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BOOK REVIEW

Indispensable handbook for global theopolitics
The Star of Redemption by Franz Rosenzweig

Reviewed by Spengler

"Learn Greek, dear reader, and throw my translation into the fire!" wrote the first German translator of Homer's *Iliad*, Count von Stolberg, words that Franz Rosenzweig placed as a superscript to the preface for his own translation of the medieval Hebrew poet, Judah Halevi.



Read Franz Rosenzweig, I should like to say, and hit the delete key, for the 100-and-a-score essays I have published in this space were an attempt to put fragments of his thinking before the English-speaking public.

A tragedy of 20th century history is that Leo Strauss, who began

as Rosenzweig's student, transferred his intellectual loyalty to the odious Martin Heidegger. Strauss' follower, Irving Kristol, the "godfather of neo-conservatism", once confessed that he tried to learn German in order to read Rosenzweig. It is a pity he failed. But one still can hope that Rosenzweig's star will ascend.

We live not merely in an age of faith, but in an age of religious wars. Today's intellectual elite feels something like the mad Englishman in a lunatic asylum whom Karl Marx sketched in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. He imagines that his warders are barbarian mercenaries who speak in a welter of unintelligible tongues, and mutters to himself, "And all this is happening to me - a freeborn Englishman!"

So felt France on the return of the Napoleonic dynasty, and so feels the intelligentsia on the return of religion to world politics. To such perplexed secularists, I strongly recommend Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, available in a new English translation, but with a caveat: it might cure them of secularism. That the translation is miserably inadequate is another matter; it is probably no

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worse than its prospective readers.

In fact, there is no *idea* in *The Star of Redemption* that one cannot find close to hand in the mainstream of Christian and Jewish teaching. Rosenzweig's act of genius was to show that Christianity and Judaism are not ideas, not mere religions (his dismissive characterization of Islam), but rather *lives*.

From death - from the fear of death - arises the perception of the transcendent, his book begins, and in the face of the fear of death, one proceeds - to life, as he avers in the book's last sentence. But the path to life requires a life outside of time, that is, the hope of immortality. Man cannot abide his mortal existence, cannot tolerate the fear of death, without the prospect of life eternal.

Faith cannot be proven or defended, but only lived, Rosenzweig taught. It is not a system of beliefs but an existential choice, not a proof but an affirmation. Critics call *The Star of Redemption* a difficult book, and that it is, not because Rosenzweig's conclusion is difficult, but rather because modern readers will resist his conclusion to the bitter end.

Sadly, it is easier for today's readers to consume Homer in the original than to read Rosenzweig. First, he cannot be translated into English, for there is no scholar active today with a command of language commensurate with one of the sublime masters of German letters. Secondly, even if well translated, Rosenzweig no longer can be understood, for his 1920 volume refers to a cultural realm long since annihilated. Thirdly, even if Rosenzweig were understood, he is rather unwelcome.

Barbara Galli's new translation of Rosenzweig's great book bears witness to these assertions, in several ways. To begin with, this essay constitutes, to my knowledge, the only review to appear on the Internet. The only other published notices I have found are a two-liner in the *Library Journal*, and a non-specialist notice in an obscure Jewish weekly. Although a cottage industry has arisen around Rosenzweig in academia, the general public has little interest.

Although Galli's rendering flows more easily than the only other English version, published in 1970 by William Hallo [1], it provoked this writer to tear out a handful of hair every second or third page. Some examples will be

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provided below.

One does not read Rosenzweig for inspiration, the way Christians read C S Lewis, for example, or Jews read A J Heschel. A secular German Jew trained in Hegelian philosophy, Rosenzweig was ready to convert to Christianity in 1913, when his attendance at Day of Atonement services brought him back to Judaism. He was not, or ever could be, a traditional Jew, but remained the outsider looking in with the critical eye of a trained skeptic.

Religious faith is woven into the fabric of traditional life, in which individuals have no choice about the roles and rhythms of life. Unravel this fabric, and faith dissolves. That was the position of Europe after World War I, which undid the great dynasties of Europe and poisoned the ancient loyalties of family, tribe, church and nation. That is the predicament of the Islamic world today (See [The crisis of faith in the Islamic world](#), Asia Times Online, November 8).

The philosophers, who had been God's apologists, became God's persecutors. Immanuel Kant demonstrated that God's existence could not be proven, and a century later Friedrich Nietzsche insisted that God was dead.

In 1914, Europe believed not in God, but in nation and *Kultur*. By 1918 these gods were toppled, and Europe began to worship the false gods of historical materialism and national socialism. Kant had already destroyed the philosophical proofs of God's existence in 1781, prompting Heinrich Heine's quip that Robespierre merely decapitated a king, whereas a German professor sent the Almighty to the scaffold. Biologists reduced to myth the Biblical story of creation. The Higher Criticism proved multiple authorship of the Hebrew scriptures. Modern philosophy and science presented themselves as a rational alternative to the sham of religion. Except for the backward or the recalcitrant, traditional faith became impossible.

Along with the great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, Rosenzweig opened a path for a modern faith, a faith strengthened by skepticism as if by inoculation. He turned the tables on the philosophers, the undertakers of faith, arguing that philosophy itself was the sham, the equivalent of a small child stuffing his fingers in his ears and shouting "I can't hear you!" to ward off the terror of death. Science did not threaten the faith of the West,

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Rosenzweig explained, but rather the resurgent "inner pagan" inside every Christian. Christians are torn between their belief in the Kingdom of Heaven and their belief in their own blood. It is the Jew, he argued, who converts the inner pagan inside the Christian.

Only a "community of blood" (*Blutgemeinschaft*) provides man with the assurance of immortality, Rosenzweig argued. God's covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham provides such surety to the Jews, and precisely for this reason the Jews provide Christians with proof of God's promise of a New Covenant. By virtue of Christ's blood, Christians become the next best thing to a community of blood, an *ekklesia*, those who are called out from among the nations, and through immersion in water, undergo a new birth to become descendants of Abraham in the spirit. Christianity embraced the gentiles newly conscious of their own mortality, of the inevitable end of their bloodline. As he wrote in the *Star*:

Just as every individual must reckon with his eventual death, the peoples of the world foresee their eventual extinction, be it however distant in time. Indeed, the love of the peoples for their own nationhood is sweet and pregnant with the presentiment of death. Love is only surpassing sweet when it is directed towards a mortal object, and the secret of this ultimate sweetness only is defined by the bitterness of death. Thus the peoples of the world foresee a time when their land with its rivers and mountains still lies under heaven as it does today, but other people dwell there; when their language is entombed in books, and their laws and customs have lost their living power.

But the contending claims of pagan blood remain in perpetual conflict with the promise of the spirit, and Christianity never entirely suppresses the inner pagan inside each believer. Christianity cannot exist except in symbiosis with Judaism, averred Rosenzweig, to which one might add that Europe's determination to destroy its Jews was not just an act of genocide, but of suicide. European Christianity did not survive the regression back to the bloodline of the nations during the middle of the past century. Only in a new nation conceived in the spirit, that is, in ideas, and free of the taint of pagan birth, could Christianity truly flourish, I have argued in the past; and although Rosenzweig never wrote about America, I

believe this assertion is consistent with his views.

How different faiths - different modes of living - address the fear of death, not only individual, but also national - creates a unique vantage point from which to understand how profoundly Christianity, Judaism and Islam differ from one another. That is the proof of Rosenzweig's pudding: the elaboration of a rigorous sociology of religion. Those who miss this point have not understood a word that Rosenzweig wrote. Sadly, among them is Professor Michael Oppenheim, who cites Rosenzweig's treatment of Islam as one of the "greatest weaknesses of the book". On the contrary, Rosenzweig's work on Islam is of indispensable value for strategic analysis today. "The coming millennium will go down in world history as a struggle between Orient and Occident, between the church and Islam, between the northern peoples and the Arabs," he wrote in 1920.

I reviewed a German-language collection of his writings on Islam in 2003 ([Oil on the flames of civilizational war](#), December 2, 2003).

That bears on the gross deficiencies of Professor Galli's translation. Galli hails from a circle of liberal Jewish theologians who embrace Rosenzweig as a non-sectarian exponent of their faith. But it was not merely a Jew who wrote the *Star*, but also a German soldier, making notes on army postcards at an anti-aircraft battery in Serbia. The *Star* is a German book as much as it is a Jewish one, for it is the record of a German philosopher's return to faith.

Galli chose to leave out the extensive notes that accompany the Hallo edition, and the few footnotes she includes bespeak abysmal ignorance about Rosenzweig's German sources. Consider a line on page 10: "He may not drink up the brown juice that night." That is a reference to Mephistopheles' taunt to Faust, who had not the courage to drink poison. Without a note, it is as incomprehensible as Galli's rendering is inelegant. Or when Rosenzweig speaks of a return to "the mothers", Galli's note states that these are "primordial forces" in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. But they are no such thing: the "mothers" are a poetic embodiment of the Platonic forms which give birth to earthly reality, and Faust must descend to them to recreate Helen of Troy. The list goes on.

That is not of small consequence, for the *Star* is a commentary on Goethe's *Faust* as much as it is a

commentary on religion. Goethe had given the world a new Everyman, learned in all the science and philosophy of the enlightenment, and left empty by it, with a gnawing hunger for life. But he could find no better guide through the world than the devil, and his only redemption was that no earthly pleasure could delude him. It is with the eyes of Goethe and the heart of a Jew that Rosenzweig descends to the "mothers", not to find a new Helen, but to find life.

It is not merely that Galli does not know German culture; she does not know German. Rosenzweig wrote, for example: "The history of philosophy had never yet seen an atheism like Nietzsche's. Nietzsche is the first thinker who does not simply abnegate God, but quite actually 'denies' Him, in the theological usage of the word." Rosenzweig employs the German verb *leugnen*, which may be translated as "to deny" or "to repudiate". But here is Galli: "Nietzsche is the first thinker who - not negates God - but, in the really proper theological use of the word: 'refutes' him." (p 24) Not only is Galli's translation unnecessarily clumsy; it is misleading. "Refutation" implies a logical exercise (in which case a German writer would have written *widerlegen*), but Rosenzweig refers here to Nietzsche's existential act.

In other cases it appears that Galli has no idea what Rosenzweig is saying. For example, Rosenzweig writes (my rendering), "However much Ethics wished to give the [individual] act a fundamentally unique position [*Sonderstellung*] against the whole of Being, in carrying this out, Ethics grabbed the act right back into the circle of the knowable All as a matter of necessity. All Ethics ends up as a piece of Being within the doctrine of the community." Rosenzweig refers here to Kant's Categorical Imperative, an attempt to derive ethical behavior from pure logic ("What if everybody did?"). The individual act is a unique event with respect to all of being, Rosenzweig argues, but Ethics grabs the individual's act of will out of his hands, and returns it as a piece of being to the impersonal All, destroying its unique and redeeming character. That is the nub of Rosenzweig's rejection of philosophy: the individual's redeeming act is not a logical decision, but an affirmation of faith.

And here is Galli's translation: "If fundamentally it wanted to give a particular place of action in relation to all being, ethics could only reintegrate the action by the same necessity into the circle of the knowable All at the moment it elaborated it; every ethics ended by emerging

again in a doctrine of the community that forms a part of being." What does that mean?

Rosenzweig's *Star* deserves an edition resembling the Jewish *Talmud*, with the original text in an inner square, and commentaries and source materials surrounding in a larger square. Hallo's edition, despite its turgid prose, is somewhat more reliable, and contains the exhaustive footnotes of the standard German editions.

Note

[1] University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

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