

Rafael Zawisza,
Ludger Hagedorn
(eds.)

»*Faith in
the World*«

Post-Secular
Readings of
Hannah Arendt

»Faith in the World«

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Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt

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Ludger Hagedorn and Rafael Zawisza, Berlin/Vienna, August 2021

Editorial Note

All the biblical quotations come from the standard version of the King James Bible.

Italicized non-foreign words in quotations signify original emphasis.

Faith in the World or: The Philosophical Contraband of a Hidden Spiritual Tradition

An Introduction by Rafael Zawisza and Ludger Hagedorn

On the 7th day of Tevet, 5687, Gershom Scholem wrote, from Jerusalem, a letter addressed to Franz Rosenzweig, who at that time was already unable to speak. It was at the invitation of Martin Buber and Ernst Simon that Scholem composed this text, one among forty prepared by Rosenzweig's friends. In Germany, it was the 26th of December, 1926, just one day after Christmas. Characteristically, Scholem wrote this letter about the »renaissance« of the Hebrew language... in German. It is a unique document that captures an extraordinary moment, when new inhabitants of Palestine—themselves speaking all the languages of the world, including Yiddish, Polish, Russian and German—prepared the first generation of young people who, not having any other common tongue, would speak only Hebrew, this reborn language in which they would have to live and love, laugh and swear. Scholem is aware of the cruelty inscribed in the fate of those newcomers: »a generation of transition,« doomed to »live within that language above an abyss.« He repeatedly writes to Rosenzweig about »our children,« although he never had any of his own—it is clearly the kind of voice that comes from a father of a nation, a patriarch who awaits his progeny with a gaze full of passion, hope and, above all, fear. Scholem noticed that the Hebrew spoken in the streets was often a »ghostly language« (*gespenstische Sprache*) that created an »expressionless linguistic space« (*ausdruckslose Sprachwelt*), a space he saw as arising from a secularization that he fiercely rejected: »the secularization of the language is no more than a *manner of speaking*, a ready-made expression. It is impossible to empty the words so bursting with meaning, unless one sacrifices the language itself.«

It was due to a justified fear for that crucial generation—who would have to live without tradition in an »abyss« (*Abgrund*) and »emptiness« (*Leere*)—that Scholem, in his letter, made such a powerful proclamation of faith in the autonomous life of *names*, stored in the holy language, always ready to erupt with revolutionary force. Scholem wanted to believe that when this hidden »force« of sacred language is evoked daily, even if unconsciously,

that it does have unforeseeable consequences »[b]ecause at the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke God in a thousand ways, thus calling Him back into the reality of our life, He cannot keep silent.«¹

Just four years later, in 1930, Hannah Arendt co-authored with her then husband, Günther Stern, an essay dedicated to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which also touched upon the topic of secularization. The authors observed that since Jewish and Christian religions were of an acoustic character—one has to listen to God—modernity brings a specific crisis whose final result is not a logical passage to atheism but rather a »religious ambiguity« (Arendt and Stern 2007, 3). The fact that God is no longer audible can be interpreted as God's hiddenness or God's non-existence. Our time is characterized by »the absence of an echo« (ibid., 1). In stark contrast to Scholem, who expected God to speak again through Hebrew, the twenty-four-year-old Arendt dismissed the idea that God could ever speak again. Secularization doesn't lead to one particular destination that can be known in advance but, at the same time, it is a process that cannot be undone once it has happened. »The absence of an echo,« with its double negation, is the most salient metaphor for a God who has evaporated, or better yet, a God whom the various sonars of the Enlightenment revealed as »residing« beyond the boundaries of Creation. It is as if there was a very thick wall, impenetrable to any sound coming from outside the world.

Although she rarely recorded strictly personal views in her *Denktagebuch* (thought journal), Arendt made the following entry in May of 1965:

Since I was seven years old, I have always thought of God [*an Gott gedacht*], but I have never really thought about God [*über Gott*]. I have often wished that I no longer had to go on living, but I have never posed the question of the meaning of life (Arendt 2016, II, 641).²

The enigmatic nature of these words notwithstanding, Arendt expresses here a characteristically Jewish response to a post-Christian modern nihilism, one which culminates in the thought that without God life has no meaning and that everything is permissible. From this point of view, nihilism and tradi-

1 Quoted from the translation by Ora Wiskind (Scholem 1990). The letter was found in March 1985 in Scholem's papers by Stéphane Mosès and the same year published for the first time by him in French. For the German original, see Brocke 1986.

2 It seems that Hannah Arendt was a speculative thinker since the age of seven, which is not surprising. We know that around that time she honestly said to rabbi Hermann Vogelstein, a family friend, that she did not believe in God. The wise rabbi responded: »And who asked you?« (Young-Bruehl 2004, 10). All the biographical information we provide comes from Young-Bruehl's biography of Arendt.

tionalism are nothing but two sides of the same coin. Arendt's question is not how to rebuild a religious worldview or how to restore the vision of nature (*physis*) as sacred—something which was exactly the goal of Leo Strauss' philosophy. Instead, Arendt poses the question in this way: After the demise of metaphysics (closely connected to the Western concept of religious transcendence), must humanity necessarily conform to an absolutely secularized immanence? Hence, the central difficulty lies not in the disappearance of God but in a human *nostalgia for the absolute*. Hannah Arendt's response to that was to rescue the world even while God seemed completely irretrievable.

Historical Panorama

Born in 1906, Hannah Arendt grew up into a Jewish secular family from Königsberg. Although her parents were non-religious, they allowed young Hannah to attend synagogue in the company of her maternal grandparents, who belonged to Reform Judaism (*liberales Judentum*). She mainly learned about Christianity at school and was impressed by stories about Jesus. Later, when she was a teenager, Arendt became a dedicated reader of Søren Kierkegaard, which can be seen as the initial signs of her interest in theology. In 1924, in Berlin, she attended the lectures of Romano Guardini, a Catholic theologian who only reinforced her passion for Kierkegaard. Arendt then studied philosophy and theology with Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann until she left Marburg for Freiburg in the spring of 1926 to study with Edmund Husserl. In Freiburg she met Karl Jaspers who would become the supervisor of her doctoral dissertation, which was defended in the autumn of 1928 and published in Berlin in 1929 under the title *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation*. Many themes from the dissertation migrated into her post-war oeuvre in different theoretical languages. In a 1964 televised interview, she told Günter Gaus that studying theology and philosophy »fit together in such a way that for me they both belonged together. I had some misgivings only as to how one deals with this if one is Jewish... how one proceeds. I had no idea, you know. I had difficult problems that were then resolved by themselves« (Arendt 2013, 15).

Although secularization wasn't Arendt's central topic in the 1930s, almost all of her writings from that period revolve around the concept of a *godless world*. In 1930, on the fifteen hundredth anniversary of Augustine's death,

she wrote a short article entitled »Augustin und der Protestantismus« in which she complained that the Protestant world was not adequately celebrating this important figure, unlike the Catholics, who, »[i]n calling him *Saint* Augustine, [...] [have] confiscated him as their own« (Arendt 1994a, 24). Arendt called Catholicism »a distortion of original Christianity« (ibid., 27); by contrast, she saw Protestantism (similarly to Max Weber) as the vehicle through which Augustine's most crucial anthropological »discovery«—inwardness—came to our times in the form of a deeply introspective and psychological type of Western man (Goethe, autobiographies, novels). This religious achievement, in the last stage of its metamorphosis, became »autonomous self-development« (ibid., 27).

In the same year, in her long review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideologie und Utopie* (published in 1929 and entitled »Philosophie und Soziologie«), Arendt criticized the author's Marxist approach and defended philosophy as irreducible to any particular socio-economical »position,« insisting instead that »philosophy's transcendence« (Arendt 1994b, 30) is another name for human freedom. Defending this freedom, Arendt, just like in *Der Liebesbegriff*, disassociated the concept of the absolute from that of transcendence, which might be an echo of her vision of a non-absolute God. What is more, she referred to the example of early Christianity, chiliastic movements and Franciscan tradition in order to demonstrate that the experience of human »homelessness« in the world began with apocalypticism and, thus, is older than capitalist alienation.

Another highly significant example of Arendt's early interventions is her 1932 article entitled »Adam Müller-Renaissance?« Studying German Romanticism at the time, she wrote the article to register a protest against the growing tendency of academics to search for precursors of Nazi ideology in Romanticism. Insisting that the thought of the Catholic thinker, Adam Müller (1779—1829), cannot be adopted into fascism, Arendt wrote a piece of theological critique borrowed from Erich Przywara (1889—1972), an anti-Nazi Jesuit theologian of Polish-German descent. Przywara was invoked by Arendt because, although she could not herself embrace a theological point of view (especially not a Christian one), she wanted to direct an appeal to Christians, particularly Catholics, to oppose Nazism.

In 1932, she published two articles dealing with Jewish and Christian roads to secularization; the first one was entitled »Aufklärung und Judenfrage« and the second »Søren Kierkegaard.« Then, in 1935, Arendt published »A Guide for Youth: Martin Buber,« where, in an untypical manner, she

praised Buber as the one who gave Jewish tradition a new life (not for her but for the youth). The idea of an unofficial tradition being clandestinely transmitted was first presented in her 1944 essay »The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition.« We can only speculate what happened during the war, but as we have seen, Arendt was both already detached from religion years before the Shoah and attempting to create a hidden tradition for secularity. This was surely inspired by her exchange with Gershom Scholem, which culminated in 1948 with Arendt's enthusiastic review of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* entitled »Jewish History, Revised,« in which the author expressed her admiration for the Jewish heterodox movement initiated by Sabbatai Tsevi.

The secularizing passage from religion to culture in Arendt's writings was first thematized by Martine Leibovici (Leibovici 2003), who pointed at the 1947 essay »Creating Cultural Atmosphere« as the programmatic manifesto of Arendtian secularism. In it, Arendt called for a reinvigoration of Jewish secular culture by Yiddish literature. The essay includes a general explanation of the secularization process: »Culture, as we understand it today, made its appearance rather recently and grew out of the secularization of religion and the dissolution of traditional values« (Arendt 2007a, 298). That is why »[c]ulture is by definition secular. It requires a kind of broadmindedness of which no religion will ever be capable« (ibid., 299); it is impartial, tolerant and »hospitable.«

It is irrelevant whether one believes in God or not; what counts is that »secularization transformed religious concepts and the result of religious speculation in such a way that they received new meaning and new relevance independent of faith« (ibid., 298). This transformation can occur when academic research inspires great literature. Arendt observed in the discoveries of »our present historical and philological sciences« that they grew out of »the fear of being robbed of the specifically human background of a past, of becoming an abstract ghost like the man without a shadow« (ibid., 298). It is only through the collaboration of both scholars and talented individuals that culture—this domain newly inhabited by the spirit—can flourish, not being reduced only to antiquarian »preservation« or »dry scholarship« (ibid., 299). In a strategic fragment of the essay, Hannah Arendt reveals what is really at stake:

There is first of all that great religious and metaphysical postbiblical tradition which we will have to win back from the theologians and scholars—to both of whom we owe, however, a large debt of gratitude for having preserved it at all. But we shall have to discover and

deal with this tradition anew in our own terms, for the sake of people to whom it no longer constitutes a holy past or an untouchable heritage (*ibid.*, 300).

This means that all the traditions of the past belong to everyone. Culture as a new zone of independence thus annihilates the validity of the label »heresy« since culture as such is driven by a »heterodoxical imperative.«³ Hence, the shift from religion to culture presented by Leibovici can be interpreted polymorphically, for example, as atheism, but Julia Kristeva calls Arendt's stance a »subtle atheism« (Kristeva 2001, 97).⁴ This a-theism does not signify that God does not exist or never existed but that worldliness and mortality are the absolute horizon of humanity. If this is the case, what happens when religious traditions get locked within the »iron cage« of historical immanence? Without the horizon of redemption, they can die out and be buried; however, Arendt reminds us that there is also a »hidden tradition,« namely something forgotten, skipped, repressed. She describes it as »a dimension which had not been handed down by tradition—neither by the traditions of customs and institutions nor by the great tradition of Western thought and concept« (Arendt 1990, 197). And here the mission of culture begins. Paradoxically, it is only thanks to secularity that this hidden dimension of the past can reappear »with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear« (Arendt 1961b, 94).⁵ This dimension must be won back from the theologians and adapted according to modern »taste.«⁶

Secularity is not always and not only a revolt against the past. In line with Vivian Liska's conception of Arendt and her German-Jewish contemporaries, one can even risk saying that their main concern was the »afterlife« of *all* our legacies. It can also be observed in the Jewish tradition of *zakhor* (Yerushalmi 1982), in which the afterlife is safeguarded by the generations of those who

3 This term is a slightly revised version of Peter Berger's »heretical imperative«; see Berger 1979.

4 In fact, it seems that it was rather a peculiar trust in God, so discreet that it is all but invisible even for the most insightful readers of her oeuvre. For more on this topic, see Jim Josefsen's essay in this book. Be that as it may, the point here is that we are not discussing Arendt's intimate beliefs, but the faith in the world.

5 It is significant that these words appear in the essay »What is Authority?« where she celebrates the creative possibilities brought about by the fact that all traditions—political and religious alike—lost authority.

6 If we say this about Arendt's cultivated theological taste, it is because in the essay on Rilke, which she wrote with Stern, they very firmly disassociate themselves from »today's literary production, which either dismisses God as a matter of course, without misgivings, or exploits religious property in a non-obligatory manner, or, finally, satisfies our so-called »religious needs« with surrogates« (Arendt and Stern 2007, 22). Our choice of terminology here refers to Jim Josefsen's work in which he underlines the importance of »taste« for Arendt (Josefsen 2020).

remember. But what makes this modern reinvention of *zakhor* dramatically incomparable to its predecessors is a suspicion that what has been inherited does not include everything that should have been rescued. The dead ones return and oblige us to search for what has been lost. This Derridean »archive fever« is the salvific drive of culture which recollects forgotten remnants hidden in a no man's land, just like it is in the Lurianic Kabbalah where the lost sparks of divinity call for salvation. In a similar vein, one could understand Rosenzweig's *neues Denken*, which encapsulates an apprehension that together with the demise of the divine, something deeply human could fade away—and that this, not God, has to be rescued. What Scholem saw in Jerusalem—the ghastly state of culture and language—unquestionably belongs to the modern Jewish experience; however, since generational inheritance has been interrupted in modernized societies, every generation becomes »a generation of transition.«

Faith in the World

With Hannah Arendt we have the fascinating example of a secular Jew who preserved a clandestine relation to *deus otiosus*. This does not necessarily mean that one can »decipher« a certain »hidden« yet well-defined theology of Hannah Arendt—all she left behind are confusing traces, mystifying allusions, and cryptic references. One of those traces, which gave the title to this collection, can be found in *The Human Condition*, at the very end of the chapter entitled »Action« where Arendt is musing over the difference between the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions. According to her, the ancient Greeks did not cherish faith and hope:

It is this *faith in and hope for the world* that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their »glad tidings«: »A child has been born unto us« (Arendt 1958, 247; our emphasis).

Hannah Arendt does not give any explanation of this mysterious phrase: faith in the world. The »world« occupies a prominent place in her thinking—hence her concise formula: *amor mundi*—but »faith« seems to be non-intuitive. Why does one need to have faith in the world? That problem can be traced back to her doctoral dissertation where she asked: »Why should we make a desert

out of this world?» (Arendt 1996, 19).⁷ The essays collected in the current book engage with these riddles.

Faith in the world cannot be based on faith in God. Arendt reminds us that the modern notion of natural law maintains the stability of the world despite the fact of whether or not one believes in God: »The point was not to deny the existence of God but to discover in the secular realm an independent, immanent meaning which even God could not alter« (Arendt 1961a, 70). In her essay in this book, Agata Bielik-Robson refers to »the Marrano lovers of the worldly,« as they were described by Yirmiyahu Yovel. Marranos there stand for worldliness as the only thing worthy of spiritual investment after the disillusionment with traditional creeds. Are they not identical with the *dilectores mundi* (lovers of the world) from Arendt's dissertation, where she defended them against Christian calumnies? For Augustine, what proved the fallen nature of human beings was their attachment to the world, an attachment that Arendt called »earthliness« and years later described as »the very quintessence of the human condition« (Arendt 1958, 2). This forms a significant bridge between *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* and *The Human Condition*. It is evidenced in her statement from a letter to Jaspers, where Arendt describes that secularity not only has to stabilize the world but also deal with our explorations of the cosmos: »we're trying for the first time and in all seriousness to turn the universum into the mundus, if I may go back to old Augustine once again« (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 50).⁸ The indispensability of the faith in the world comes to the fore in the context of a new Gnosticism, one which can return as a double alienation, that is, as an alienation from both the world and the cosmos: »It is as though we no longer needed theology to tell us that man is not, cannot possibly be, of this world even though he spends his life here« (Arendt 1958, 270). Already in the late 1920s, on the brink of an unprecedented historical catastrophe, Arendt was thinking about a remedy for the deep confusion infiltrating the Occident. Her proposal is hidden in two words: *verwurzelt*, which means »rooted« and *vertraut* which refers to familiarity, intimacy and closeness. Humans should live a rooted life, but the ultimate ground for such existence is not in »blood and soil,« as the fascist would have it. What

7 The question sounds different in the original German text: »In der caritas lebend wird die Welt zur Wüste, statt zur Heimat, sie ist leer und fremd dem, was der Mensch sucht. Warum aber ist die Welt für das Suchen des Menschen die Wüste?« (Arendt 1929, 13). In Mark Farrier's translation: »Living in caritas, the world becomes a desert instead of a home, it is empty and foreign to what human beings seek. Why is it that the world is a desert when it comes to human being's seeking?«

8 Arendt to Jaspers, July 9th, 1946.

accompanies rootedness and overcomes it is the act of *vertrauen*, trust, which has its orienting point in the world, encompassing all creatures. Their lives all share the same origin but only faith in that fact can become the obliging precondition for building the common world.

By extracting a secular core from theology, Arendt chose her own way to secure the migration in the profane (to paraphrase Theodor Adorno's words describing Walter Benjamin's method) as the most radical test for any religious legacy: if anything sacred can pass through the wall of fire and survive the destruction, it can be preserved; the rest will simply perish. This complicated operation is responsible for what Susan Neiman identifies in Arendt's writings as »the tension between a clear, but nearly private inclination to think in sacred categories and a healthy suspicion of the transcendent« (Neiman 2001, 70). Rodrigo Chacón portrayed the tension by locating Arendt between belief and unbelief (Chacón 2012, 93, 105). However, since she herself was not concerned with this binary, one needs to be very precise here: in Arendt's case, religion was not an existential, personal dilemma. Rather, in her philosophy she made a move away from inwardness and toward a worldly in-between that provides the *locus* for speculative thinking in a secularized world.

Even when Arendt's reflections head towards atheism, God remains a *pre-text for thinking*. On April 14th, 1951, Arendt made the following entry in her *Denktagebuch*: »God as the Creator of the world: only when we insist on asking for causes [*Ursachen*] in the first place. That we do this at all is because we ourselves are always the cause [*wir selbst immer Ursache sind*]« (Arendt 2016, I, 65). One could say that human beings create God out of their lack of self-sufficiency. To put it differently, human beings are so afraid of their own capacity to create new beginnings that they prefer to abdicate this terrifying power. Seen from this angle, theology is what Peter Sloterdijk calls *Theopoese*, a discourse that reveals more about mortals than about God (Sloterdijk 2020).

While it is true that »Arendt's writings are charged with theological language« (Neiman 2001, 69), Arendt never actually created any kind of theology. Instead, following Franz Rosenzweig, she created a hybrid discourse that blurs the boundaries between philosophy and theology and confronts both. Because of that, we have to be prepared to face what Susan Neiman brilliantly referred to as Arendt's »consequent ability to live with *creative confusion*« (ibid., 71; original emphasis). The tendency for Arendt's writings to be

confusing was very well understood by Margaret Canovan who noticed that even her basis for human rights can be seen as cryptotheological:

Plurality in itself does not entail equal rights: so is Arendt smuggling in from outside politics a moral absolute about the equal worth of all human beings? In all probability Arendt's own conviction of human equality did indeed have its base outside politics, in religion. But this is not to say that she smuggled a religiously based moral absolute into her political thinking. The point is that Arendt [...] was at one and the same time sure of her own convictions *and* sure that no one's personal convictions can be authoritative for politics (Canovan 1992, 198—199).

How exactly did she smuggle in her enigmatic message?

A Life Spent on *Schmuggel*

Schmuggel or *Schmuggelware* are the German terms for »contraband« (*Schmuggel* is less specific and closer to the English »smuggling«). However bizarre this »intellectual contraband« may sound, it carries the original etymological meaning—roughly, against the ban—which came to English via the French *contrebande* from Italian *contrabbando*, where *bando* signifies »announcement,« »notice« but also »ban« or »banishment.« Contraband in all those languages refers to cross-border, illegal transportation of goods—a clandestine commerce whose aim is to ignore the borders and to avoid paying taxes. It sometimes also refers to smuggling persons from war areas or even trafficking legally banned products, like drugs or weapons. The intellectual *Schmuggel* became the fate for Hannah Arendt and many of her contemporaries. Her long way from Berlin (via Prague) to Paris in 1933, and from Marseille (via Spain and Lisbon) to New York City in 1941 epitomizes the conditions of her »bio-graphy,« that is, of a life spent on writing. Between the borders of continents and languages, Hannah Arendt smuggled a lot and did not respect »the authorities« guarding the traditions. What interests us here particularly is what was contrabanded, that is to say: What was transmitted despite the Kantian »ban« on theology in modern philosophy?

Hannah Arendt's reflections on God, religion, and secularization are scattered throughout her writings. Julia Reinhard Lupton rightly points out the cryptic character of Arendtian reflections on religious themes: »In Arendt's writing, sexuality and religion are most revealing not when they



Hannah Arendt, passport photo, 1933, probably taken already in France.

Courtesy of the Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust / Art Resource, NY.

receive explicit thematization, but when they operate as psychotheology, opalescently reflected through figure, citation, and footnote» (Reinhard Lupton 2006, 10). This makes it tempting to explore unknown facets of the oeuvre and excavate hidden meanings by rallying a »speculative courage« (Arendt 1958, 259) praised by Arendt herself, a courage that gives the freedom to either fill in »lacunas« or expand on her thinking.

The development of Hannah Arendt's intellectual odyssey reflects the dramatic events of her life as a Jewish woman exiled from Germany. Very

telling is the gap between the publication dates of her first two books: *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* in 1929 and then, nineteen years later, *Sechs Essays* in 1948. Also, there is the abyss between her last German academic publications of 1933 and her first American essay in 1942. In between those years Arendt's writings are scarce: a few essays published in French during her Parisian years, one in Yiddish, with the rest being short newspaper articles, mostly related to Zionist politics. Recounting the period just after the war, she wrote to Jaspers: »for twelve years the peace necessary to do intellectual work has been something I've known only from hearsay« (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 23).⁹ The first step back to proper writing was Arendt's employment at Schocken Books. Although her work there primarily involved the editing of other writer's books, she still had enough time—thanks to Schocken's leniency—to write her first book in English, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that Arendt treated work at Schocken with the utmost seriousness and, according to Marie Luise Knott, fancied that being on the editorial staff for the publications of the works of Kafka, Scholem and Benjamin was like being present for the creation of a new Jewish, theological canon (Knott 2013, 35, 42). It was only after the success of *The Origins* that Arendt became an author in her own right. She received a Guggenheim Foundation research grant to write about the totalitarian aspects of Marxism and although she never finished a book on this topic, the years she spent on it were not in vain. We can see this in the fact that half of her *Denktagebuch* is composed of entries made between 1950 and 1954.¹¹ Arendt contrabanded much of what she collected at that time into her later publications: *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future* (1961), and *On Revolution* (1963). Moreover, one can find in those works the traces of her speculations about God in her *Denktagebuch* entries, distilled and reformulated into secular, philosophical language.¹²

9 Arendt to Jaspers, November 18th, 1945.

10 Although that does not mean she wasn't busy working as an important editor at Schocken Books.

She wrote a letter to Scholem on April 4th, 1948: »Thank God I've had some lower back pain and couldn't go to the office. This has allowed me to rest a bit, and to work« (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 88).

11 She wrote to Scholem on the 9th of April, 1953: »I want to make use of a couple years of rest and normality, but any longer than that I won't be able to handle« (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 176).

12 A hint of that »translation« from a religious to a secular register of language can be found in the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, where Arendt writes that human life is »a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking)« that modern man »wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself« (Arendt 1958, 2—3).

Smuggling became Arendt's *modus operandi*. It started early on, at the time of her escape from Germany. Knowing that the books of Jewish authors were being burned in the Third Reich, Arendt must have assumed that the remaining copies of *Der Liebesbegriff* that she smuggled abroad were to become the only ones in existence.¹³ Even still, she managed to smuggle another treasure that Walter Benjamin entrusted to her, namely, his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*), which in 1941 safely travelled with Hannah Arendt to the United States of America. When she was still in Southern France, fleeing the Gestapo, she wrote down her reflections on French anti-Semitism in a notebook; a year later, from those notes, she was able to compose her first above-mentioned essay in English: »From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today.«

The most seminal contrabanding occurred, though, between Arendt's earliest work on Augustine and her postwar writings. In a letter to Mary McCarthy in October 20th, 1965, she commented on her reworking of Ernst Basch Ashton's translation of *Der Liebesbegriff*:

It is kind of a traumatic experience. I am re-writing the whole darned business, trying not to do anything new, but only to explain in English (and not in Latin) what I thought when I was twenty. It is probably not worth it [...] but by now I am strangely fascinated in this rencontre (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 190).

Nevertheless, as her *Denktagebuch* from the early 1950s certainly shows, Arendt's dissertation was used, negatively, for the creation of a philosophical anthropology. Shortly after the completion of the manuscript of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (finished in 1949), she decided to reinvent her intuitions about human birth from *Der Liebesbegriff* and placed them at the center of her philosophical thought. The point is not only that she reformulated her earliest ideas and translated them from German to English, but that she found a passage between *Der Liebesbegriff* and her later works: a chiasmus between a *nearly* theological dispute with Augustine and a *nearly* secular philosophy.

Nevertheless, Hannah Arendt was not an Augustinian; in fact, her readings of any author always involved deep revisions. She also defied the giant of Jewish thought, Gershom Scholem, who wanted her to come to Israel, learn Hebrew, and become a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

13 On March 31st, 1945, she wrote to Scholem that she couldn't send him a copy »because, sadly, I just have one (stolen) copy; otherwise, it's nowhere to be found. This I heard from some university librarians who've been looking for a copy for years« (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 29).

Scholem expected that she would become a translator of his works into English, as if she was to remain a literary agent of others and not an author in her own right. In a letter from 1947, Scholem wrote in a strong tone of self-praise:

Why don't you be so kind and learn Hebrew one of these days? Then I could send you this and that or the other, and besides, you could then enter heaven. My essay on the bankruptcy of the Science of Judaism, for instance, is an exceptional piece of writing, [...] composed in the best literary style. Impressive! (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 77).

Scholem characterized Arendt's work as »spiritual exercises in political thinking« (ibid., 200).¹⁴ For her part, Hannah Arendt continued to intertwine a hidden spiritual tradition with philosophy, but it was apparently not enough for Scholem. When he sent her a copy of his 1963 essay, »Tradition und Kommentar als religiöse Kategorien in Judentum,« he left on it a handwritten note: »A bit of Jewish theology, recommended to Hannah from Gerhard« (ibid., see figure 12.). In any case, whether it concerned Zionism or Jewish theology, Hannah Arendt remained faithful to herself and warned Scholem that he should not wait for her »return«: »You have no choice but to look at me with consternation, for in my case repentance can hardly be expected« (ibid., 50).¹⁵ She might have been impressed by Sabbatianism, but it didn't lead her to study the Kabbalah. To understand what Arendt might have taken from Scholem, one would do well to keep in mind a self-identification she formulated in a letter to Scholem on January 14th, 1945: »Ich bin (...) ein Epikaeures« (Arendt and Scholem 2010, 57). She was referring to her position in the Jewish community. The English translation renders it as »an epicurean,« which is only one of its many possible translations (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 26). The word *epikoros* (or *apikores*) was used among the Jews to denote a Jewish sceptic, an apostate or even a heretic; later it also referred to the adherents of Haskalah—the Jewish Enlightenment—or socialism. Writing to Scholem so openly and ironically was, no doubt, Arendt's way of indicating her detachment. Yet, she never rejected her Jewishness. Being an *apikores* was her chosen fate. That ambivalent neither-nor stance gave Hannah Arendt enormous freedom to shape her idiosyncratic response to the challenges of godless modernity. By definition confusing and cryptic, her thought evades any final interpretation. The hybrid, intentionally inconclusive discourse of *apikorsim* opens a space for

14 This is how he referred to Arendt's *Between Past and Future*, see Scholem to Arendt, April 13th, 1962.

15 Arendt to Scholem, April 21st, 1946.

speculation. It remains intriguing to contemplate why Hannah Arendt chose the roundabout method of speaking about messianic shards migrating into the profane. It might have been her reformed post-Hegelian sensitivity, shared with Walter Benjamin, that informed the recognition of secularity as the final destination of religion. This perspective determines for her the tasks enunciated on the first page of *The Human Condition*, namely, how to imagine the reconciliation with finitude and how to affirm earthliness. Such an intuition of a happy life appears in Arendt's defense of Heinrich Heine from the essay »The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition«:

[T]he pariah, excluded from formal society and with no desire to be embraced within it, turns naturally to that which entertains and delights the common people. [...] He turns, in fact, from the world of men and the fashion thereof to the open and unrestricted bounty of the earth. And this is precisely what Heine did. Stupid and undiscerning critics have called it materialism or atheism, but the truth is that there is only so much of the heathen in it that it seems irreconcilable with certain interpretations of the Christian doctrine of original sin and its consequent sense of perpetual guilt. It is, indeed, no more than that simple *joie de vivre* which one finds everywhere in children and in the common people—that passion which makes them revel in tales and romances, which finds its supreme literary expression in the ballad and which gives to the short love-song its essentially popular character (Arendt 2007b, 72—73).

After all, it is not clear whether the passage into the profane is a simple abandonment of theology, that is, just completely forgetting all about it, or rather, that it is a new promised Epicureanism requiring an overcoming of the theological legacy together with its anthropological pessimism. Could it be that without this dialectical odyssey, the ephemeral *joie de vivre* cannot be transformed into a self-conscious philosophy of life? Only such a philosophy, discovered by Arendt through her deconstruction of theology, could save happiness and freedom and make them inseparable; yet, without »the speculative conditions for a philosophy of freedom« (Arendt 1981, 145—146), Epicureanism would not have been able to become a modern political theology. Is this *the* secret of Hannah Arendt's secularity?

Literature on the Topic

The early reaction to Arendt's cryptotheological work is characteristic of the whole reception of her thought. In their reviews, theologians criticized