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KENOSIS, EMANCIPATION, PASTNESS: REFLECTIONS FROM A JEW

1. *Claustrophobia at the Christian Table*

This essay is in the broadest sense a reflection on the possibilities (or impossibilities) of social emancipation in an era of growing racism. But it is also – and relatedly so – a phenomenological reflection on what it is like as a Jewish scholar of Jewish thought to participate in the contemporary Euro-American (read: Christian) academic conversation about (the death of) God. Generally speaking (and even in many cases where Derrida and other Jews are responsible for setting the table), apophatic, postmodern, and post-metaphysical atheological theologies (or encounters with religions without religion) operate in Christian spaces – or to put the matter more boldly: Most apophatic, postmodern, and post-metaphysical atheological theologies under discussion in the academy today *are Christian*. In this respect we can point to the very locution “death of God” (noting that in Jewish contexts, the search for an equally apophatic, postmetaphysical turn of phrase results in the simpler turn of phrase, “God”), as we can point to the “Christianless Christianity” (or as I would gloss, “*Christian Christianless Christianity*”) of Badiou and Žižek,<sup>1</sup> Vattimo’s “*After Christianity*”<sup>2</sup> with his emphasis on weak thought in expressly kenotic terms in his so-called post-Christian opening (which we might as well call “*During Christianity*”), and the cover of Critchley’s *The Faith of the Faithless*<sup>3</sup> on which a cross comes into view as a negative space (itself brought into relief by myriad smaller crosses adorning the cover). This is of course fine (or perhaps more to the point, unavoidable): Christians and those of us writing with the ink of Christian pens (including myself and anyone else communicating by way of language) can perhaps be expected (or even destined) to draw on Christianity even in remarks on its dissolution. But since this dynamic – the overwhelmingly Christian character of post-Christian encounter – will press more on some than on others (or at least will press on some on some occasions more than on others on other occasions), it is helpful to occasionally pause to point it out overtly. For while the box in which we are thinking might already be unavoidably globalatinized, we still benefit from trying to find our way to critical (even if inescapably Christian) ways of reflecting on our entrapment. At any rate, I offer up these initial reflections in the hopes that they are in some small way relevant to working through some of the worst liberal stagnancies around race in contemporary political theory and civics. (I will add that this Jewish author’s decision to give her own ideas to voice ultimately in terms of kenosis

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl Raschke, *Critical Theology: Introducing an Agenda for an Age of Global Crisis*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in in Political Theology*, (London; New York: Verso, 2014).

carries its own host of complicated and claustrophobic implications that are, I believe, relevant to the critical task at hand).

2. *From New to Old Testamentality: Levinas' Phenomenology of Pastness and the Jew as Son*

In his essay "Being Jewish,"<sup>4</sup> Levinas reflects on the Jew as a marker of origins and pastness, and as in this way an antidote to what we may call the "energies of the New and the Now" which he connects with modernity, science, Sartrean existentialism, and also Christianity—all examples for Levinas of forms of life which deemphasize origins in favor of absolute presence. In this respect (and in spite of Levinas' own use of phenomenological method across his work), we can discern in this point a uniquely Levinasian critique of phenomenology: It is a critique of Sartrean being-for-itself as a focus on an absolutely free—and in that sense we may say present—project of consciousness, and it is a critique of Christianity as a religion of presence. And it is precisely a critique of both qua "energies of the New and the Now" (related to what we may call a "New Testamentality") in contrast to a concern with pastness and origins that we may identify as the "energy of the Old" (related to what we may call an "Old Testamentality") at the heart—according to Levinas—of human subjectivity. Here presence and immediacy—i.e. what we are calling the "energies of the New and the Now"—are viewed in a negative light and are contrasted by Levinas with what we may call a phenomenology of pastness in which origins (and with it, "the Old") matter. (Indeed, we might read his framing of Christianity in this way as a reaction to Sartre's own claim in *Anti-Semite and Jew*—but also Rosenzweig's thesis in *Star of Redemption*—that Judaism is unhistorical; here, in its connection to presence-without-origins, it is Christianity that appears unhistorical—at least in the phenomenological sense under description).

In relation to Sartre, Levinas offers up his insights as both a general critique of Sartrean existentialism and (in related fashion) as a critique of Sartre's anemic sense of what "the Jew" is—even when taken (as is charitable to do in one's approach to Sartre's talk of "the Jew" in *Anti-Semite and Jew*) as a marker for a phenomenological modality of human subjectivity. Reading Sartre's take on "the Jew" charitably (and in any case, in the way Levinas seems to read it) as a phenomenological placeholder for a modality of human subjectivity (as opposed to what would essentially amount to an entirely unresearched—and failed—attempt on Sartre's part to provide a historically accurate picture of Jews), "the Jew" emerges—in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*—as the product of the Anti-Semite's discourse. Levinas finds value in this, but notes that there is something else that "the Jew" signals. While Levinas' own writing in this essay (and in other essays) works at the complex intersection of socio-historico-political and phenomenological inquiry, if we focus on "the Jew" in Levinas' "Being Jewish" (on par with Levinas' reading of "the Jew" in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*) as a phenomenological marker for a modality of human subjectivity (and not as a historical point about Jews), then we can understand Levinas' critique of Sartre on "the Jew" as follows: Whereas Sartre sees in "the Jew" (as a marker for a deep element of human subjectivity) an existentialist point about human "situation" and the ways we must navigate our freedom from within limiting facticities (including subjugation to unjust systems), Levinas sees in "the Jew" (as a marker for a deep element of human subjectivity) a very different (he here says "religious," but we can hear in even this pre-ethical writing a glimmer of the Levinasian "ethical") sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Being Jewish" in *Cont Philos Rev*, 40, (1947/2007), 205-10.

“creation” and “election”: Where Sartrean existentialism (in its energy of “New and Now”) stops at the facticity of “situation,” Levinas asks us to go deeper than existentialism to “creation” and “election” as a grounding in origin (related, we may emphasize, to an energy of “the Old”): Drawing on the religious lexicon of Judaism (in ways that resonate with (a) Rosenzweig and (b) Levinas’ own later ideas of “Time of the Other” and the ethical temporality of diachrony), Levinas speaks of a human subjectivity that – as “created” and “elected” – is grounded in a prior origin:

To exist as a creature... is to refer in one’s very facticity to someone who bears existence for you, who bears sin, who can forgive.

Jewish existence is thus the fulfillment of the human condition as fact, personhood and freedom. And its entire originality consists in breaking with a world that is without origin and simply present. It is situated from the very start in a dimension that Sartre cannot apprehend. It is not situated there for theological reasons, but for reasons of experience. Its theology explicates its facticity.<sup>5</sup>

Here we find a perhaps unexpected move from origins (and what I have called “the Old”) to pardon. Leaving aside the implications and details of this arresting link to pardon (in short, it is a grounding desire for something that can only come from outside of oneself), it is helpful to reflect on how the overall sense of “the Jew” (and “Jewish existence”) as marker of origins (and pastness, in special relation to pardon) implicates a set of claims about Christianity (or perhaps we are better served to say “Christianity” or “the Christian”) in this same essay: Speaking of “the Jew” in way of signaling something about the deepest ground of human subjectivity (in all humans, and in relation to a grounding need for pardon), Levinas at once identifies and valorizes “the Jew’s” relationship to the Father (a lifting up, we might say, of a testament which breathes precisely in its relation to “the Old”), as he in this same sense critiques “the Christian’s” sense of absolute freedom and distance from the Father (its engagement, we may say, with a testament that is only always New). In provocative contrast to Christological thematics, Levinas in this context overtly identifies “the Jew” as the Son: In her relation to the Father/Law/Origin as a “fettered, responsible freedom” (which will be developed in his later works as the “difficult freedom” that is tied in responsibility to the radical alterity qua alterity of one’s neighbor and never opened into the solipsisms of the New & Now), “the Jew” emerges as the son-born-always-of-a-Father: Whereas God (as Son) is the Christian’s brother, God is the Father of the Jew (as Son). Countering a phenomenology of Newness/Nowness as the grounding vision of human subjectivity, Levinas finds in “the Jew” a fuller picture of human subjectivity in terms of a past-with-origin that communicates its way into the present with “the gravity of a fact,”<sup>6</sup> with “the weight of existence,”<sup>7</sup> and with “the emotional schema of personhood as a son”<sup>8</sup> in the spirit of Isaiah 53’s Suffering Servant: It is not Christ-as-son but human subjectivity as son (signaled by “the Jew,” which is to say, the human qua created and elected) that suffers servitude and in this way signals the difficult freedom – not an unfettered, New/Now freedom – of human subjectivity. This, for Levinas, is what grounds subjectivity; and it is precisely this difficult freedom of origin that is “lived in a halo of affectivity”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, “Being Jewish,” 209.

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 208.

and that opens us to the true passive vulnerability of human subjectivity itself.

3. *That Same Anti-Semitism: On the Phenomenology & Socio-History of Being's Irremissibility*

Read as an exploration of human subjectivity in a motion of "Old over New," "the Jew" – and the Old Testament narrative of creation and election that accompanies her – signals the most fundamental element of human subjectivity. Looking beyond the Bible – in a move that is (1) clearly not meant to be merely historical (based, that is, on the last line in the quote below) and (2) not methodologically dissimilar to (though certainly different in content from) the most charitable reading of Sartre's own goals in *Anti-Semite and Jew* – Levinas turns to the role of the Anti-Semite in the reality and identity of the Jew as a way of thinking about human subjectivity:

The recourse of Hitlerian anti-Semitism to racial myth reminded the Jew of the irremissibility of his being. Not to be able to flee one's condition... Granted this is a human condition, and in this the human [subject] is perhaps naturally Jewish.<sup>10</sup>

As in his dedication to *Otherwise Than Being* in which he draws a direct link from the millions of Jews murdered by Hitler to "the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism," Levinas here directly draws a link from "the Jew" to the human subject more broadly. But whereas the *Otherwise Than Being* dedication speaks at the socio-historico-political level (referring, that is, to other groups of oppressed and massacred people), his first focus here (in the spirit of what we've seen to be his overall engagement with Sartre on "the Jew") is human subjectivity: "The Jew" – qua a "being reminded," we may say, of the "irremissibility" (i.e. the unpardonable-ness) of being – sheds light on the condition of human subjectivity for any human subject.

We can move, in other words, from "the Jew" in "Being Jewish" as an insight about human subjectivity to the socio-historico-political space of the Jew as the object of anti-semitism in the *Otherwise Than Being* dedication (as well as in other parts of the "Being Jewish" essay): At the phenomenological level we may say that each human resides in something of a creation/ election/ origin/ desire-for-pardon in response to the "irremissibility" of her being; and so in a phenomenological register, "the Jew" can be seen to signal the grounding element of human subjectivity in all humans. That said, at the socio-historico-political level, actual Jews together with actual members of other racialized, marginalized, and oppressed groups – the millions and millions of all confessions and nations in the dedication to *Otherwise Than Being* – are targets of hatred and violence (perhaps we may here speak of a very different historical sense of "election") in ways that make their experience of the "irremissibility of being" different than that of human subjects in general; and so in a socio-historical register, "the Jew" can be seen to signal each person who is part of any racialized, marginalized, oppressed minority. Bridging from "Being Jewish" to *Otherwise Than Being*, we may say that each such person – each member of a minoritized, racialized, despised group – also signals in a heightened way this very same "irremissibility of being" (and need for pardon at the ground of human subjectivity) which

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

existentialism misses and towards which Levinas points—an irremissibility, furthermore, that at the political level implicates us in the work of justice (including the needs for and limits of pardon at the level of human history).<sup>11</sup>

4. *Time Hegemony: From Christian to Liberal Presence (or: How Not to Approach Pastness)*

We have seen the Jew—and, we have added, other minoritized, racialized others—signal the “irremissibility of being” in relation to a phenomenology of pastness (itself in relation to “the Old”, origins, and pardon). Within this register, we have seen that “the Christian” (or “Christianity”) signals the flight of “the New and the Now” which emphasizes what we might call a “moment self” less structured around its origins than around what we may call its “now-future.” Here too we may of course speak at the phenomenological and historical levels: Phenomenologically, we may say that “Christianity”—in its relation to God as brother, itself temporalized as a “Now” modality—signals a free, unfettered, virile element of human subjectivity that is not yet its ground. Socio-historico-politically speaking (at least within certain times and places, including both Levinas’ time and place and this author’s time and place), we may add that Christianity (and here we might specify, White Christianity—in relation too to Male and other dominant positionalities) functions as a hegemonic frame in any number of senses—including framing the bodies and lives of those who are not White Christians, and including in related spirit the comparatively less violent—but still disruptive—work of framing not only discourses of theology but even discourses of atheology (to return to my earlier reflections on claustrophobia at the Christian table).

Working within and expanding the temporal register that we have found in Levinas above, we may shorthand this as a kind of White Christian “time hegemony” (of a “New/Now” over an “Old/Origin”). As the framer of power, possibility, and pardon (which is to say, as framer of bodies and

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<sup>11</sup> The relation between phenomenological and historical pardon—as well as implications for (a) rethinking and (b) placing limits on historical pardon—is part of my longer study in progress on Levinas’ “pausal subjectivity.” Turning specifically to my extension above of “the Jew” to signal all minoritized and marginalized humans, we should add that in “Being Jewish” Levinas remarks that if “Judaism can give occasion to [hateful] reactions, this hatred is distinctly different from that provoked by a persecuted race or any given minority” (Emmanuel Levinas, “Being Jewish,” in *Cont Philos Rev*, 40, (1947/2007), 205-10.). In my own extension of this point about anti-Jewish hatred to a point about hatred against all marginalized groups, I am not primarily concerned with whether (and why or why not) Levinas—in the 40s or in the 90s—would approve this extension; I am, rather, concerned to engage myself and my readers in such an extension. That said, I am inspired in any case by much of the spirit of Levinas’ own work—including his *Otherwise Than Being* dedication where he overtly extends “anti-semitism” to include hatred against all marginalized groups. Reflecting for a moment on Levinas’ apparent decision in the 1947 essay to isolate anti-Jewish hatred in a unique category, we may offer two initial thoughts: (1) It would seem that even the most minimal principle of charity ought allow us to cut Levinas a break for feeling, as a Jew in 1947 Europe, as if there is a special hatred of the Jew; (2) beyond that, it seems that the meaning of this line within the context of the essay deserves further consideration in relation to further reflections on the implications of Levinas’ (and Sartre’s) use of compresent historical and phenomenological registers—including in relation to broader questions about the relationship between politics and ethics in later Levinas, and between facticity, temporality, and history in Levinas and in a range of other continental philosophers.

discourses), White Christianity speaks. And it in this way speaks (1) for and (2) through many of the rest of us.

Emphasized in a temporalized modality, and bringing together elements of our phenomenological and political reflections above, we may specifically unpack the hegemony of White Christianity as a blow against pastness: Where pastness signals the facts and facticity of a fettered social and historical situation (with parameters imposed from outside, a need to escape those parameters felt on the inside, and all-in-all a lived limit to freedom and presence), White Christian hegemony signals at the very worst the desire and at the very least the ability to live unfettered by chains of the past. Indeed, from a critical race and feminist perspective, this abstraction of (as a kind of disregard for) the past is one of liberalism's most damning qualities. That we move here from White Christianity to liberalism's failures around pastness is motivated both by their shared hegemonic enactment of "New/Now" modalities at the expense of marginalized minority voices, as it is also (and relatedly) motivated by Levinas' own identification of abstract liberalism as a degraded outgrowth of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, towards the goal of human emancipations, we may identify four destructive approaches to pastness – two that emerge from the far right of Hitlerisms, and two that emerge from liberalisms on the left. As we will see, in other words, emancipations are blocked by both overly robust and insufficiently robust relationships to our pasts.

Let's start with two competing compartments to pastness on the part of Hitlerism. On the one hand, Hitlerism sinks into the mire of determinism and destiny. It is so beholden to a past that the future is already written – so much so that, to quote from Levinas, "if race does not exist, one has to invent it."<sup>13</sup> This is an over-commitment to pastness (including, arguably, one's own fantasies of pastness – e.g. fantasies of pastness at play in "Make America Great Again" rallying cries) that leads to violence. On the other hand, we have an under-commitment to pastness that also leads to violence. Here we

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas makes this point in "Philosophy of Hitlerism." [Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in *Critical Inquiry*, 17(1), (1934/1990), 62-71.] In that context, Levinas is praising Christianity (and Judaism) for appropriately robust phenomenologies of pardon, and noting that a liberal (Protestant European) form of life has – in its strongly disembodied, idealizing, and abstracting tendencies – decidedly lost hold of the best of what Judeo-Christian religion has to offer in terms of pardon and, relatedly, in terms of addressing the needs of concrete embodied humans. He goes on to suggest that liberalism's inability to address embodied needs opens a path to Hitlerism's own racist "blood and soil" ability to feed those embodied human needs. For a further discussion of this point, see Sarah Pessin, "America's Love Problem: How Oprah's Call to Friendship Feeds Bannon's Call to Racism (or: On Three Strains of Liberal Lovesickness)," in *Political Theology Network*, (2018). <https://politicaltheology.com/americas-love-problem/>. Extending to our current point, we may note that where Levinas in his 1934 essay moves from a focus on what is best about Christianity (viz. concreteness and pardon) to the loss of those features in its afterlife in liberalism, our point about liberalism above will be all the harsher given that we are here inspired by Levinas' 1947 emphasis on what is worst about Christianity (viz. a loss of pastness, origins, and pardon): If what is best about Christianity gives way to a sad state in liberalism, a fortiori what is worst about Christianity gives way to an even sadder state in liberalism.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in *Critical Inquiry*, 17(1), (1934/1990). 69.

may turn to each of Habermas and Adorno on the importance of countering the politics of forgetting typified in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (i.e. mastering the past), a value on the rise in recent years and seen, for example, in a right-wing nationalist 'Alternative for Germany' figure vigorously denouncing Germany's ongoing memorialization of the Holocaust, while emphasizing instead the need for, in his words, "a 180-degree turn" when it comes to Germans' engaging their past.<sup>14</sup> In other words, and to paraphrase, "Enough with the Holocaust" according to one right-wing German nationalist whose party recently gained traction for its robust anti-Islam campaign. In response to this insufficiently robust relation to pastness, we may say instead that subjectivity and justice both reside in never thinking you can or should "master" (in the sense of box up and put away) the past—a point drawn out in Adorno's own reflection—in his use of the terms "*Aufarbeitung*" and "*Verarbeitung*"<sup>15</sup>—on two kinds of working with the past: The destructive kind of working with the past that aims to neatly master it, and the redemptive kind of working with the past that wrestles with history (the heaps of violent history envisioned, we might say, by Benjamin's Angel of History) towards critical consciousness-raising and justice. And so too in Habermas' own emphasis on the obligation of new generations of Germans to come to terms with Germany's Hitlerian past—as nothing short of providing (or robbing) people of the ability to breathe; as summarized by Thompson:

Jürgen Habermas, in his participation in the German historians' debate of the 1980s, adamantly insisted that present-day Germans have an obligation to remember and appropriately come to terms with the injustices of the Third Reich. Younger generations, he says, must 'seek to reassure themselves about a historical heritage which they, as citizens and members of a collective political life, must inherit in one way or another.'<sup>16</sup> And the dead victims of injustice have a claim to 'the weak anamnestic power of a solidarity that later generations can continue to practice only in the medium of a remembrance that is repeatedly renewed, often desperate, and continually in one's mind'. This remembrance, he thinks, is necessary so that their descendants 'can breathe in our country.'<sup>17 18</sup>

Too weak a bond to pastness leads to suffocation.

We have seen two Hitlerian failures to relate to pastness—one typified by too tight a hold one by too light a hold on a past. In turning to liberalism, we find two other failures to relate to pastness—and while to be sure liberalism's insufficiently emancipatory frames ought not be likened to Hitlerism's atrocities, liberalism can also contribute (albeit it in very different ways) to breaking the arc of justice. On the one hand, liberalism fails to critically problematize the past. In this regard, critical race and feminist theorists point

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<sup>14</sup> The speaker in question was Bjoern Hoecke in January 2017; see:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38661621>

<sup>15</sup> See Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past" in *Can One Live After Auschwitz*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Henry W. Pickford, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960/2003).

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "On the Public Uses of History," in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, ed. and trans. by Max Pensky, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. by S.W. Nicholson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 231.

<sup>18</sup> Janna Thompson, "Apology, Historical Obligations and the Ethics of Memory," in *Memory Studies*, 2(2), (1999), 198-199.

to liberalism's non-critical tendency to simply pull forward, unexplored, a number of cultural habits and conceptual dualisms – e.g. underexplored hegemonic assumptions about the private and the public – that ensure a future of ongoing subjugation for a variety of marginalized groups. On the other hand, liberalism fails to sufficiently take up the past: In any number of critiques of – including critical race and feminist theoretical approaches to – Rawlsian theories of justice (including critiques found in Charles Mills, Naomi Zack, Anthony Appiah, et al.), the liberal approach is shown to fail precisely in its abstract theory's inability to sufficiently lift up, engage, or address/redress a host of particular material oppressions and injustices (historical and ongoing) – including most egregiously in an American context against Black and Native people – at the very foundations of the system in which our "search for justice" transpires. Rawlsian thought experiments about justice administered under a veil of ignorance look dispassionately to idealized futures in ways that reveal (or perhaps better: enact) an immoral disconnect: We are encouraged to "pull up a chair" and participate in thought experiments while sitting atop ground that is thoroughly soaked with the blood of our (still actively bleeding) neighbors. The past cannot be mastered by force, nor can the suffering bodies it delivers to us daily be set to the side (even if only for a moment) as we engage in idealizations.

On this charge, liberalism flies away on a cloud of universalisms and idealisms – a concern seen too in Levinas' critique of liberalism's failing to sufficiently engage human embodiment (in this way opening the door to Hitlerian rallying cries of blood and soil), and in Sartre's damning assessment of the dangers of abstraction in his account of "the democrat" in *Anti-Semite and Jew*.<sup>19</sup> In upholding a view of "the generic, universal human being" the democrat (steeped in uncritical bourgeois values) advocates for assimilation and in this way refuses to wrestle with what Sartre calls the "concrete synthesis" of Jews, Blacks, and other lived historical identities. Indeed, with his sense of "the universal human," the universalist's valorization of assimilation becomes a form of genocide. These failings of liberalism can be highlighted, on our temporalizing frame, as failures to appropriately engage pastness – including most pressingly the particularities and histories of neighbors from racialized, marginalized, and oppressed groups. Put into our further frame, we may note a deep link between liberalism's failures with respect to pastness and White Christian "time hegemony."

Indeed, seeing in the White Christian a certain brand of time hegemony that plays out in liberal failures around racial justice, and reading in "the Jew" a signal to a more phenomenologically and politically appropriate set of relations to pastness, we are – in our efforts to hasten emancipatory change for minoritized, racialized communities – well-served to consider Rosenzweig's description of Judaism as the "no" that saves Christianity from idolatry. In his *Star of Redemption* (part 3, book 3), Rosenzweig speaks of the "eternal protest of the Jew,"<sup>20</sup> and notes that "the existence of the Jew constantly subjects Christianity to the idea that it is not attaining the goal... that it ever remains – on the way."<sup>21</sup> Judaism, in its "no" to Christianity –

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1948/1995).

<sup>20</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. by William W. Hallo, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 413.

<sup>21</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 413. My use of Rosenzweig notwithstanding, we ought remain critical of Rosenzweig's privileging of only Christianity and Judaism from among religious traditions (i.e. he speaks of Christianity and Judaism in particular as necessary and mutually inter-related cosmic realities).



which in our context is to say White (and other majority-positioned) Christianity – is prevented from its will to totality (and with it the related universalist idolatries of perfection, self-completion, and totalitarianism) precisely inasmuch as the Jew remains a Jew in all her particularity – which is itself to say (in our context) precisely inasmuch as the minoritized person refuses to assimilate into the White Christian and liberal universalist dreams of sameness. To return to my starting autobiographical frame, I might add: This is why it's a good thing to invite the voices of more scholars who are not White Christians into this and other conversations more often. Furthermore, Rosenzweig's logic of the "no" also helps us unpack the logic and dynamics of kenosis with which I end below.

##### 5. *Kenotic Key*

Enacting – in spite (or perhaps in light?) of myself – the *Christian* Christianless Christian frame of any atheological conversation, I end with kenosis.<sup>22</sup> Thinking the Jew as marker of the minoritized, racialized, oppressed Other, and carrying with us the weight of Rosenzweig's "no," we may say that the Jew (in her "no") is the kenotic site of emptying – the site of Christianity's emptying of its own father-like powers over the state and over the general Western thought-space. In this respect, we might say that every minoritized, racialized, marginalized subject (Black, Native, Muslim, Woman, Transgender, Gay, Jew, etc.) functions as a "no" to the totalizing desire of White Christianity, and with it white liberalism and various other forms of socio-political utopianisms and universalisms. The structural silencing of minoritized, racialized, marginalized subjects emerges as the kenotic space which empties White Christianity of its father-like hold on its own narrative of redemption, love, and universal human community. Contrary to Vattimo who emphasizes the kenosis of Christ in a valorization of a pluralism that comes "after Christianity," we return to our starting concern that so-called post-Christianity still bears (in its overt self-reference to Christianity even in its attempt to empty itself) a Father-like grasp on the narrative. In light of Rosenzweig's sense of the Jew serving as the subject who allows Christianity to loose its hold on its own hegemony, would we not find that it is the minoritized, racialized, marginalized subject who serves as the kenotic site of White Christianity, allowing White Christianity to have always already unavoidably lost track of its own narrative? Would we not find that it is the minoritized, racialized, marginalized subject who in this sense allows the Father, White Christianity, to avoid consuming itself in a bringing of same into same (with all the vigor of Dalí's 'Autumnal Cannibalism') through a totalizing mastery over state and thought-space? In contrast to Vattimo's declaration of Christ's kenosis as an end of hegemony, and in contrast to the similarly ironic tendency of much contemporary political theology and various flavors of post-metaphysical atheology to uphold grace, incarnation, Pauline anti-nomianism, and Christ's kenosis as signaling the ends of hegemony, we might wonder if it is instead only the moments at which White Christianity fails – fails, that is, to assimilate the bodies of minorities who are not White Christians, and fails (in related spirit) to install kenosis, the death of God, and similarly Christian constructs as the grounding markers of

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Pessin, "Kenosis, Charity, Love: On the Mystical Element in Greco-Judeo-Islamic Thought," in *English Language Notes* 56 (1), (2018), 139-152. See too Sarah Pessin, "America's Love Problem: How Oprah's Call to Friendship Feeds Bannon's Call to Racism (or: On Three Strains of Liberal Lovesickness)," in *Political Theology Network*, (2018). <https://politicaltheology.com/americas-love-problem/>

emancipation in various disciplinary lexicons – that kenotically empty Christianity (and with it, various motions of liberalism and universalism) of its constricting holds (including holds that uphold the status quo and its many structures of inequity). Christianity’s failures in this sense – along with the (God-willing) future failures of Christianity to totalize (failures made possible precisely by our “remain[ing] Jews [and other non-White-Christians] before you”)<sup>23</sup> paves a path to the liberations of justice (albeit of the non-overjoyed, Derrida-meets-Levinas, pausal variety of justice that is always yet to come).

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<sup>23</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, “A Religion For Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 14.