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**Bernardo Sorj\***

Is it possible to be an agnostic or atheist and a Jew at the same time ?

This question that I am asked very often, is based on the idea that Judaism is no more than a religion. I usually explain that although Judaism is also a religious tradition with many trends, it has become something different in modern times. Actually, it diversified and in this diversification, several secular forms of Judaism developed, some of them based on downright atheistic views. In this way Secular Judaism became something that certain writers defined as cultural tradition and others called civilization.

This answer, which is undoubtedly correct, allowed me to hide a basic subject that only nowadays, when the ideologies that helped me to build my secular philosophy have faded away, seems to be obvious: atheism is always part of a tradition. For my generation atheism seemed to incarnate universality confronted with the narrowness of a religious vision. I still believe that atheism, be it from Jewish, Muslim or Christian origin, meant, at least for several generations, the search of wider horizons of solidarity and identification with Humanity as a whole. However I also understood that all this was part of a dialogue within a tradition.

An atheistic view of the world is only possible in a basically theistic culture. It doesn't make sense in religious non-theistic cultures (like the Eastern traditions) since it challenges a vision of the world in which divinity has a leading role. Therefore, atheism places itself as an alternative to a system of beliefs and values connected with a God, and even when atheism tries to break completely with this system, it exists because a religious tradition existed before, a tradition that was concerned with the same problems that are still challenging today for unbelievers.

Since atheism was a common denominator for people who shared values, ideas and beliefs, it ignored the diversity of origins and the fact that God and the religious

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\* Professor of Sociology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and Director of the Edelstein Center for Social Research (besorj@attglobal.net).

traditions were seen in a different way by people who otherwise agreed on non-theistic views.

We do not want to be unjust and, having the “insight” of a retrospective view and influenced by contemporary knowledge, to devalue what several decades ago was the prevailing feeling of a community that challenged the narrowness of religious beliefs that were associated with institutions that excluded and dehumanized those who did not share their faith.

But today things changed. History demonstrated that atheism can be just as inquisitorial and intolerant as religion, and therefore the things that really matter are not the beliefs of each person about the transcendental extent of life, but the capacity to accept different views and the will to respect different ideas within democratic institutions that may provide a common ground for communication and mutual understanding.

If we want to reconstruct Secular Judaism for our time we must take a fresh critical look at the old, repressive and obsolete atheism, understand with which God we are quarreling, with which (frustrated) hopes of redemption we used to fancy ourselves, what a kind of past we wanted to bury and what treasures of our past, we hurriedly wanted to abandon. We must reexamine our behavior in the past without resigning an open-minded approach to the changes in the world.

## JUDAISM AND TRASCENDENCY

The crisis of the diehard atheistic views or the atheism that stressed its universality, is the crisis of the beliefs in which atheism was born and developed since the beginning of modernity. These beliefs, liberal or socialist, were based on the trust on mankind and its capacity to dominate nature and organize society, and on the progressive sense of History and the capability of science to give all the needed answers to all the doubts of human curiosity.

With the failure of Marxism and of the societies that pretended to be based on it, we discovered that atheism, at least as it was built by former generations, was very similar to religion, since it also had its roots in a system of suppositions of

transcendancy or omnipotence ( or as we say today “empowerment”). Today we may be atheists, but this is a personal belief, a feeling that is unconnected to any ideology that may offer a general view of society or express the feeling that we have a way to control our individual or collective destiny.

How can we recover the lost feeling of transcendancy ? How can we regain the feeling of power we had when we thought we knew how to push History in the right direction? The old atheism had occupied the place of God, but today, instead of thinking that if God is dead everything is allowed, we remain with the feeling that if God is dead we are free to think everything, but nothing we want to achieve as a community is possible.

The feeling of transcendancy produced by Secular Judaism was connected with a strong attachment to prestigious social ideas but never faced directly such issues as the place of the individual in the universe, the meaning of life, how to face personal suffering or how to ritualize the great moments of life like birth, marriage, or death. In our contemporary world, where subjective feelings have such an important role, religion has the kind of language and the metaphors that are most suited to fill voids and convey feelings that science is unable to express, in spite of the benefits Prozac or psychoanalysis (both products of the secular world) may offer.

## DEMOCRATIC JUDAISM

Judaism in the Twentieth Century was reformulated by Socialism and Nationalism, especially in Europe, and by Liberalism, particularly in Germany and afterwards in America. All these ideologies allowed the renewal of the communities and gave them the possibility to rebuild their own Judaism and their connections with the outside world. These solutions seen insufficient today, and owing to the hollowness of Secular Judaism, we are witness to important advances both of xenophobic Nationalism and religious Fundamentalism.

First, Secular Judaism revived the messianic message, but when Jews became richer and more "bourgeois" in the second part of the Twentieth Century, even in Israel, utopist hopes weakened and became a kind of mysticism without social meaning. The capacity of Secular Judaism to renew the utopist spirit depends both from internal

processes within the communities and from larger movements of change within the larger society, which are not yet clearly defined.

As long as Humanity will not seek new utopias, the challenge for Secular Judaism will be to rebuild the dialogue with Jewish tradition, particularly with the Jewish tradition that accepts Modernity and wishes to be a bridge to the world. This Jewish tradition only will be relevant if it will be a source of wisdom and not of dogmas, in which Zionism will remain faithful to its origins and will last as a political ideology and not a theology. In this sense, Secular Judaism has many things to share with religious traditions, like Reform and Conservative. Everything, but God.

Perhaps there is also another difference between Secular Judaism and the religious traditions, since the former recognizes avowedly that Judaism has no monopoly of any truth and therefore should not be considered as the best source of answers to many of the problems and challenges of the new millenium. The trends of renewal within the Jewish religion since the ninetieth Century made a "tour de force" to translate their tradition to the values of Modernity and to demonstrate that Judaism can be modern while Modernity may be lived as a Jewish experience. These efforts made sense as part of the cultural battles within the Jewish community, but very often enlarged the world of Judaism without really contributing with something substantial to modern wisdom. Perhaps today it would be prudent to recognize that Judaism has no answer to all the questions and since it came into history many centuries ago, it has many elements that are incompatible with a true democratic and humanistic vision.

The renewal of Secular Judaism will demand a huge effort to overcome the cultural impact of the Holocaust because it must avoid its transformation in a tool for the impoverishment of Judaism, a barrier of separation between Jews or a sterile dialogue in which we finally may talk with the executioners and not with the victims. The best way to honor the dead, at least for those who don't want to build a Judaism based on fear and persecutions, is not so much to find the causes of the Holocaust (in spite of the merits of the intellectual effort) but to rescue and give a new life to the world that was destroyed with its enormous richness of different ideas and intellectual and artistic trends.

In spite of the fact that at the beginning of the new century, Secular Judaism finds itself in a defensive position, it disposes of a great historical and cultural capital, a

tradition of participation in the big political challenges of Humanity and its activism and participation in the struggles for social justice and for a world with stronger bonds of solidarity. Therefore a dialogue between secular and religious Judaism, when both have a commitment with Humanism, is needed for both of them: the first may enlarge its horizons so as not to be limited to a narrow view of life which is unconcerned by anything but the community, or to become a individualist or narcissist mysticism; the second, in order to reconstruct its links with the sources of Jewish tradition. This dialogue has existed, hidden or openly, in the past, but it was destroyed by the Holocaust or repressed by Communism. Whoever may read nowadays the writings of great thinkers of Secular Judaism like, for instance, Chaim Zhitlovsky or Echad Haam will be impressed by their knowledge of the religious tradition, in the same way we are astonished by the fact that many religious Orthodox young people ignore completely a whole tradition of solidarity and struggle for a better world that characterised modern Judaism.

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Dr. Bernardo Sorj is Professor of Sociology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and Visiting Professor, Maison des Schiences de L'Homme, Paris. This essay was published in the newspaper *Identidad* in Uruguay, August, 2002, and reprinted with permission of the publisher and the author.