

GABRIEL VAHANIAN  
Université de Strasbourg

FROM HUMAN BEING TO BEING HUMAN:  
AN IMPOSSIBLE SHORT-CUT  
A REVIEW ESSAY ON ELISABETH ROUDINESCO,  
*RETOUR SUR LA QUESTION JUIVE*

Zion was built by the lord on the holy mountain,  
and he loves that city  
more than any other place  
in all of Israel.  
Zion, you are the city of God,  
and wonderful things  
are told about you.  
Egypt, Babylonia, Philistia, Phoenicia, and Ethiopia  
are some of those nations  
that know you,  
and their people all say,  
"I was born in Zion."  
God Most High will strengthen  
the city of Zion.  
Then everyone will say,  
"We were born here too."  
The LORD will make a list  
of his people,  
and all who were born here  
will be included.  
All who sing or dance will say,  
"I too am from Zion." —*Psalm 87*

Jesus replied, "There are some things that people cannot do,  
but God can do anything." —*Luke 18: 27*

I am the lord! There is nothing too difficult for  
me. I'll come back next year at the time I promised,  
and Sarah will already have a son. —*Genesis 18:14*  
(Contemporary English Version)

*Foreword*

If Auschwitz, then no God. Except that, were it as plausible as it is lapidary, the hypothesis thus spelt out rests on the assumption that faith is conditioned by some socio-historical process: an assumption that falls short of its biblical and more radical alternative, which plain English would

read: "If God, then no God is God." This biblical and more radical alternative rests on that critical as well as self-critical iconoclastic thrust of biblical faith which entails that no God is ever worshipped that, ontologically or logically, metaphysically or existentially, does not become an idol. The reason is simple: theologically speaking, whatever is named, whether God or idol, Being or beings, is a matter of language. More specifically, when speaking of language, it is both a matter of wording the world on one the hand and, on the other, of worlding the Word—a matter of words. This in turn entails that nothing is more symbolic than the literal and that, conversely and even more significantly, the symbolic is itself a matter of words. Put otherwise, nothing is more contingent than that which is necessary or nothing is more necessary than the contingent.

This means that wherever the spheres of the divine and the human intersect each other as they must, they can only do so precisely by nipping in the bud any obsession with identity as marker of a self-identifying process through which the self, supposedly construed as autonomous entity, is ultimately surrendered to a subtle and no less absolute heteronomy that, however paradoxically, is yet utterly impervious to the famous "Je est un autre," as Rimbaud used to say.

Indeed, the biblical notion of creation, redemption, and fulfillment puts into question all obsessions with self-identifying autonomous spheres whether of the divine or of the human. God is not God without the world. On another level, being human is for sinful human beings possible only "before" God (*coram deo*). This is just what, especially since Luther, even traditional theology acknowledges by proffering that, before God, the believer is at once sinful and justified. Not only soteriologically, but also, above all, eschatologically, being human is for human beings at once impossible and, to that extent, the only thing possible. And, hence, all the more contingent on things which, being as they are, could have been different — if, indeed, instrumenting the Kingdom of God, faith did consist, as it should, not in changing worlds (i.e. this world for another world, whether after death or after life), but, here and now, in changing this world, in hoping against hope for the advent of a world worth inventing time and again — "on this earth as it is in heaven."

Heaven and earth — spheres whose respective autonomies intersect each other as would the possible and the impossible, and in fact do only by showing at the same time that there is no shortcut from the possible to the impossible. Likewise with the quest of one kind or another for origins and self-identity, i.e. in fact, for *difference* (if not for a '*differance*') between, say, 'them' and 'us' — there is no shortcut. The differences that are assumed to constitute our respective identities are altogether pegged on flimsy constructions variously claimed in the name of physiology or biology, or race and culture and even of religion (Greek and Barbarian, Israel and the Nations, Aryan and Semitic).

Did I say 'differences'? I meant rumors: often repeated, rumors finally leave a trace, a resistance however flimsy to the trail blazed through the coincidental worlding of the word and the wording of the world — through language and its process of metamorphosis from tribal to universal, through pedagogical stages like ancient, mediaeval, modern, Western or Eastern; in short, from

onomatopoeia to metaphor. Except that, even as miniaturization is today as characteristic of technology as gigantism once used to be, so are today universal and singular capable of each other, at least virtually if not actually. Possibly not always: though planetary, today's village still smacks more or less of parochialism, e.g. Islamic, Christian, Jewish, even while, in every instance today's world is inevitably drifting away from any and all traditional understanding of one's anchorage in the interface of the universal or global and the local. Still, post-Christian or whatever, today's world is not post-religious; nor is it post-secular, as is often claimed. Its quest for a transcending reconfiguration of faith, of the human as reconfiguration of the divine, is challenged by a task which, though literally impossible, is all the more urgent for being spiritually the only thing possible. A mere matter of words, it is equally a matter of '*kairos*', of timing, and, since and so long as there is no time when time was not, spacing of this timing, if it must happen here and now, can only time and again happen once and for all.

## 1.

From the possible to the impossible there is no short-cut and none either from human being to being human — or from the unconscious to consciousness or, for that matter, from oblivion to memory. And, besides, of what avail would such a move be if, from one prison to another, I should forget nothing and be oblivious of nothing?

This question revolves, painfully, if more concretely, stated, around a disarmingly simple matter: is Zionism still the answer to the Jewish question, or does Zionism perpetuate the Jewish question by switching it from one ground zero to another, from that of a religious illusion to that of a cultural fantasy? Is Zionism itself in some strange way a continuation of Auschwitz? Such is, to my mind, the horrendous question at the heart of Elisabeth Roudinesco's reassessment of the Jewish question in her recent book entitled *Retour sur la question juive* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009). And horrendous it is because, rather than secularizing the Jewish question, she enshrines it in the soteriological rags of "once a Jew, always a Jew." Be it by birth or through conversion, a Jew remains a Jew, and never can defect, culturally if not religiously speaking, merely shifting by the same token seat of obscurantism from the domain of religion to that of culture.

Meant undoubtedly to suggest the perspective from which a book is to be read, the incipit of this particular one should have shocked me, and perhaps did, or quite possibly just didn't. It is a book that destroys itself by the time you reach its last word, leaving no trace but that of an argument yet in need of being decrypted, of reconstructing itself by re-assembling — remembering — its memory and by emancipating it from the constricting sacralization of its history. If truth be told, perhaps the incipit is at once so shocking and yet so journalistically casual that, past the introduction, there seemed no longer to be any reason to remember an incident in fact related just as would be news no less banal for being unconscionably unusual. I myself was guilty of this forgetfulness until I reached the last line of the book — the last line of the last paragraph of the last chapter. And with this last line I was somehow prompted to return to the first line, at which point I immediately realized that what was at stake in it had just been spelled out. A group of young people are expelled from their homes by another similarly

young and no less Jewish, except that its youthful members are soldiers of Tsahal, here merely to carry orders. They are called all kinds of name that boil down to one: 'Nazis.' And, as if to remind the reader that memory is always diffracted by history, even is its prime victim, the incipit adds the mind-boggling qualifier of "even worse Nazis than the Arabs."

Not some but *all* the Arabs.

You shudder. None of these youths is the survivor of a death camp. And yet, instead of making "it" history by making history, they rehash and prolong the conditions of its own distortion. Their use of language betrays even subtler forms of racism, all the more offensive for its merely psittacistic appeal to linguistic resources of a language devoid of any natural, physiological or biological anchorage. And, yet again, horrendous all the more: the incident that takes place in December 2008 at Hebron in the West Bank, in the wake of which seems forgotten Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil. Even Jews could be Nazis — not to mention that, in the concentration camps, some were indeed accused of being Nazis.

All of a sudden Elisabeth Roudinesco's inquiry turns into a quest for neither more nor less than an impossible identity, all the more "*introuvable*," which, at best, is buried under layers of self-hatred only a Jew would be capable of. It can and does break out under different guises, such as the self-inflicted subconscious anti-Semitism that lurks behind Jewish humor or, more subtly, pervades the so-called "Jewish science" of late modernity—psychoanalysis. Of which Roudinesco is as well a practitioner as at times an addict. Self-controlled and yet able even to leave you in a lurch, as she does when, after a potent introduction like this book's, she signs off, leaving you behind, and absconds, vanishing without the counterpoint of a substantial conclusion.

The upshot? Rather than delivering a message, Roudinesco seems content with practicing a massage. The effect, depending on what is *ex post facto* read into Auschwitz, is a question that does not recoil from putting the reader in a double bind by focusing the question not so much on who is anti-Semitic as on who is not — especially if there can be no worse an anti-Semite than a Jew who, though not religious, is yet more Jewish than he is human; or who, being first a Jew rather than a human being, is all the more Jewish, though possibly for not being Jewish enough.

As fully aware of this issue as she may be, Roudinesco lets her texting of it meander, though not unlike a pleasant river meandering through a large city, at once usurping and beautifying its landscape, wording it into a language and worlding it into words, and yet at the same time inevitably surrendering either at the whims of a wooden tongue, or mere words. She writes: "Since the end of the 19th century anti-Semitism has become the motive power ("moteur") of Jewish '*conscience*' (consciousness, self-understanding), regardless of whether one is a practicing Jew or not" (p.15). Regardless of, like it or not, which side you stand on: there is no escape from the blessing if not the curse of "once a Jew, always a Jew." Whether by birth or through conversion, a Jew remains a Jew, and never can defect, culturally if not religiously speaking. Ostracized, even excommunicated for betraying the religious tradition, a Jew remains a Jew – in spite of himself. He does not

become one of the goyim. Beyond physiological or biological considerations, he is not thrown back into one of the 'nations,' a term reserved to non-Jews by that very same biblical tradition that does not settle for any cheap cut-rate cultural obfuscation of precisely the kind of religious obscurantism it denounced long before the fashionable advent of Modernity and the rise of psychoanalysis; to wit, these words of the psalmist, "Egypt, Babylonia, Philistia, Phoenicia, and Ethiopia / are some of those nations / that know you, / and their people all say, / "I was born in Zion." / God Most High will strengthen / the city of Zion. / Then everyone will say, / "We were born here too." / The LORD will make a list / of his people, / and all who were born here / will be included. / All who sing or dance will say, / "I too am from Zion" (*Psalm 87:4-7*). These are words in the light of which Freud's dictum that Moses was not a Jew is no more shocking than a statement to the effect that Jesus was not a Christian, either. Indeed, who cares? Unless, of course, obsessed by emancipation from the traditional religious obscurantism of the past we should let ourselves be shackled by the hidden obscurantist agenda of a newfangled culturalism all the more potent for claiming to be post-secular rather than post-religious.

## 2.

And, indeed, is anything gained if, purportedly in the wake of this culturalism, self-identity is freed from so-called religious obscurantism only to be surrendered to some new type of obscurantism? Such an obscurantism would be no less ominous for lurking more or less aggressively behind the cultural façades of so-called ethnicity or generic variants of it parading under more parochial labels, whether of haphazard communitarianism or of some hypertrophied sense of dialectal solidarity with a particular linguistic heritage. This self-identity would be no less tribal for claiming to be universal at the same time.

Languages leak. There is no way of ignoring this fact: languages endanger the trust they cherish most, only to be trusted as though they should not be trusted.

Rigorous as they might claim to be, all the more porous they are. Meant as they are to contain themselves, their cultural deposit is and has always been as porous as the tradition they inherit from is claimed to be religious (and with a vengeance): e.g., the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Set forth to be hallowed, God's name is instead crossed out in heaven as it is on earth: Just as there was no sacred precinct in the Garden of Eden, so also there is no temple in the New Jerusalem.

Authentic identity is as anonymous--or, should I rather say, as anomalous--as the Samaritan who is good rather than cutting the figure of the declassified Jew one expects of him, and who, instead of wondering who is his neighbor, shows there is no one of whom a post-Israel Jew is not the neighbor, be it by reason of creed or of race. Identity is not geared on the self, much less that self on whose retina the other is always caught upside down before it is put right side up.

And you keep thinking, until it dawns on you: The same correction should apply to the question how could one still be a Jew after Auschwitz -- let alone

a Christian, when, in fact, even more than before that epochal divide, the real question was and still is: how can a human being go on being a Christian or a Jew instead of merely being human, even if only culturally, let alone religiously?

We must realize that looking into Auschwitz as though it were a rear-view mirror is no help: you see the past that, binding you to its future, equally blinds you to itself. So that, unless memory, not unlike human sight, should in a blow for freedom hit you, and you come up to yourself, you cannot even admit to yourself that you have been dis-located and outsourced, switched on to a post-this or post-that age, post-Christian, post-Modern, post-structuralist, etc. – to an age of post-its. Or am I misconstruing Roudinesco's perspective on the question of our age? Am I mistaken when I hear that, for her, a post-Auschwitz human being questing for being human, as already pointed out, revolves finally around this double-edged question that swings from who is an anti-Semite to who is not? In an Age that she herself acknowledges as being one in which we all are both anti-Semitic and 'German Jews;' in which being Jewish (religiously) or being a Jew (culturally), simply amounts to possibly being paradigmatic man or woman; in an Age when memory and its encapsulation by the cult of it becomes nonetheless some kind of emblematic surrogate of history and its arrogance as well as its fascination with originary identities (Greek vs. Barbarian, Jews vs. Goyim, Christian vs. pagan, Islamism vs. colonialist – not to mention fundamentalist vs. secularist), though God knows each is a misnomer of the other, each the converse image of the other. History collapses, as always, under its own weight; and, like *Sophie's Choice* or *Last Year in Marienbad*, next year in Jerusalem unfolds and fades into last year in Jerusalem. Surely Roudinesco knows there is no mountain left, holy or otherwise, from which salvation can come, if only because nothing is more addicted to the sacred than secularism – which, God forbid, is no blame undeserved by fundamentalism.

Any more than nature, history is no matrix of salvation. And yet, not the least merit of this book is that, painstakingly, it shows the limits of psycho-sociology in contrast to which, as Roudinesco herself, if dimly, senses, religion once freed from its relics is self-limiting.

To wit, on either side of each and every fence, enemies or adversaries, fundamentalists or secularists, they end up, the rug pulled from under them, professing some kind of universalism. Groping after which, she admits, a post-Auschwitz redefinition of Jewish identity is in order – or else, but then, unfortunately for the reader, her theological or purely and simply biblical acumen falls short of her psychoanalytic expertise, and all the more pathetic becomes the alarm bell she triggers.

### 3.

Pathetic, yes, and therefore all the more imperative, what with the perilous state of a world whose gods have failed as are bound to fail all gods that, no sooner than worshipped, are turned into idols so accommodatingly subtle as to be all the more imperious. And whatever the reason, good or bad, Jews blaspheme other Jews. But then is there still any ground left for the slightest distinction between Israel and the Nations? Jews and the Goyim? Christians and the Heathen? And should any be left, simply shift that leftover parcel of

idiolect as ground for a distinction from the realm of faith (one is saved through no merit of one's own) to that of history or psycho-sociology (the good you do me you do not for my own sake so much as for your own). As a result, we have *de facto* switched from one and the same God for Abraham, for Isaac, and for Jacob as also for Jesus to the declassified, historicistic if heuristic notions of Judaism and Christianity -- and the latter's streak of medieval anti-Judaism, which commendably Roudinesco contends is not to be confused with the cultural obscurantism of latter-day Western anti-Semitism.

Not yet, at any rate, as she might add later on. Indeed, this medieval anti-Judaism does survive the collapse of Christendom. To be sure, the Enlightenment, instead of foddering persecution of the Jews, now promotes their emancipation as well as that of Christians from their common if respective obscurantism. Except that, even if mancipation is officially synonymous with assimilation, the Enlightenment itself, however dubiously, says Roudinesco, somehow refrains itself. It altogether abstains from dissolving Jewish identity and expunging it from the common social memory, *lest* no shred of it were left that should still be remembered. For better or worse — depending on factors of socio-cultural atavism. A believer or not, a Jew sort of remains a Jew. So that, ironically, so-called medieval or political anti-Judaism gives way to a phenomenon gratified with the modern coinage of anti-Semitism, no longer either dormant or pseudo. At first 'political' (in France), this anti-Semitism becomes 'racial' in Germany. And Roudinesco makes her point: Anti-Semitism is "the matrix of racism," and above all of that particular kind of racism which, under the pretense of humanitarian altruism, will be spawned by French and, in general, Western colonialism, based on newfangled factors such as physiology or biology, not to mention linguistics and its enthusiastic wallowing in the prefabricated distinction of Aryan and Semitic.

Roudinesco has exhaustively read and made a note of everything that, directly or not, might pertain to the issue at stake for her. Her investigation is staggering, and leaves unscathed no reader even slightly worth a human being, let alone worthy of being human. Surely, if only for that reason, she might be forgiven for letting her argument go meandering as would a river lost and, practically, stagnating. Patience if not self-flagellation is what she requires of her reader. Which, admittedly, could be a blessing if the case were finally closed.

Instead, for the time being, things turn out to be even murkier than one would imagine. The French revolution both spins out anti-Semitism and spawns Zionism, both the virus and its antidote, even as of Abraham's seed are born Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, not to mention both Moses and Jesus, neither of whom for that matter set foot either in the Promised Land or in that Kingdom of God of which the Church is claimed to be the sacramental emblem. So that, truth is, through the iconoclastic streak of Abraham's faith, both Israel and the Church end up colonizing a world that, by asserting its own emancipation from their respective religious obscurantism, also known as fundamentalism, will in its turn call for emancipation from its own cultural obscurantism, also known as secularism: Abrahamic iconoclasm consists, not in opposing the religious and the secular, not in the disfiguration of one by the other, but in their mutually transcending

reconfiguration of each other. Jews will thus seek emancipation from the residually ‘Christian’ subconscious obscurantism of Western secularism. In Roudinesco’s perspective, in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, this allows for viewing the birth of Zionism as an offshoot of the French revolution. Founders of Zionism, both Herzl and Nordau were journalists in Paris. Their motto: to decolonize the Jewish self. Subsequently, however, with the advent of the state of Israel, this self-decolonization soon will itself be felt by the Palestinians as a further instrument of Western colonialism. By turning the Promised Land into a conquered piece of land, a new factor of divisiveness seems thus unleashed across the face of the earth: one human group is always the colonizer of another, further complexifying any possibility of mutual otherness as transcending instance of tribal identification. And oddly enough, the poetically anti-Semitic Jung supports the cause of Zionism and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, Freud is already horrified, fearful of the worst scenario that could take place, and did or does even to this day.

The holocaust not only took place, but is also continued by negationists of every ilk, religious or otherwise. Worse still, prominent scholars Jewish or not so Jewish (Chomsky), rise up in defense of negationists’ right to freedom of speech. The documents accumulated by Roudinesco are so revolting that they so defy the reader that he wonders if Auschwitz could ever be the epochal divide between before and after the traumatism. Tossed to and fro, even the memory of it takes a beating (H. Arendt vs. G. Scholem, among others), and not so much identity per se as the identification of being human will forever elude the human being, putting into question the very ‘Jewish question’ that brought the human being into question. Is it still the right question (as Roudinesco at times seems to suggest by ‘returning’ to it)? Or should it rather be forgotten if memory is to be preserved from the sacralization of its history? Is it not time, as Joseph Roth has suggested, for a post-Zionist era to dawn at long last? Why could one not be unique and yet refrain from beholding oneself so ‘irreplaceable’ as to deny others a similar claim? Or, for that matter, as Roudinesco suggests at the end of her book, to be so unique and irreplaceable as to be reduced to one’s community, one’s tribe, one’s roots, one’s piece of land: that is, putting it in more biblical terms, as she does, to be at once accursed and blessed either by or in spite of God, like everybody else or, at least, like Jacob when, though wounded, is blessed by his God and is called into being human, one among others.

#### *Afterword*

Deprived of a substantial conclusion, the reader is left wondering what the core of this work is all about. Through predominantly psycho-analytical hues of just about everything, it even copes with Jews and Judaism and some common denominator, swiftly summed up in the hallowed phrase, or idiolect, or mantra — just an abstraction as unobtrusive as it is elusive and all the more enticing for being hazy: “Once a Jew, always a Jew.” No incarnation, but rather sublation of a subliminal Jew through the sublimation even of Jewishness, at the cost of a post-Western and post-Zionist subversion of language; a subversion in whose amplitude, after Auschwitz and its deconstruction, is henceforth anchored a new question: not so much who is as who is not an anti-Semite — albeit in spite of God or of no God or, even, of one’s Jewishness? Impossible?

GABRIEL VAHANIAN is a distinguished professor of theology. His major books include *The Death of God* (1961), *Wait without Idols* (1964), *No Other God* (1966), and *God and Utopia: the Church in a Technological Age* (1977).

©Gabriel Vahanian.

Vahanian, Gabriel. "From Human Being to Being Human: An Impossible Short-Cut," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 115-123.

JCRT 12.1 (2012)