own judgement; that in each moment we are called to respond to the prophetic command to justice. Thus, in Levinas' perhaps most famous words on the messianic: "Man can do what he must do; he can master the hostile forces of history by helping to bring about a messianic reign, a reign of justice foretold by the prophets. The waiting for the Messiah marks the very duration of time."[29]

[29] Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, p. 50; eng. trans., p. 26.

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