

Ks. JAN SŁOMKA
Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach
Wydział Teologiczny

LEVINAS' INTERPRETATION OF CREATION VERSUS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

KONCEPCJA STWORZENIA EMMANUELA LEVINASA A TEOLOGIA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA

ABSTRACT:

The biblical notion of creation lies at the very heart of Levinas' anthropology and metaphysics. He realises that the notion is totally ignored by modern philosophy, and he does not endeavour a discussion of the subject within the framework of philosophy. Instead, he frequently engages in a polemic with the concept of creation which prevails in traditional Christian theology. His perception of man as a created being, as well as his metaphysics as a whole, draws on desire rather than thought seeking to comprehend, or ontology; he demonstrates that modern scepticism, or post-modernism, opens a way to better see man as a created being. He argues that the notion of creation is far more closely related to the concept of separation than that of participation which pervades traditional theology, while man, as a created freedom, is atheistic by nature. The temporality of human life, on the other hand, is a relation to God. All the above mentioned strands of Levinas' thought, developed in a controversial way, may prove inspiring for modern theological reflection on creation. This inspiring and critical function of Levinas' philosophy is clearly visible against the background of Jürgen Moltmann's theology and the theological project of Marc Harris.

Biblijna idea stworzenia stanowi centrum antropologii i całej metafizyki Emmanuela Levinasa. Wie on, że ta idea jest zupełnie pomijana przez współczesną filozofię i nie usiłuje na ten temat w ramach filozofii dyskutować. Natomiast wielokrotnie podejmuje polemikę z koncepcją stworzenia dominującą w tradycyjnej teologii chrześcijańskiej. Swoje pojmowanie człowieka jako stworzenia wyprowadza, podobnie jak całą metafizykę, z pragnienia, a nie myśli szukającej zrozumienia, czyli ontologii; wskazuje, że współczesny sceptycyzm, czyli postmodernizm, otwiera drogę do lepszego zobaczenia człowieka jako stworzenia. Pokazuje, że idea separacji o wiele lepiej koresponduje z ideą stworzenia, niż mocno obecna w tradycyjnej teologii idea partycypacji, a człowiek, jako wolność stworzona, jest z natury ateistyczny. Natomiast czasowość ludzkiego życia jest relacją z Bogiem. Te kontrowersyjnie poprowadzone myśli Levinasa mogą być inspirujące dla współczesnej teologicznej refleksji nad stworzeniem. Inspirującą i krytyczną funkcję myśli Levinasa wyraźnie widać w zestawieniu jej z teologią Jürgen Moltmanna oraz projektem teologicznym Marca Harris.

1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas' thinking is rooted in the Old Testament, though at the same time it belongs to the European philosophy of 20th century. Its double genesis is particularly visible in an analysis of (when one analyses) his concept of creation. The concept is clearly biblical in its nature and foreign to modern philosophy, yet it occupies a central position in Levinas' thought.¹ Levinas is aware that the notion of creation is nowadays treated as a non-philosophical issue, and he does not attempt to rationally prove his stance. He simply accepts, together with the Bible, that man is a created being. Neither is he seeking a common ground with other contemporary philosophies, although he repeatedly wonders when and why the European philosophy abandoned the idea of creation. At the same time, his reflection on creation is developed in opposition to the theological teaching based on the European philosophic tradition.

There are no doubts that, to a large extent, Levinas owes his idea of creation to F. Rosenzweig. It is a fact acknowledged by Levinas himself.² His general acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Rosenzweig is particularly related to the idea of creation. A study of that relationship deserves a separate comprehensive research, which is not part of this article.

For the sake of clarity, it has to be stated that Levinas is preoccupied with man. The world draws his interest insofar as it is a world where man lives. Being no infinity or transcendence, nor an ethical subject, the world in itself is of no interest to Levinas. The world has obviously also been created, however, the analysis below pertains exclusively to man as a created being.

It is not possible to present an exhaustive account of the idea in one article since, as has already been mentioned, it is one of the most significant ideas in Levinas' anthropology, and, together with other related ideas, it weaves through his entire work. Therefore, in order to present the basic structure of his thought, this article will focus on a handful of basic notions which Levinas employs when writing about creation: metaphysics, scepticism, separation, freedom and temporality. Each of the above mentioned notions is significant for Levinas' entire thinking, so they will only be discussed insofar as it is necessary in order to present his idea of creation. In the discussion of the relevant notions, an emphasis will be placed on Levinas' disputes with the tradition of Christian theology, while the general links

¹ In his article, Jeffrey Hanson notes that the notion of creation *ex nihilo* is of crucial importance to Levinas, yet it is relatively seldom found in his writings. He explains it pointing out that the notion is of theological nature, while Levinas consistently claims that he is a philosopher, not a theologian. I would not totally agree with Hanson. Although the phrase "ex nihilo" is, indeed, a theological concept which rarely finds its way to Levinas' writings, the notion of "creation" is a biblical one, and it is ever present in his texts. See also footnote 7.

² Emmanuel Levinas. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press) 32. Hereafter this work will be referred to a TI. Rosenzweig is "too often present in this book to be cited". More on the subject: J. Hanson, *op. cit.*, footnote 2.

of his thought with the main trends of 20th-century continental philosophy will not be analyzed: they have already been thoroughly studied, and they do not contribute significantly to the understanding of Levinas' idea of creation.

The second part of this article will address the question asked in the title about the way in which Levinas' thought on creation may serve as *ancilla theologiae*. In that context, each of the relevant notions, metaphysics, scepticism, separation, freedom and temporality, will be discussed again. Special emphasis will be placed on the potential use of Levinas' thought to better understand and describe the relationship between theology and modern sciences.

As part of summary, we will confront Levinas' thought on creation with Jürgen Moltmann's and Marc Harris's theology.

2. Status Questionis

As has already been mentioned, the notion of creation is nowadays considered as a non-philosophical one. It is thus no wonder that philosophers commenting on Levinas' thought leave out his reflection on man as a created being. In a comprehensive article devoted to Levinas in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, and the attached bibliography of almost 300 titles, there is no discussion of the idea. A JSTOR search has pointed to three relevant texts, which are briefly presented below.

The article "L'idée de création chez Levinas : une archéologie du sens" by Olmedo Gaviria Alvarez,³ first presents Levinas' idea of creation and his references to religious traditions and the European philosophy. Referring to those traditions, Levinas wonders why modern philosophy has abandoned the idea. In the main body of the article, the author focuses on demonstrating that Levinas' idea of creation is not related to the question about the origin and purpose of man, but to the question of man's actual relationship with God. The idea of creation points to the relationship with God as the source of meaning, and, since for Levinas it is always an ethical relationship that becomes the source of meaning, the idea of creation as an actual relationship with God is inseparably linked to the description of an ethical relationship with another human being. In conclusion, the author claims that there is a close link between the idea of creation and the idea of brotherhood in Levinas' thinking.

The article "Schöpfung bei Emmanuel Levinas" by Joseph Wohlmuth⁴ gives a general account of Levinas' idea of creation and then proceeds to an analysis of his thought from the perspective of German theology. It is a theology that is solidly founded on German idealism. That is probably the reason for the author's introductory claim that the theology of creation has come to terms with the

³ Olmedo Gaviria Alvarez. 1974. *L'idée de création chez Levinas: une archéologie du sens*, "Revue philosophique de Louvain", QUATRIÈME SÉRIE, Vol. 72, No. 15: 509-538.

⁴ Josef Wohlmuth. 1992. *Schöpfung bei Emmanuel Levinas*, "Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie", N° 4: 408-426.

problems posed by the development of modern science.⁵ He compares Levinas' thought to J. Moltmann's theology of creation and demonstrates its connection with the "theology after the Holocaust". He also undertakes a thorough analysis of the way in which Levinas addresses the question of the Creator God's responsibility for the evil committed by people.

"Creature Discomforts: Levinas' Interpretation of Creation *Ex Nihilo*",⁶ an article by Jeffrey Hanson, is the latest study of the idea of creation in Levinas' work. The author indicates two purposes Levinas seeks to accomplish by introducing the notion of creation *ex nihilo*.⁷ First, it describes the condition of the ethical subject. It points to the absolute character of the ethical demand. If man is created *ex nihilo*, there is nothing prior to the ethical demand. Secondly, Levinas aims to "reconfirm the *ex nihilo* ethical subject in her singularity without reabsorbing her into a totality". Therefore, for Levinas, the notion of creation is closely linked to that of separation. In the second part of his essay, Hanson discusses the relationship between the notions of creation *ex nihilo* and paternity. The third part of the essay "examines the curious destiny of creation *ex nihilo*". Whereas in the beginning of his career, Levinas considers creation *ex nihilo* as "too passive to capture the sense of subjectivity", in his later work, *Otherwise than Being*, "creation *ex nihilo* is singled out as the only idea that captures the radical passivity of the subject". According to Hanson, a growing emphasis on the passivity of the subject contributes to an increasing inconsistency in Levinas' thought: it seems to undermine the absolute primordially of the ethical demand, which is so strongly stressed in *Totality and Infinity*.

Such relative lack of interest in Levinas' idea of creation is in sharp contrast with the general popularity of Levinas' thought among theologians. The topic of Levinas vs Christian theology has been raised many times in the past decades. A sound review of those publications, accompanied by a classification of various ways in which the relation between Levinas and Christian theology is perceived, has been provided by Robyn Horner in his text "On Levinas' Gift to Christian Theology"⁸. In 21th century alone, two books were published under the same title, "Levinas and Theology", one by Michael Purcell in 2006, and the other by Nigel

⁵ Almost thirty years later, it is difficult to accept such a statement. The mentality shaped by modern science increasingly dominates, calling for theology of creation that will address its demands.

⁶ Hanson, Jeffrey. 2015. *Creature Discomforts: Levinas's Interpretation of Creation Ex Nihilo*, in: *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World. Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology*, Edited by Brian Treanor, Bruce Ellis Benson, and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press) 113-127.

⁷ Unlike Hanson, I believe that Levinas treats the notion of creation as a primary premise of his anthropology rather than a secondary concept resulting from his previous assumptions and the need to justify other ideas. It is a biblical concept, so for Levinas it is prior to any philosophical notion.

⁸ Horner, Robyn. *On Levinas's Gifts to Christian Theology*, in: *The Exorbitant. Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, ed. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Singer. 2010. (Fortham University Press, New York) 120-149. The idea of creation does not make a significant appearance neither in Horner's text, nor in the entire volume.

Zimmermann in 2013, which demonstrates that the issue is still topical⁹. Neither of them raises the theme of creation in Levinas' work.

3. Metaphysics: a Desire Rather than Ontology

Already the first sentence of the first subchapter devoted to the issue of creation exposes a controversy between Levinas' thought and classical theology:

Theology imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology.¹⁰

To comprehend that sentence, it is essential to remember Levinas' understanding of "ontology", as he attributes a particular meaning to the notion. In line with the etymology of the word, he perceives ontology as any effort taken with the aim to comprehend being. Ontology is a theory of being. Levinas, therefore, links ontology with any form of cognition, or the process of defining being with concepts. For him, also the thought of Heidegger belongs to the realm of ontology. Viewed from such a perspective, the whole philosophical tradition originating from Socrates and called metaphysics by Aristotle, becomes ontology for Levinas.¹¹ He writes:

Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.¹²

In his own specific way, Levinas draws a clear distinction between ontology and metaphysics. It is the subject of the whole subchapter in the first part of *Totality and Infinity*, "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology".¹³ While ontology is about comprehension, metaphysics is about desire and scepticism. A description of desire opens the first part of *Totality and Infinity* (18nn). Desire comes first. Metaphysics emerges and persists because of the desire of the Other that remains in us. "The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, ...The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other."¹⁴ Thus, metaphysical desire is not secondary to the knowledge or imagination of the object of desire. We also experience desires directed towards more or less specific objects, they can, however be satisfied; they are essentially desires for something that can be embraced, comprehended, absorbed, or made The Same, and Levinas usually refers to them as needs. Let us, however, reiterate Levinas' fundamental thesis: in man, there is a desire that is prior to any idea of the object of desire. It goes beyond immanence: it is transcendence, metaphysics.

⁹ Purcell, Michael. 2006. *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge University Press); Zimmermann, Nigel. 2013. *Levinas and Theology* (BollmohuryT&T Clark).

¹⁰ TI 296.

¹¹ It has to be noted that the distinction between metaphysics and ontology made by Levinas diverges from the set arrangements. His concept of ontology also covers what is usually considered as metaphysics.

¹² TI 47.

¹³ TI 46-52.

¹⁴ TI 37.

Since desire always comes first, prior to a subject, the impossibility to satisfy it is part of its very nature. Therefore, any effort of ontology, any intellectual result of its work, is immediately contested as inadequate vis a vis the desire. The desire remains a continuous desire of The Other, while any knowledge acquired via ontology becomes, ipso facto, The Same. Thus, ontological desire is closely linked to scepticism, which means challenging any description, system or intellectual construction built on the basis of ontology.

Similarly to the primacy of desire, metaphysics precedes ontology. Therefore, objecting to the description of the relationship between the creation and the Creator in terms of ontology, Levinas portrays it as a metaphysical relationship. In other words, if ontology is a movement of thought aiming at comprehension, then, according to Levinas, the Creator-creation relationship totally falls outside that movement; it is unsusceptible to comprehension or, to use Levinas' own words, it is anarchic. One can speak or write about it, invoke the fact of creation, capture it in intellectual constructs, the creation itself, however, remains indefinable, and, like desire, it belongs to the logics of The Other. Creation is only "comprehensible" in terms of metaphysics, not ontology. The word "comprehensible" has been put in inverted commas, as comprehension in its generally accepted meaning takes us almost automatically into the realm of ontology.

The primacy of desire helps to place Levinas' anthropology in the context of the European philosophical tradition: man is primarily a free being rather than a rational being. To invoke major theological traditions: here Levinas approaches Augustine rather than Aquinas.

4. In Praise of Scepticism

Scepticism has already been mentioned in this article. In *Proper names*, his collection of essays, Levinas discusses, inter alia, *Voice and Phenomenon* by Derrida. That is where Derrida levels his criticism at Husserl's belief in the possibility of an assumptionless description of reality, and where he develops his idea of deconstruction. The work is generally considered as a postmodernist manifesto. Having presented Derrida's deconstruction project, filled with sheer delight at the act of destruction which Derrida has performed on all the axioms of Western thought, Levinas writes:

It will be less readily recognized – Derrida would probably refuse to do so – that this critique of being in its eternal presence of ideality allows us, for the first time in the history of West, to conceive of *the being of the creature* without resorting to the ontic narrative of the divine operation – without treating the „being“ [„être“] of creature as *a being* [*un étant*] from the outset, without bringing to bear negative and empirical concepts, such as contingency or „generation and corruption“ – concepts as ontic as the incorruptibility of the Whole. For the first time, the „less being“, which is that of creature, is shown in its verbliness of verb.¹⁵

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas. 1987. *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, Hors sujet, Montpellier: Fata Morgana) 60.

As he notes earlier, Levinas is fully aware that Derrida and other 20th century philosophers will not be able to agree with him on this point, as the very idea of creation is foreign to them. Thus, he is able to sympathise with postmodernism as far as the criticism of philosophical tradition, the act of destruction is concerned, however, the intellectual paths of Levinas and the postmodernists totally split apart on the subject of “man as a created being”.¹⁶

The quoted passage demonstrates the importance of scepticism for Levinas’ notion of creation: the scepticism that challenges the foundations of systematising Western thought, which he refers to as ontology. The thought, or ontology, is founded on the principle of the unity of being, formulated by Parmenides, developed by Plotinus and continued by Spinoza and Hegel. Levinas writes that “multiplicity is taken to be the ontological fallenness of beings mutually limiting one another in their proximity. Since Parmenides across Plotinus we have not succeeded in thinking otherwise”.¹⁷ In an attempt to “think otherwise”, Levinas follows Plato as he commits patricide on Parmenides,¹⁸ challenging the principle of the unity of being, he rejects, however, the Platonic idea of the multiplicity of beings as fallenness. To Levinas, multiplicity as the fundamental structure of beings is the result of creation rather than fall. Multiplicity as the fundamental structure of being precludes the possibility of synthesis and systematisation as the final effect of thinking. It calls for scepticism.

5. Separation, not Participation

Since multiplicity is the fundamental structure of beings, one should not wonder that “separation” is one of the most important terms used by Levinas to describe the relationship between the Creator and the creation. It stands in clear opposition to the term “participation” introduced by Plato and embraced as part of the basic Neoplatonic vocabulary. Consequently, “participation” is one of the key terms in Western philosophy. Augustine incorporated that philosophical notion in the Christian idea of creation, and it thus pervaded Latin theology. It is within the category of participation, with all the richness of its content provided by the Western philosophical tradition, that the classical theological description of the Creator – creation relationship is placed. Levinas radically rejects the philosophical idea of participation.¹⁹ He claims that separation is “the ultimate structure

¹⁶ That is how the work of Levinas is perceived, i.a., by Carl Raschke. He presents Levinas’ philosophy as one of the significant sources contributing to the construction of the post-modernist theory of religion. Referring to Levinas’ thought, he repeatedly juxtaposes it with that of Derrida. Raschke, Carl. 2012. *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory. Toward a Semiotics of Event* (University of Virginia Press) pp. 108-140. Raschke does not refer to the idea of creation in his text.

¹⁷ TI 108.

¹⁸ In *Sophist*, B257.

¹⁹ More on the subject: Jill Robbins. 1999. *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 87-90. The Author also stresses that Levinas raises the question of participation primarily for polemical purposes.

of being”,²⁰ using the term also to describe the Creator – creation relationship: “What is essential to created existence is its separation with regard to the Infinite.”²¹ Separation implies the existence of totally distinct beings. The relationship between the Creator and the creation consists in separation. Both the Creator and the creation, i.e. man, are infinite beings, and an infinite being cannot be limited. Therefore, separation means that beings do not border on one another. Their mutual relation does not consist in limitation, it is of a totally different nature. Since separation is the fundamental structure of beings, metaphysical desire cannot be perceived as a pursuit of the lost and yet sought-after unity. Unity is neither the beginning (arche), nor the final purpose, the ideal. The creation is a free, good work of God, and it is irreversible. Desire is by no means an evidence of shortage or a void that has to be filled; it is not a need, but a desire for the Good, while “the Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy.”²²

The desire for the Good, “desire in its positivity is affirmed across the idea of creation *ex nihilo*”.²³ “Creation *ex nihilo* breaks with system, posits a being outside of every system, that is, there where its freedom is possible”.²⁴ The relationship of creation leaves to the created being “a trace of dependence” on the Creator, it is, however, only a trace rather than presence. Therefore, it is a relationship that continues to be separation, a relationship that is exclusive and unique. From that dependence, which is expressed with the metaphor of a trace, the created being draws its independence, its exteriority to the system. Separation is not simply a negation; it means distinctness and, at the same time, an openness to the Infinite.²⁵

Since man is infinity, the social relation is also a concrete manifestation of separation. It is of different nature than the relation to the Creator insofar that it is not marked by the trace of dependence, yet its fundamental structure is that of separation. The social relation, which is first and foremost a relationship with another man, is known to be the leading theme of Levinas' thinking. It clearly demonstrates that the idea of creation, or the relationship between man and the Creator, is of utmost significance for his entire thought. It has to be reiterated that the surrounding world, according to Levinas, has no dimension of infinity; it is immanence, thus, the relation to the world has a totally different structure.

6. Freedom of Creation, Created Freedom

To Levinas, the notion of creation is closely linked to his belief in the authenticity of human freedom. Man is a created freedom: this sentence summarises Levinas' anthropology, as he treats human freedom as seriously as desire, to which he

²⁰ TI 106.

²¹ TI 109.

²² TI 107.

²³ TI 107.

²⁴ TI 108.

²⁵ See TI 108.

attaches a metaphysical dimension. He acknowledges the primary value and authenticity of freedom, but also its significant limitation. In *Outside the Subject*, Levinas makes an effort to descend to the very depth of our humanity and freedom: he presents a comprehensive analysis of dependence, of the susceptibility of "I" and human freedom. In that depth, he finds a point where "I" becomes a mere "self", an absolute passivity, which is a trace of being creature.²⁶ It is precisely because of its posteriority that freedom is the most relevant evidence that man is a created being. It is autonomous, it is freedom and not its illusion, and at the same time it is limited. It is a freedom that has been created, bestowed. Levinas likes to refer to the investiture of freedom.²⁷ This is where Levinas introduces the motif of chosenness and the closely related responsibility which is prior to any decision; the responsibility which is not chosen and which cannot be avoided. That responsibility or chosenness makes man unique, irreplaceable, unable to hide in the crowd. Thus, the thought on creation is at the same time a thought on the chosenness and uniqueness, on the exceptionality of a single human being.

Human freedom is rooted in the freedom of the Creator, yet that rootedness does not mean participation. It is the autonomous freedom of a separated being. Such an understanding of freedom leads Levinas to a statement that man, i.e. the Will, is atheistic by nature. He devotes a whole subchapter to the subject.²⁸ This article only stresses that Levinas' claim about man's atheism is closely related to the acknowledgement of the fact that man is a created being. The atheism is a plain consequence of the assumption that the Creator -creation relationship consists in separation. Such statements are in obvious contradiction to the entire Christian tradition claiming that God dwells in the human soul.

Levinas strongly emphasises the transcendence of God. God is transcendence and infinity. The other man is transcendence and infinity. Yet, the other man is a body, so we meet him, he reveals himself to us as a face. God, on the other hand, is not carnal, thus, we cannot meet Him face to face. He is absent. We can only perceive His traces. His trace, however, is not explicit, it has no structure of a phenomenon, it is an enigma, a dilemma. Similarly, the way God speaks to man has the nature of a trace, it is an enigma, a dilemma, while the Revelation is "a blinking light".²⁹ That is probably the reason why Levinas does not essentially write about God Himself: he acknowledges that nothing can be said about Him directly.

The freedom that is created, or bestowed, needs justification as, because it is not *casa sui*, it cannot find justification in itself. Levinas demonstrates that the only justification of freedom is offered by the Other, another man, who gives meaning to my freedom and legitimises it. Such perception of freedom means, inter alia,

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas. 1978. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers) 195, Footnote 13. Hereafter this work will be referred to as OBBE.

²⁷ See TI 89-94.

²⁸ Atheism or the Will, TI 57-63.

²⁹ See OBBE 154.

a dispute with Sartre's existentialism, but also Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*.³⁰ However, the dispute is only a consequence of Levinas' own original thought on human freedom as created freedom and man as created infinity.

Another important statement deals with the category of limit: if man is infinity, or transcendence, and infinity has no limits because of being transcendent, then the freedom of the other man is not the limit of my freedom. Those freedoms do not border on each other, they do not limit each other, nor do they form a totality: "The I's form no totality; there exists no privileged plane where these I's could be grasped in their principle. There is an anarchy essential to multiplicity."³¹ The above implies that there is no common plane of history, no possibility to predict the future. Here Levinas is in fundamental discord with Hegel and his vision of history as a logical process.

7. Temporality of Creation

In the preface to *Time and the Other*, Levinas asks a question "Is time the very limitation of finite being or is it the relationship of finite being to God?" (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, Preface, p.30). It is, in fact, a rhetorical question, and the answer is obvious to Levinas since it underlies one of the main axes of his entire thought: time is the relation of finite being to God, it is thus evidence, an outstanding evidence, of our creaturehood. Our relation with God is diachronic in its structure, since time as a fundamental way of man's existence is our relation with God, or our religion. That relation is not intentional, nor does possess the structure of knowledge since knowledge implies the presentation of God as a subject of cognition, i.e. synchronicity. In his description of that relationship, Levinas is also critical about the notion of eternity: God cannot be conceived as living in eternity, beyond time. Such God would be "an abstract eternity and dead God."³² The temporality and mortality of our lives are at the same time the self, passivity and susceptibility. Those notions, which are of key significance in *Otherwise than Being*, touch the deepest depth of "I", showing an openness towards The Other who cannot be reduced to The Same, or comprehended. That openness, as has already been mentioned, means responsibility which cannot be avoided, irreplaceability.

The reflection on time as a relation of man to God demonstrates most clearly that Levinas develops his thought in opposition to the entire philosophical, and, consequently, theological tradition which perceives time as secondary to eternity, a sign of fallenness, an accidental property. According to Levinas, time is not a degradation of eternity, but the relation to the infinite.³³

³⁰ See TI 307.

³¹ TI 298.

³² Emmanuel Levinas. 1987. *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press) 31. Hereafter this work will be referred to a TO.

³³ See TO 32.

Let us conclude this part of the article with an almost obvious statement: In his analyses of time, Levinas draws heavily from Heidegger.³⁴ However, his perception of man as a created being makes his perspective fundamentally different from Heidegger's, to which he himself refers in a very brief manner. Heidegger thinks time on the basis of death, while Levinas thinks death on the basis of time.³⁵ Such an order of thinking results from his acknowledgement of the absolute primacy of a diachronic relation to the Creator. In a similar way, Levinas and Heidegger differ while reflecting on the nature of human freedom. Here also, Levinas does not complete Heidegger's philosophy with an additional paragraph about man as a created being, but he demonstrates that the recognition of man's creaturehood lends depth to that philosophy, setting it on a solid foundation.

8. Theological Perspective

In his comment on Derrida's work, Levinas argues that post-modernist scepticism does not necessarily have to be identical with nihilism, on the contrary, it can be combined with the recognition of God, man's Creator. Theology, therefore, does not have to reject post-modernism. It may use it as a tool to criticise those modernist trends which it finds contrary to the message of the Gospel, or to validate the solidity of its own intellectual foundations.

The reading of Levinas encourages such a critical look at the long tradition of symbiosis between theology and the philosophical tradition originating from Plato and Aristotle – a symbiosis which has resulted in ontotheology. It is particularly significant for the subject discussed in this article: Levinas demonstrates that theology can – and should – reacknowledge the biblical notion of “creation” as absolutely primary, while all others, taken from philosophical traditions, should be treated as temporary annotations which can – and should – be abandoned when they cease to help us understand the biblical word “creation.” That reflection suggest a return to the biblical language as the primary and fundamental tool in the theological narrative on creation. The imagery and ambiguousness, or sometimes enigmaticness of that language are in fact its strength and the sign of perfection. The language of philosophy is of ancillary nature, thus, it should not claim any right to superiority. The above refers to the whole entirety of categories and systems developed by our philosophical tradition.

On the other hand, it is clearly visible that the Christian teaching on creation is now struggling with a mentality shaped by the domination of modern science, while the incredible development of technology seems to reaffirm the predominance of the scientific paradigm. The scientific explanations of how the

³⁴ Anyone who reads Levinas' text will frequently come across passages where he acknowledges his philosophical indebtedness to Heidegger, at the same time expressing his disappointment at the involvement of the latter on the side of the Nazi regime.

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas. 2000. *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo, preface by Jacques Rolland (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press) see 106.

world and man have emerged and how they function are accepted as intellectually obvious: the universe is described by physics and the related cosmology, the origin of man – by the theory of evolution, while human consciousness is regarded as an effect of electrical impulses within our cerebral convolutions. Even though such explanations contain numerous gaps, also of fundamental nature, they seem to form a coherent whole, and they prove to be strong enough to totally dominate the intellects of modern people, especially well-educated inhabitants of the Western world. Thus, the polemics theology endeavours within the limits designated by the scientific mentality and paradigm are predominantly hopeless.

Traditional theological teaching on creation, which is based on ontology, is unable to step beyond the above mentioned paradigm. Its perception of creation within the categories of causality and purpose almost unavoidably pushes it towards the paradigm of modern sciences. Even though causality in classical metaphysics is not identical with the causality defined by modern sciences, the similarity of notions and the related images leads to a very strong superimposition of meanings, and it takes a significant effort to unravel the resulting misunderstandings, which cannot be fully avoided, anyway.

A different path has been taken by biblical fundamentalism, mainly in the United States. It strives to adjust to the modern scientific paradigm and defend the truth on creation from within (e.g. the notion of creation linked to the intelligent design theory).

Both the paths described above seem to lead nowhere. And since *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith which is not supported by intellect degenerates, becomes mere fideism and loses its vitality. To what extent can Levinas' thinking help us avoid such traps? The essential elements of his thinking include a close link between the notion of creation and anthropology, a stress on humanity as infinity, which implies defending humanity against any reduction, particularly the reduction of humanity by the paradigm of modern science. Levinas' thought refers to our innermost experience, treating it seriously and with trust, and taking it beyond the diktat of modern sciences. It reaffirms that the knowledge of the latter is of secondary, external nature, belonging to the realm of The Same, the objective, by its very essence. Levinas, therefore, helps to restore intellectual weight to the biblical categories. Their pre-scientific nature, which is a most serious charge in the view of the modern scientific mentality, is presented as intellectual wisdom which, in relation to man and humanity, is prior and superior to any scientific rationality. It makes it possible for man to perceive himself as a created being in the biblical categories, without a compulsive need for apology so as to reconcile that thinking with the paradigm of modern science.

Thus, with a circular, hermeneutic movement, our thought makes a long journey through ontology back to the Scriptures. It is by no means a return to naivete, or rejection of what has been achieved during that long journey: on the contrary, the journey has enabled a deeper spiritual understanding of the biblical message. The word "spiritual" does not mean anything inferior to what is rational: it can be

perceived as a higher and deeper form of rationality, a way of thinking fit for our humanity that understands its own creaturehood, from which it draws the strength to live in a human way.

What considerably differs Levinas' thinking from traditional Christian theology is the notion of separation. Christian tradition puts a strong emphasis on God dwelling in the human soul, it is keen to describe the community of God and man as a parallel to the inter-human community, it knows the notion of theosis. Augustine begins his *Confessions* with the famous sentence "our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee".

Levinas has a different perception: the dependence of the creation upon its Creator is only a trace which presumes the Creator's absence. Desire, which is the foundation of metaphysics, is not a desire for God, no matter how we understand Him, it is a desire without a correlate. Levinas does not know Augustine's "reposing in God", he only knows a trace of the Creator. What is more, that "weak" metaphor of a trace and the concept of separation are for him a warrant of the reality of human freedom. It is from the concept of separation that he develops his reflection on atheism.³⁶

Levinas draws his idea of creation from the Old Testament, and as a philosopher and a Jew, he does not recognise the Revelation in Jesus Christ. He knows the New Testament, and he occasionally quotes the Gospels, however he treats them as a human text, while in Jesus he sees one of the Jewish teachers. Christian faith and theology, on the other hand, are founded on the belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Yet, it seems that also that aspect of Levinas' thought – the idea of the absence of God – may provide an inspiration for Christian theology. It might serve as a point of reference in the reflection aiming to cleanse theology from some overly anthropomorphic and simplifying perception of the community with God and God's dwelling in the human soul.

What also seems inspiring for Christian theology is the link between the notion of creation and time, and the entire Levinas' reflection on time as the relation of the creation to the Creator. Even though that relation is described as a trace, which implies looking back, it is a relation that is diachronic and anarchic by its nature and is happening now. Levinas refers to it as an intrigue in which Infinity engages with man: „One is tempted to call this plot (fr.: intrigue) religious; it is not stated in terms of certainty or uncertainty, and does not rest on any positive theology.”³⁷

9. Two Confrontations: J. Moltmann i M. Harris

The juxtaposition of Levinas' thought with Christian theology in its entirety seems to be a good starting point for more specific confrontations. Therefore, we

³⁶ Levinas' approach to atheism, which is closely linked to his notion of creation, could be, in my opinion, as inspiring for Christian theology as the idea of creation discussed in this article.

³⁷ OBBE 147.

will now try to confront his ideas with the reflection on creation by two Christian theologians, Jürgen Moltmann³⁸ and Marc Harris.

Moltmann presented his theology of creation in a series of lectures which were then published in a book “God in creation : an ecological doctrine of creation: the Gifford lectures 1984-1985”³⁹. In order to understand the theological and philosophical context of his thought, one has to bear in mind that Moltmann represents Protestant theology, solidly based on the Scriptures. On the philosophical side, he is deeply seated in the tradition of German idealism which draws from Hegel. His theology of creation is generally classified as a variety of pantheism⁴⁰. Moltmann’s book devoted to the theology of creation was published in 1985, thus after the publication of the main body of Levinas’ work⁴¹. As he declares in the introduction, his aim is to renew the theology of creation, which is necessary in the context of new threats and challenges. He writes:

In the 1930s, the problem of the doctrine of creation was knowledge of God. Today the problem of the doctrine of God is knowledge of creation. The theological adversary then was the religious and political ideology of ‘blood and soil’, ‘race and nation’. Today the theological adversary is the nihilism practised in our dealings with nature. Both perversions have been evoked by the unnatural will to power, and the inhumane struggle for domination on earth. The inhumanity of this power complex and its perversion manifests the godlessness of our modern world and its terrifying Godforsakenness.⁴²

To address the above described threats, Moltmann tries demonstrate anew the living presence of God in creation. His thought is theology – it is based on the Christian faith in the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It presents the whole world as a place where the Holy Spirit is active.

Levinas and Moltmann share a similar idea: the notion of creation is opposed to the reductions which modern mentality, including modern science, cause in our thinking about the world. Their perceptions of creation, however, are radically different. Moltmann starts from the world in which we live. He is convinced that a renewed perception of the world, or the perception of the world as God’s creation permeated by the presence of the Spirit, is a necessary starting point for an escape from the growing nihilism.

³⁸ As has already been mentioned, such juxtaposition was presented by J. Wolmuth, however, he focused on the interpretations of the notion “creatio ex nihilo”. We have adopted an entirely different perspective.

³⁹ Moltmann, Jürgen. 1985. *God in creation: an ecological doctrine of creation: the Gifford lectures 1984-1985*, trans. Margaret Kohl from the German *Gott in der Schöpfung: ökologische Schöpfungslehre* published by Christian Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1985. Translation © SCM Press Ltd.

⁴⁰ See Culp, John, “Pantheism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/pantheism/>>.

⁴¹ In his reflection, Moltmann consciously draws from the Jewish thought (see his declaration on p. xiii), however, he never refers to Levinas.

⁴² Preface, s. xi-xii.

For Levinas, the surrounding world is immanence which tells him nothing about God. Only human being is transcendence and reveals God. Thus, his thinking on creation focuses exclusively on man as created being. It is the Face of the neighbour and its ethical call that provide the point of departure. In that call, man recognises the neighbour and himself as created beings. For Levinas, the idea of man as created being is prior to the idea of God. The ethical agitation provoked by the face of the neighbour may then provide a stimulus for ethical reflection on the surrounding world and the perception of the world as God's creation. Levinas does not take that step, but he obviously does not preclude it.

The two ideas of creation described above seem to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive. What brings them together is their opposition to nihilism⁴³. It is also interesting to analyse those two ways of thinking from the perspective of the year 2020, when the concerns expressed by Levinas and Moltmann have been largely substantiated: the technocratic paradigm is growing in dominance, strongly determining man's thinking of himself, while practical nihilism seems widespread. In my opinion, Levinas' thought shows more robustness today compared to that of Moltmann. The ethical experience, the call of the face of the neighbour are the only foothold for reflection on man and the whole world as creation. A renewed ethical perception of the world, seeing the world as God's creation, needs to be based on a renewed ethical perception of man as God's creation. The way in the opposite direction is, in my opinion, closed today.

As has already been mentioned, Moltmann's thinking on creation belongs to the realm of Christian theology. Moltmann thus assumes that seeing the world as God's creation is pre-conditioned by faith in God, the Holy Trinity. Levinas' idea of creation, on the other hand, is a philosophical idea, which he himself stresses repeatedly. It is not based on the prior faith in God, it is a primary anthropological concept. From my perspective of a Christian theologian, I admit that it is Levinas' idea rather than Moltmann's theology that effectively opens a space for dialogue. Following the tracks of Levinas' thinking, it is possible to engage in a dialogue on man as a created being also with those who do not believe in One God in Three Persons. Such a dialogue may create a strong basis for a shared concern about ecology, that is the world where man lives. Therefore, referring to the text by R. Horner, we may claim that Levinas' idea of creation is also his gift to Christian theology.

Marc Harris is the other theologian whose idea of creation we want to briefly confront with Levinas' thinking. His theological project is one of the latest and the most interesting attempts at the theological description of creation. Concerning his assumptions and research goals, he writes: „The Genesis creation stories provide an obvious example, and even now, more than 150 years after Darwin's Origin

⁴³ Levinas rarely refers to nihilism, however, he reiterates that his thinking is an objection against the dominance of neutrality, e.g. *Against the Philosophy of the Neuter*, TI pp. 301-303.

of Species, controversy still rages over how they are best understood theologically in the light of modern science.”⁴⁴

The above quoted sentence points to the paradigm wherein M. Harris intends to develop his theological reflection on creation: it is the paradigm of modern science. Harris's intention is to search for the traces of creation using the latest results of scientific research. From the perspective of Levinas' reflection, it means circulating within immanence i.e. outside humanity⁴⁵. Levinas' claim that modern science moves in the world devoid of human traces is in fact a claim that, by its very nature, science is blind to transcendence. As has already been pointed out, Levinas' notion of creation is essentially identical with that of separation, i.e. transcendence: the traces of creation can be seen in another human being, or in relation with another human being (the intrigue of the infinity), thus in transcendence. Immanence, according to Levinas, bears no significant traces of creation.

Seen from such a perspective, Harris's intention to search for the traces of creation taking modern science as a starting point is clearly doomed to failure. No matter how cautiously he might move in his search and reflection, no matter how much respect he might show to each sentence of the Bible, each phrase of the biblical description of creation, his prior assumption, searching „in the light of modern science”, leaves him within immanence, and any trace which he might recognize as a trace of creation is but a false clue.

The perception of Harris's theological project from the perspective of Levinas' thought reveals a deep conflict: the conflict of two rationalities. It is a conflict where no compromise is possible. Let us iterate the fundamental assumptions of each side of the conflict in order to present its nature in the clearest possible way:

Harris's theological project in its entirety is placed within the rationality of modern science. It is a rationality which does not acknowledge anything above itself. For anything that is outside, it grants temporary legitimacy, in patient anticipation of the moment when it will be able to include and explain it. In other words, that rationality is convinced that eventually it will be able to embrace the entire reality.

In his text *A Rupture of Immanence*⁴⁶, Levinas demonstrates that modern science remains within immanence. The subsequent part of the book points out that immanence can be only broken by another rationality, new or the oldest⁴⁷. What is more, according to Levinas, it is impossible to pass from the rationality of

⁴⁴ <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-mark-harris>.

⁴⁵ Referring to modern science, Levinas wrote: „Contemporary thought thus moves in a world of being without human traces, where subjectivity has lost its place in the midst of spiritual landscape comparable to the one before the astronauts who first set foot on the moon, whence the earth itself appeared as a dehumanised star.” (OGCM p.7).

⁴⁶ The first part of OGCM, pp 1-54.

⁴⁷ OGCM pp. 106-107: „a new rationality – unless this be the oldest rationality, prior to the one that coincides with the possibility of the world – which consequently is not brought back to ontology. A different – or deeper – rationality and one that not allow itself to be led into adventure that, from Aristotle to Heidegger, theology ran when it remained a thought of Identity and Being which was fatal to the God and to the man of the Bible, or to their homonymous.”

modern science to that “new-older” rationality. It is necessary to think differently from the very beginning, and start one’s thinking beyond being. A powerful evidence of such thinking is provided in Levinas’ book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

At the same time, it is obvious that the two rationalities cannot exist alongside, in parallel. Thus, there can be no compromise: it is either modern science, or the other rationality described by Levinas that is the ultimate rationality. A solution of the dilemma is of key importance for anyone who pursues theology, as the nature of theology consists in reflecting on transcendence. Presenting his project of theological research, M. Harris states that „The creationist agenda has tended to dominate the debate”. He is absolutely right: the question about creation is now the realm of probably the most significant theological controversy, where not only the issue of creation as one of the many theological questions is at stake, but the very nature and paradigm of theology itself.

References

- The Exorbitant. Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, ed. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Singer. 2010 (New York: Fortham University Press).
- Hanson, Jeffrey. 2015. *Creature Discomforts: Levinas’s Interpretation of Creation Ex Nihilo*, in: *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World. Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology*, Edited by Brian Treanor, Bruce Ellis Benson, and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press) 113-127.
- Harris, Mark. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-mark-harris>.
- Horner, Robyn. *On Levinas’s Gifts to Christian Theology*, in: *The Exorbitant. Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, ed. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Singer. 2010. (Fortham University Press, New York) s. 120-149.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2000. [GDT] *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo, preface by Jacques Rolland (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Levinas Emmanuel. 1998. [OGCM] *On God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1978. [OBBE] *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. [PN] *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, Hors sujet, Montpellier: Fata Morgana).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. [TO] *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. [TI] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).
- Moltmann, Jürgen. 1985. *God in creation: an ecological doctrine of creation: the Gifford lectures 1984-1985*, trans. Margaret Kohl from the German Gott in der Schöpfung:

ökologische Schöpfungslehre published by Christian Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1985.
Translation © SCM Press Ltd.

Olmedo Gaviria Alvarez. 1974. *L'idée de création chez Levinas: une archéologie du sens*,
"Revue philosophique de Louvain", QUATRIÈME SÉRIE, Vol. 72, No. 15: 509-538.

Raschke, Carl. 2012. *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory. Toward
a Semiotics of Event* (University of Virginia Press).

Purcell, Michael. 2006. *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge University Press).

Robbins, Jill. 1999. *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press).

Wohlmuth, Josef. 1992. *Schöpfung bei E. L.*, "Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie", N°
4: 408-426.

Zimmermann, Nigel. 2013. *Levinas and Theology* (Bollmorbury T&T Clark).

Słowa kluczowe: Emmanuel Levinas, stworzenie, ateizm, sceptycyzm, teologia,
Jürgen Moltmann, Marc Harris

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, creation, theology, Jürgen Moltmann, Marc Harris