

“Systematic Existence Philosophy and the Problem of Autonomy: Franz Rosenzweig and the Contemporary Iranian Interpreters of Mullah Sadra in Dialogue”

Synopsis: This text outlines the challenges and precedents for thinking through the problem of human autonomy for those that accept an ontological “existence philosophy” as their operative philosophical paradigm. It offers new directions for how contemporary Iranian-Shia philosophers in the shadow of Mulla Sadra and Khomeini, and Jewish thinkers grappling with the German philosophic tradition of Idealism and Existentialism, can come into dialogue in the unique context of modern theocracy.

I. Introduction

Modern Judaism and Iranian-Twelve Shiite Islam both contain philosophic streams that can be termed “systematic existence philosophy.” The Jewish tradition is associated, on the one hand, with the German thinker Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) who melded tropes and concepts from the biblical, rabbinic, and medieval-philosophic/mystical traditions with post-enlightenment Continental European Romanticism, Neo Kantianism, and Existentialism in the attempt to push back against the Hegelian turn in continental philosophy. On the other end of the ideological spectrum of “Jewish Existentialism” lies the mystically attuned religious thought of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook (1865-1935), a rabbinic thinker originally from Odessa, Ukraine considered the ideological father of Religious Zionism who ultimately became chief rabbi of Palestine during the British Mandate. With an eclectic systematicity, Kook fused the

cosmology of Jewish mysticism with an enthusiastically embraced Hegelian Romantic Idealism.¹²

The Shiite tradition, one may say, is exemplified by the Safavid era thinker Mullah Sadra and the school he initiated in the 17th century. One may say that Sadra was chiefly responsible for the dominant subsequent trend within Shiism that would creatively and systematically appropriate the major concepts and tropes of Illuminationist thinkers such as Ibn Arabi and Sahrawardi and classical Sufism, while nevertheless

¹ Islam plays a minor, albeit striking role, in Franz Rosenzweig's magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*. (1921) In his polemical depiction of Islamic revelation as static, stultifying, and incapable of dialogic fulgrancy due to its bifurcated existence as either fundamentalist literalism or "magic," Rosenzweig displays remarkable ignorance to the scholarly literature on Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and theology available in the German academy of his time that was largely written by German-Jews. Ignaz Goldzieher's work on Shiite theology, for example, is remarkably overlooked. Rosenzweig might have been intrigued by Goldzieher's depiction of Shiism's theopolitics as resembling the Catholic Church. See Susannah Heschel's recently released *Jüdischer Islam* (Berlin, 2018) on the disproportionately copious Islamic Studies scholarship produced by German Jews in the late 19th / early 20th century before the National Socialist rise to power. It is clear, as Gil Anidjar has most expertly demonstrated in *Jew and Arab: A History of the Enemy*, (Albany: 2003), that Rosenzweig's positing of the Muslim as enemy of the Christian and Jew is an inversion of the long-standing European-Christian positing of the Arab qua Muslim as the political enemy and the Jew as the theological-racial enemy.

² As opposed to Rav Kook, who wrote in a novel but recognizably "Jewish" Hebrew language theological vocabulary, Rosenzweig's work is expressed through the language of German philosophy. It is a matter of longstanding debate in the scholarly literature about how expressly "Jewish" a thinker Rosenzweig was and the criterion one might use to evaluate such "Jewishness" in the context of German-Jewish philosophy. For a helpful overview of this discourse see Peter Eli Gordon's *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy*. (Berkeley: 2005). It is beyond the scope of this paper to make an intervention in this debate, but I place myself in the camp that views Rosenzweig within the continuum of a Jewish philosophic tradition ranging from Philo to Moses Maimonides Baruch Spinoza to Emmanuel Levinas. Writing in an idiom familiar to their philosophic contemporaries outside of the Jewish community, these thinkers were able to refashion traditional Jewish concepts with selective appropriation from the philosophic currents of their time, while redirecting those currents from the unique vantage point of Jewish particularity.

undergirding ontology as a pre-requisite for any epistemology.³ Indeed, Sadra's epistemological scheme is based on apprehending or experiencing a temporally infused divine wisdom and fulgrancy that nonetheless maintains a distinction between God and Man cum 'arif' (the mystic philosopher).⁴ Beyond the most well known 20th century Sadraists such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Allameh Tabatabai who innovatively, and many might say radically, worked within a traditional Islamic-philosophic conceptual vocabulary with some competence in Western philosophy, well known contemporary Iranian-Shiite thinkers such as Mehdi Ha'eri Yazdi, Abdol Karim Soroush, and Ahmad Fardid, along with Western based expositors of Iranian-Shiite thought such as Henry Corbin and Reza Hajatpour, have often integrated insights from the existential, phenomenological, and analytic traditions of the West in order to deepen, expand, and recast certain Sadraian tropes and concepts with varying theo-political consequences and intentions.

Inherent in the creation of an ontologically based systematic superstructure for human existence, knowledge and action is the existence of a simultaneous co-dependence

³ The other contributors to this volume, and most specifically Reza Hajatpour, Mohsen Kadivar, and Sajjad Rizvi have explicated this transition from a *Husuli* epistemology of acquisitory illumination based on hierarchy of intellects and a *Huzuri* (presential) approach centered on ontological modulations of "intensity." For an excellent recent synthesis of the theopolitical dimensions of Corbin's oeuvre see Wasserstrom, Steven. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. (Princeton: 1999). For more on the synergies between Fardid, Khomeini, and Corbin and their historical context see Ali Mirsepassi's *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: 2017).

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to make direct interventions into debates within Rosenzweig scholarship of whether Rosenzweig should be mostly considered a Romantic in the mold of Schelling (See Ernst Rubenstein's *An Episode of Jewish Romanticism: Franz Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption*. [Albany: 1999]), a Neokantian in the mold of Hermann Cohen (See Benjamin Pollock's *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy* [Cambridge: 2009]), or an Existentialist (See Gordon).

and struggle between the notion human autonomy and the paternalistic “guardianship” of the system-elucidating philosopher. While this is a tension that the tradition of political philosophy has been preoccupied with since Plato, the turn to ontology and a synthesis of the philosophic and the mystic recasts and exacerbates traditional modes of reconciling the autonomy of human reason and reasoning humans *visa vis* the superior capacities and privileged access granted to the philosopher as he maintains and cultivates the ontological groundwork for the fusion of reason and revelation within discrete time.

Indeed, any system of religious philosophy inevitably emerges from the thinker’s own privileged sense of intellectual agency to create such a systematic superstructure, an agency often imbued with an attendant religious authority. The intellectual and charismatic personhood of the philosopher is more often than not self-consciously projected through narrative or textual production existing in a continuum spanning prophetic origins and the prophets’ clerical exegete-jurist (*‘ulama/rabbis*) heirs, with their most exemplary texts emerging in eras of religiopolitical transition in which the integrity of tradition is perceived either to be at risk and/or is opportune for innovative strengthening.⁵ This textual production does not exist merely in dialogue within such an ephemeral textual landscape of extraordinarily gifted expositors with privileged access to divine wisdom and the divine law that it engenders, but is rather projected onto the

⁵ See Omer Michaelis’ recent work on *taqlīd* and the ways it defensively and opportunistically fashions and conceals radical intellectual moves that adjust boundaries of canonical knowledge in “Even of the Philosophers”: Taqlid in Maimonides’ *Dalālat al-Ḥā’irīn* and its Islamic Sources. *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah*. 2017. 7-47. (Hebrew) ” For a recent masterful exposition of the theopolitics behind Sadra’s artful textual synthesis of mysticism and philosophy against the background of anti-philosophic/mystic skepticism and the transition of the Safavid state from tribal and mystical sources of legitimacy to one buttressed by clerical authority, see Ata Anzali’s *Safavid Shi’ism, the Eclipse of Sufism and the Emergence of ‘Irfān*. (Columbia, South Carolina: 2017).

“community” of religious believers, both as members of such a collective community and as individual legal, religious, and political agents.⁶ The existence philosopher’s self conception of the meeting point between the intensity of experienced revelation, the community upon which it is projected, individual creaturely existence, and reason within the created system lies at the crux of how one can articulate a concept of autonomy within and/or in relationship to the system. For in these types of ontologically oriented systems that combine mystically or romantically inclined interiorized reasoning with “rational” philosophic reasoning, the philosopher is acutely cognizant that

“no Enlightenment-style amputation of intuition [can] occur; pure reason, that narrow faculty, [is] deemed incapable of accessing metaphysical realities *on its own*, though of great utility in processing prophetically- or mystically-revealed data into a coherent system.”⁷

In explicating the theo-political implications of systematic existence philosophy, reason’s “incapability of accessing metaphysical realities on its own” lies at the crux of whether one believes that the ontological realities set forth by the system of existence philosophy mandates a theocratic polity headed by a sovereign individual capable of uniting the figures of philosopher king, mystic master, and religious jurisconsult. Such a sovereign is capable of epistemically orienting human reason to its ontological groundwork, thereby allowing the system to function optimally in the face of challenges to its constitutional and circulatory health.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of this transition in the Jewish tradition, especially in connection with our current concern related to the problem of autonomy, see Kenneth Seeskin’s *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: 2001) Chapters 3 (“From Prophet to Sage”) and 4 (“From Sage to Philosopher”).

⁷ Melvin-Koushi, Matthew. Review of “Safavid Shi‘ism, the Eclipse of Sufism and the Emergence of ‘Irfān,” Rice University Dissertation. <<http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/9248> > (2014)

This chapter is meant to put contemporary political interpreters of Shiite existence philosophy who have attempted to push back against such a theocratic imperative and its attendant epistemic “Monopolsanspruch” (demand for monopoly) emerging from the system of existence philosophy while nonetheless embracing an ontology based system fusing philosophy and mysticism into dialogue with the Jewish tradition of existence-philosophy exemplified by Franz Rosenzweig.⁸ Building his philosophic system out of a rejection of a perceived theocratic epistemic monopoly emerging from a secularized Christianity embedded in Hegel’s theory of state, and in contradistinction to the messianic dimension of Jewish-Zionist political theology that had been forged via the interaction between European Idealist, Romantic, and Existentialist thought, Rosenzweig emphasized that the nature of his existence-based system resists any type of totalizing systematicity, a system whose ontological energy and health was not dependent upon the preservation of an epistemic monopoly by any particular religion or secularized theology of the state.⁹

⁸ The desire for a “Epistemische Monopolsanspruch” is one of the eight components of arguments on behalf of theocracy in his conceptual introduction to a collected volume of essays *Theokratie und Theokratischer Diskurs: die Rede von der Gottesherrschaft und ihre politisch-sozialen Auswirkungen im interkulturellen Vergleich*

(Tübingen: 2011) The other elements of the theocratic argument, according to Trampedach, are specific concepts of divine revelation, a determination of the relative holiness of those tasked with carrying out the commands of revelation, the constellation of political ideas present at a given moment in history, the reality of existent political and religious institutions, dominant theologies of history, conceptions of a “righteous” and “sin free” way of life (a factor which renders politically quietist religious stances potentially theocratic), and a concept of theopolitical violence.⁸

⁹ Rosenzweig’s two main works are his 1898 dissertation *Hegel und der Staat* and *The Star of Redemption*. There is, however, a gap in the Rosenzweig literature in that there has been no sustained conceptual study systematically detailing the emergence of the latter work from the former, though Rosenzweig’s anti-Hegelianism or Hegelian debt is often thematized.

Thus I will first highlight the contours of the general problem of the individual autonomy vis-à-vis religion and politics, while proceeding to depict how the problem of autonomy should always be considered a “present absent” in the traditions of systematic existence philosophy. I will then delineate how this dilemma has played out in debates regarding the religiopolitical epistemological structures emerging out of Franz Rosenzweig’s thought along with the tradition of Shiite existence philosophy, particularly as it pertains to contemporary Iranian Shiism’s revolutionary synthesis of existence-based ontology and law via a new form of esoteric statecraft rooted in a politicization of the “*Wilaya*” (Guardianship) principle. And I will conclude by musing on the way that political thinkers in both the Iranian-Shiite and Jewish contexts can use the traditions of existence philosophy to rejuvenate notions of individual autonomy rather than sublimate it within either pure religious subjectivity divorced from agency in the public sphere and/or a theocratic state.

II. Guardianship and Autonomy

The medieval political-philosophic tradition, upon which the political castings of both contemporary Iranian Twelver Shiite and, to some extent Jewish, existence- philosophy is grafted, is epitomized by the Islamic and Jewish *falaasifa* such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Averroes and dialectical theologians like Al-Ghazali and Judah Halevi. While a figure like al-Farabi renders politics and law into structures molded and at the service of those engaged in philosophic speculation, and “both Jews and Muslims saw Plato’s ideal republic, ruled by a philosopher and geared to nurtur[ing] future philosophers as their

model,” scholars such as George Tamer have carefully demonstrated that the medieval Muslim philosophers did not intend for the coercive reign of religion via the apparatus of a state melded indistinguishably into its sovereign superstructure.¹⁰ Their idea of rule by divine law (theocracy), filtered through the rule of reason (nousocracy), and the rule of a discrete system of laws (nomocracy) serves to “maximize the autonomy of the community” via exoteric praxis.¹¹ The medieval Jewish or Islamic proponents of “philosophic religions,” according to Carlos Fraenkel, saw religious philosophers as the ultimate guardians of a theo-legal system whose ultimate aim was to ensure the proper cultivation of the soul amongst potentially all citizens—whether in the context of a state or political entity, or a religious community within the state bound together by a normativity distinct from the state while occasionally reliant on it.¹²

The dilemma put forth by Daniel Frank in his influential volume “Jewish Philosophy and Autonomy” is truly at the crux of the matter in thinking about the political autonomy of the individual via Rosenzweig and his system of systems, and the problem of individual political autonomy in Shiite Islam in the aftermath of the religion’s turn to “existence philosophy”. Is autonomy generated by a human reason that stands outside of, and is in some respects, generative of, the norms and structures that form the script of political community per the medieval Muslim philosophers. Or does the

¹⁰ Tamer, George. *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne. Leo Strauss und die Islamische Quellen*. (Leiden: 2011) Chapter 6. Tamer careful philological work challenges the political-theological interpretation of Leo Strauss that draws a straight line between Farabi and Plato. Contrast this interpretation with Farabi scholarship in the Islamic Republic of Iran that posits just such a religiopolitical conflation.

¹¹ Trampedach, Kai. *Theocracy or Anthropocracy: On Political Constitution in Antiquity* 11-13 in *Politics and Law: Jewish and Islamic Thought between the Poles of Theocracy and Theology*. Tamer, G. Hajatpour, R. and Meyer, T. eds (forthcoming) & Frankel, Carlos. “*Theocracy and Autonomy in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophy*.” *Political Theory* 38(3):340-366. 2010

¹² Fraenkel, Carlos. *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza* (Cambridge: 2012)

existential script of political community, inclusive as it may be sometimes of human reason at various intensities, form the epistemological reference point and substantiating content of the autonomy of the individuals who live in it. ¹³ In other words, where is the autonomous generative locus of political sovereignty located, or primarily located. Who has access and possession of it? And who gets to decide whether the script of the theopolitical play is sustaining a successful performance? Is it possible to risk a disastrous, or merely bad, performance, or is there a point when the level of risk becomes so untenable as to overturn a longstanding a religious abstention from using political coercion in order to protect the sphere of religion and/or to turn politics into a construct of holy significance? How should we evaluate a philosophic religion's capacity to provide guardianship in a modern world that claims it can live *reasonably* well without it? ¹⁴

The solution put forth by Leo Strauss to this modern dilemma accords the philosophers the first version of autonomy and the power of shaping the communal script with both reason as an element external to society that flourishes in alienation and is protected by fundamentalist religion. The “subjectivity,” if we may call it that, of the masses of believers and citizens is enmeshed in the script cast by the philosophers via an apparatus of esoteric *technika* that attempts to orient the state and its Law through their decisionistic determinations of the people's readiness to let reason play a more prominent role in undergirding and fashioning the communal script of state Law. Strauss solution aims to manage the risks inherent in the dangerous relationship between these two

¹³ Frank, Daniel. *Autonomy and Judaism: The Individual and Community in Jewish Philosophical Thought*. (Albany: 1992) Introduction

¹⁴ Fraenkel, Carlos. *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*. (Cambridge: 2013) 36-37

categories of individuals. According to political philosopher John McCormick this constitutes Strauss' argument for an atheistic theocracy in the context of modernity.¹⁵

Yet Strauss' method is based on the perfectibility of human reason as achieved by a select few via an "acquired" epistemology from a negatively transcendent God is indeed the approach developed by the tradition of medieval Islamic philosophy indebted to Neoplatonism which was mentioned at the beginning of this piece. It's hard to believe that an existence-philosopher such as Rosenzweig would endorse such a model. Judah Halevi, a figure towards whom Rosenzweig had a profound proclivity, had a notion of individual autonomy that was much more radically circumscribed than even Maimonides would have considered kosher. Ehud Krinis, in his groundbreaking work *God's Chosen People: Yehuda Halevy and the Shiite Imami Doctrine*, has demonstrated the exhaustiveness of Halevy's effort to bring Judaism away from the approach of the medieval Islamic philosophers and towards the mystically infused theo-political apparatus of (Ismaeli/Twelve) Shiism and Sufism. As Shlomo Pines wrote in his groundbreaking article "Shiite Terms and Concepts in Yehuda Halevy's *Kuzari*," which Krinis fleshes out in his book, Halevi scornfully opposes any notion of the unity of the human species or the equality of individuals as suggested by the Khazar King to the rabbi. Quoting Pines

the *Kuzari* situates the Jewish rabbi as a defender of revelatory religion and of the possibility of divine **contact** with the mundane. This position invokes a

¹⁵ McCormick, John. "Post-Enlightenment Sources of Political Authority: Biblical Atheism, Political Theology and the Schmitt-Strauss Exchange," *History of European Ideas* 37:2 (June 2011) 175-80.

strict hierarchical premise that places the receivers of divine revelation on a separate and higher stratum in relation to the rest of humanity—a hierarchical difference analogous to that between human beings and animals.”¹⁶

Yet Rosenzweig, I would think, rejects both such “politically” esoteric approaches to revelation—1) a concept of revelation rooted in divine transcendence and revelation via reason for the autonomous philosophers and a coercive religiolegal script for the masses 2) the other a concept based on the imminence of divine contact for the mystically initiated learned chosen and the rendering of the “chosen” masses into herds. This is the case no matter how richly Halevy believed that the subjective religious soul of the individual believer could be cultivated by Hebrew lyricism rooted in love of God and the Land of Israel as a “top up” to the law.

So is Rosenzweig’s capable of offering us a way out? I believe the best place to look for resources that can empower a mode of normative Rosenzweigian political thinking, particularly as it concerns, system and autonomy, is the tradition of religiopolitical thought emerging in Iranian-Shiism out of, and against, the philosophic underpinnings of politicized Shiism advanced by the most politically significant existence philosopher of all, Ruhollah Khomeini. And I believe those Shiite thinkers convinced of Sadraian existence philosophy’s systematic strength can find resources in Franz Rosenzweig’s thought to maintain the system’s health without coercive theocratic authority accorded to a philosophic guardian deemed most expertly versed in the system’s language, a philosopher capable of grafting it

¹⁶ Krinis, Ehud. *God’s Chosen People: Judah Halevi and the Shiite Imami Doctrine*. (Begijnhof: 2014)

onto a polity ruled by law emanating from his charismatic personage with the aim of creating an epistemic monopoly capable of maximizing the system's revelatory fulgrancy for the lives of those acting as agents within it.

III. Autonomous Agents and Agency in Rosenzweig's Thought

One would be hard pressed to say that Rosenzweig deals with human political autonomy in any direct, meaningful fashion. Rosenzweig presents a number of exceptional individual archetypes whose mode of individuations are key to the exposition or implosion of knowledge, though the recipients of such knowledge appear to fall into the background. They include the philosopher who must stand before death and resist the temptation of mystic union with the divine, the master teacher-scholar of the Jewish house of learning, and, "an artist without art", (*ein Künstler ohne Kunst*), all of whom, one must assume, Rosenzweig identified within his own personhood.

Yet with Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, his magnum opus, we are dealing essentially with Judaism and Christianity as independent systems, whose internal components and coordinates have been re-ordered and refashioned to resist the temptation to unify or dissolve all epistemic splits and openings and to harness the intensity of revelation into life. Rosenzweig's "political" interpreters have attempted, in variegated fashions, to retrieve a notion of human autonomy, primarily in Rosenzweig's connection and correction to the imperative of dialogic subjectivity arising out of Neokantian thought and a notion of epistemic incompleteness.¹⁷ Alternatively, they highlight Rosenzweig's ideal community of creaturely individuals immersed in fulgrant

¹⁷ Gibbs, Robert. *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*. (Princeton: 1994)

religious subjectivity yet fortified against the idolatry of self and other.¹⁸ These are communities of religiously educated individuals resisting the claims to totality claimed by Christianity and/or the State—along with Jews who are collectively resisting the temptation for withdrawal from concrete historical time. In the realm of religious law, one can speak of the autonomy Rosenzweig accords the *Ba'al Tshuva* (the Jew who returns to a religious way of life) in accepting the sovereignty of God's obligatory commanding law anew.

These rich interventions regarding the political, the dialogic, and the law, however, only begin to address the problematic absence of the “political autonomy” of the individual in Rosenzweig's thought and offer building blocks for political arguments within the public sphere. This is disconcerting given that many of the current political exigencies facing the Jewish people have emerged from the fusion of Hegelian teleology and a decisionistic synthesis of mystical and philosophic existentialism—namely the theocratic idea designed by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hacoheh Kook and fleshed out into ideology, jurisprudence, and a political program of Religious Zionism by his disciples. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the ideational underpinnings of Rav Kook's own appropriation of Hegelian and Romantic metaphysics and fusing them with

¹⁸ Batnitzky, Leora. *Idolatry and Representation*. The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered. (Princeton: 1997). Other prominent contemporary scholars that try to think about politics alongside Rosenzweig include Honig, Bonnie. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law and Democracy* (Princeton: 2009), Santner, Eric. (particularly due to his exposition on a political-theological concept of “Creatureliness”) in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*. (Chicago: 2001.) Also see the author's “Living the Truth of a Free Europe: Community, Philosophy, and Responsibility in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin.” in *The Rosenzweig Jahrbuch 3: The Idea of Europe*. “ (Freiburg/München: 2008)

the substrate of Jewish philosophy and his own charismatic personage as the philosopher-prophet par excellence.¹⁹ Yet, the Shiite context, with its theocratic corporealizations of existence philosophy and philosophers who have directly assumed power in its defense, can be a valuable interlocutor.

IV. The Shiite Context

The Shiite-Islamic philosophic and mystical traditions fused in the Safavid-era 17th century thought of Mullah Sadra. In the shadow of a consolidating clerical hierarchy vis-à-vis the Safavid Shas, Sadra's thought is considered to inaugurate a tradition of "existence philosophy" (although Sadra "school" is argued by many to be a contemporary invention), a philosophy based on ontological "intensities" of creation and epistemologies tied to revelation guided to a substantive sensory perception rather than the illuminationist "acquisition based" Neoplatonically rooted models of the Middle Ages.²⁰ Like Rosenzweig, one cannot say that Sadra has an explicitly "political philosophy" ala Farabi, and any social thought advanced can be found in a single treatise concerning education. Sadra was never used in any direct way to justify the direct clerical assumption of coercive power in the absence of the Imams, though many a sociologist would argue that rationalization of Sufism and Shiite theology through philosophy that he developed offered philosophic

¹⁹ For such an excellent introduction to Kook's life and thought see Mirsky, Yehuda. *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*. (New Haven: 2014)

²⁰ For a recent attempt to systematically explicate "political" thinking based on Sadra's conception of Divine Law, see Jambet, Christian. *Le gouvernement divin. Islam et Conception Politique du Monde*. (Paris: 2016)

succor to the consolidation of the authority of a clerical class as it relates to the state.

Yet, the revolutionary legal theosophy of the Islamic Republic, which fuses acquired and imminent knowledge, the nous and the sein, within a theocratic legal nomos, partially yet significantly builds off Sadra. It takes the unprecedented step in linking “the Law” to the Sadrian fusion- thereby obliterating the politically quietist position of the clerical establishment who refused to do so. The revolutionary clerics, given their self-perceived supreme ability to identify “perfect humans” capable of uniting the intensity of *Vahdat al-Wujud* (unity of existence) with the law, who claim a capability to determine “the intensity” of the political community’s saturation with the divine within the system set up by Sadra. ²¹Khomeini’s philosophic-mystical synthesis is a self-reflexive “absolute conception of existence as reality without limits that comprehends all things and is the sole way of conceiving a divinity that is infinite and omnipresent.”²² They possess the capacity and ability to emerge out of the category of “masses,” and, through fashioning the laws of a polity undergirded ontologically and mimetically referenced on an epistemological level by the existence based system, they are able to fulfill the Shiite imperative of *Wilāya*, or guardianship by allowing for a form of human autonomy leading towards “true” felicity.

²¹ The idea of *vahdat-e vujud*, however, is particularly unpopular with most of the clergy, although it is supported with numerous qualifications by those who defend the Sadrean synthesis of philosophy and mysticism. I thank Prof. Muhammad Legenhausen for his insights in this regard.

²² Bonaud, Christian. *L’Imam Khomeyni, un gnostique méconnu du XXe siècle. Métaphysique et théologie dans lesœuvres philosophiques et spirituelles de l’Imam Khomeyni*. (Beirut: 1997) 233 Translation is my own.

Despite its multiplicity of meanings, the term *Wilāya* consists of a corollary dynamic between the divine and the learned, and the learned and “the people,” both as collectives and as individuals.”²³ As a principle that can be said to exist at the fulcrum of each religious sub-discipline (jurisprudence, theology, law, philosophy, exegesis etc), *Wilāya* is indeed a core principle dynamic that has the potential to strain a largely accepted divide between the realms of “religion” and “coercive politics,” as has been demonstrated by the emergence of the principle of *Velāyat-e Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult). This is an ideational complex that complexly, though not without some degree of tension, synthesizes the *Wilāya* concepts within each discipline into an overarching political theology, with the charismatic personhood of the philosopher-mystic fully melded with religious-juridical authority and installed as the epistemic fulcrum of a theocratic polity.

The theocratic argument propagated both against the rapidly secularizing despotic Pahlavi State of the Shah and the quietist tradition of religious authority in favor of the Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult is formulated by its supporters on two levels. An exoteric argument rooted in *Fiq*, or Law (as opposed to *Usūl-al Fiq*- jurisprudence) which states that it is only “reasonable” –from the pivotal principle of *‘aql*--that coercive political power be assumed in the Hidden Imam’s absence in order to fulfill the legal obligation of *Wilāya* as religious authorities—that religious leaders are the “guardians” of the people as if they were minors whose

²³ Indeed, any Persian language source engaging in an overview of *Wilāya* will offer 30 or so different definitions and Persian translations for the word including master, owner, friend, and sign. All imply some type of “correlative” dimension. See, for example, the introduction to Mohsen Kadivar’s *Hukūmate Velāyī* (The Guardianship Government (Tehran: 2008) and Chapter one of Mohsen Shafai’s *Shu’ūn Velāyat* (trns. Conditions of Guardianship) (Tehran: 2007)

parents assume the responsibility for creating an environment where the children won't sin without knowing it..” This, however, does not make such rule “theocratic,” or a direct rule of divine law. What brings this rationalistic and fairly derivative “self evidentness” into the realm of the innovatively theocratic is its formulation within and deployment outside of the tradition of rationalized Islamic mysticism. As Ashk Dahlen noted, “by according philosophy full equality with jurisprudence among the traditional sciences, where the two are considered different manifestations of the same truth emanating from the same source, Khomeini’s essential objective was to integrate social norms with higher mystical values.”²⁴

V. Nodes of Exchange: An Initial Sketch

As Rosenzweig noted in *The Star of Redemption*, the modern coercive state is, in its non-critically deconstructed form, not merely a passive vehicle for inaugurating this revolutionary upheaval in the epistemological underpinnings of the law. It operates, rather, an ideal conduit for facilitating the relationship between these esoteric Platonic Philosopher kings and the proletariat masses they must protect from sin and whose path to truly autonomous felicity they must keep open, between an old law not fully dependent on either “reason” or “existence” or “the State” and a new law that melds all three via a personalistic gnostic conduit and an attendant decisionistic system of positive law. As Rosenzweig wrote in his third chapter of the Star,

²⁴ Dahlen Ashk. *Islamic Law, Epistemology, and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in 20th Century Iran*. (London: 1993) Chapter 5.

“Coercion provides life with legal redress against law. By being coercive itself, the state remains hard on the heels of life. The point of all coercion is to institute new law. It is not the denial of law as one might think under the spell of cataclysmic behavior; on the contrary, it lays the basis for law. But a paradox lurks in the idea of a new law. Law is essentially old law. In the coercive act, the law constantly becomes new law. And the state is thus equally both lawful and coercive, refuge of the old law and the source of the new...At every moment the state is forcibly deciding the contradiction between conservation and renovation, between old law and new. It thus constantly resolves the contradiction, *while the course of the people’s life only delays the solution through the onward flow of time*. The State attacks the problem, indeed the State is itself nothing but the constant resolution of this contradiction.”²⁵

So where have Iranian scholars of Shiite Islam looked to retrieve the power of human autonomy rooted in both autonomous individual human reason and the script of community? Abdul Karim Soroush, a philosopher heavily indebted to Kant and Popper considered to be one of the foremost religious intellectuals of the post-revolutionary period, has sought to undermine the discursive power of “the esoteric” and its power to unite philosophy and law via “*wilāya*” of the supreme jurisconsult against the autonomy of human reason. He has also turned to the tradition of Persian literature as a parallel source for the creation of religious and political subjectivity and autonomy, tapping into the dual presence of Arabic and Persian as languages connected alternately to worldly revelation and the transcendent afterlife, law and love, that are intended to undermine the absolute claims of one script, or one mode of religion, against the other. Prophecy is revolutionarily reconceived as moving away from the exclusive purview of the prophet-law giver (Mohammed) and is granted to the poet whose verse reveals esoteric content on both aesthetic and substantive levels, thereby undermining the

²⁵ Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Part 3

notion of the “open secret” of a theocracy based on clerical possession of esoteric knowledge that has nonetheless been completely textualized.²⁶ Ascribing the master-lyricist Rumi, and the Persian language with which he writes, with the power of translating divine prophecy out of the Arabic and away from Mohammed and thereby expanding prophetic experience via a theosophic aesthetics of love is a claim that many traditional Iranian clerics have declared as heresy.²⁷

Indeed, Rosenzweig also envisioned a dual and complimentary role for Hebrew and German in intensifying the ontic energy of revelation towards the eternity of redemption and the precariousness of temporality by virtue of the very necessity for translation from a divine (Hebrew) to a temporal language (German) that nonetheless lyrically enhances the former, removing its claim on the totality of human experience and granting agency to the individual to interpret divine command even though the individual is “always checked by the community- past, present and future.”²⁸

Another oppositional Iranian thinker now living in Germany, Reza Hajatpour, has focused on the notions of “creaturliness” and the notions of substantive motion, buttressing its long-standing “non-Political” standing with a notion of “accepting the risk” of the non-political.

“ Alongside the primacy of existence, substantive motion, (*al-haraka al-Jawhariya*) plays a key role in Sadra’s philosophy. Substantive motion also has a transcendental purpose. It connects the other-worldly with the world. It propels material towards the intellect, multiplicity towards singularity, appearance towards reality, the deficient towards perfection, all the while

²⁶ Soroush, Abdolkarim *Velāyat-e Bāṭani ve Velāyat-e Siyāsī* (Esoteric Guardianship and Political Guardianship).

²⁷ See Soroush’s 2016 interviews on the BBC Persian series “Pargar.”

²⁸ Batnitzky, L. 116.

combining permanent renewal with eternal life inside of its unstable nature . It is the conduit whereby God brings forth new creation and anchors it in nature. Yet in Sadra’s existence philosophy, substantive motion along with permanent creation does not only have a narrow eschatological meaning, it also implies the relationship between the imperfect and the volatile on the one hand, and the absolute perfect essence. The deficient essence captured by the non-Being can hope for an eternal life through continual renewal **and autonomy.** “²⁹

Shiite *Wilāya*, according to Hajatpour, must always “risk” failure and powerlessness given that the imperative of *Wilāya* will always put the heirs of the imams in judgement of the Political. Indeed, sometimes the hardest job is to do nothing at all. To step back before crossing the line. To leave a system in place with the knowledge that human reason is both self-generative in a creaturely ontological sense AND cultivatable in a revelatory one. Hence there is no need for the coercive intervention of a clerical director functioning as an “insider” / “outsider.” Old law can become new law without the coercive State being hard on the heels of life. Hajatpour posits the permanent dilemma of whether the ontological freedom of the “act of being” as well as the freedom of the soul implies a religious and ethical freedom. That is whether the actual “Man” (as opposed to the concept of man) in Sadra’s existentialist philosophy can determine and fashion the extent and degree of his faith and ethical life---or whether an ontological conception of such freedom implies a boundary being set between itself and the ability of an individual to freely determine his position on the path towards cultivated perfection.

Rosenzweig, like Hajatpour, also expounds upon a notion of the “deficient essence” longing for continual renewal. Building off of German philosophers such as

²⁹ Hajatpour, Reza. Introduction to the current volume

Schelling, viewed the concept of “transcendent immanence” as originally emerging from the creation of the world. He postulated that the world was created through God contracting onto himself and withdrawing from a remnant of his being. This remnant, a remnant plagued by deficiency, is the very world we live in. Thus divinity is infused into the world, even though God’s essence remains outside of it. God reenters the world through the miracle of revelation, an act which mimics creation in that it insists on both the violent creation of an entirely new normative order based on God’s will, and the capacity of man as a religious being to philosophically recognize that such a normative rupture is indeed possible. That is why Rosenzweig defines the miracle of divine revelation as a “*Vergeweltigung Gottes*,” literally translated as “God making himself world.” This German linguistic formulation mimics the word for miracle in Hebrew: *Nes*. For the root of this Hebrew word is also present in the word for rape- A.N.S. (*Vergewaltigung*, or in Hebrew, *ones*). Thus the revelatory miracle is to be considered a violent penetration of the world by a transcendent God. Rosenzweig posits such a violent penetration of normativity as a challenge to philosophy. The philosophic tradition, according to Rosenzweig, is profoundly afraid of the miracle because it presents the challenge of an entirely new normativity as mandated by a divinity. It is the promise of a system that deliberately never sees completion, and thus is open to both renewal from a transcendent God and autonomous action.

VI. Conclusion

Rosenzweig turned away from the political and legal philosophy of his teacher Hermann Cohen, who emphasized the modern state as an inculcator and guardian of ethics through the architecture of its laws—the concept of *Rechtsstaat*--and pivoted toward a Jewish community and its own religious learning and law as the guardian of the individual Jew and his spiritual, and in this sense, intellectual cultivation. Rosenzweig had a metaphysical notion of the interaction between Judaism and Christianity, and rooted his political critique of current events from that vantage point. Like Sadra, he viewed social, spiritual, and intellectual life as intertwined in existential being—and could not step outside these processes for providing a systematic explication of political life. It is my hope that this initial pairing of Rosenzweig with the Iranian-Shiite context and its explicit struggle for human autonomy in light of existence-philosophy's coercive theocratic turn initiated by some of its most profound interpreters can prove useful. It may possibly allow both Jewish and Iranian-Shiite thinkers to more creatively develop political-theological concepts and arguments that embrace a strong yet dispersed notion of human autonomy and epistemic diversity while nonetheless embracing the existential fullness represented by ontologically grounded systems of philosophy infused with the divine.

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