

SHMUEL HUGO BERGMAN

by

Nathan Rotenstreich\*

A description of Bergman's religious thinking should be prefaced by a brief account of the philosophical climate of opinion which influenced Bergman and in which he actually participated. The Prague tradition of philosophical thinking had a profound impact on him. Its prominent representative Bernard Bolzano (1781 - 1848), a Roman Catholic, developed as the central ideal the concept of *Wahrheit an sich*, truth in itself, a realm of truth which is independent of propositions, judgments and statements of the thinking subject. It is somehow a Platonic interpretation, not of the object but of truth, which holds that our propositions do not constitute or construct meanings, but that we are able to read truth which is inherent in the structure of the universe.

Another philosopher from the Prague tradition who influenced Bergman was Franz Brentano (1838 - 1917). He too was a Roman Catholic, who parted with the Church over the infallibility dogma. Bergman worked continuously with him and conducted a correspondence with him which was not only of biographical but also philosophical significance.<sup>1</sup> Bergman was influenced by the significance which Brentano attributed to what he called 'evidence' (*Evidenz*): There are statements not only in the area of knowledge and cognition, but also in the area of attitudes, feelings, love and hatred, rejection and attraction, which carry in themselves the ingredient of evidence, so that one can say: This attitude is true: it is morally correct. It is not a question of opinion, of mere evaluation, nor the application of a utilitarian criterion referring to beneficial results of such an attitude in the history of mankind. There are inherent justifications in ethical attitudes.

Circumstances, probably changes in the general climate of opinion, brought Bergman near to the Kantian tradition, through Hermann Cohen, and through Paul Natorp who as a religious and a social thinker had influenced him; as well as through Ernst Cassirer about whom Bergman wrote extensively and with whom he corresponded, The Kantian tradition does not leave room for evidence in the sense of Brentano's position. Yet Bergman's

\* Adapted from a lecture given at a meeting of the Jerusalem Rainbow Group on 10 December 1975 in memory of Shmuel Hugo Bergman (1883 - 1975).

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 7, September 1946, pp. 83 - 158.

philosophy of religion is an attempt towards a synthesis between Brentano and Kant, between the religious conviction carrying its own evidence and the analysis of the presuppositions of the scientific world view including the religious *Weltanschauung*.

There is a third trend in Bergman's thinking which developed in the later part of his life, which brought him back to an intuition he had in the beginning. This is what he called dialogical thinking. It is, to some extent, the existentialist position. It started with the encounter with Buber and the Jewish thinking of the contemporary Jewish renaissance. It just happened that Buber's *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Three Addresses on Judaism) were delivered in Prague where Bergman lived and was very active in the Zionist student organisation "Bar Kochba". Buber's three lectures to that audience (1909-1911) brought about the meeting between them, and the contact continued until the end of Buber's life, in Jerusalem. Yet Bergman maintained a critical attitude towards Buber, due to their different interpretation of religious phenomena, and not least due to an urge or trend in Bergman during his last twenty or thirty years to move towards a closer observance of the commandments, which Buber did not think to be central, according to his philosophy of immediacy. To Buber, Man encounters the Divine, but there is no room for commandments in his philosophy of immediacy. To some extent their ways parted, in spite of the very great influence which Buber exerted on Bergman in their close relationship throughout the years. This brought him to explore the modern existentialist (or dialogical) philosophy in the last book published by him, on the dialogical philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber,<sup>2</sup> which will appear in English and German before long.

In this book, half of which deals with Kierkegaard, Bergman shows his appreciation of the phenomena of religious experience which emerge in that branch of existentialist philosophy, which is distinct from the position held by Heidegger and Sartre. Bergman expresses a clear Jewish motif when he states, in his analysis of Kierkegaard, that the fallacy of existentialism is that it relies on, or remains in, the immediate experience only, without leading to a defined conduct of life (*orach chayyim*). The book is based on lectures which Bergman gave years ago at the Hebrew University. I do not know of other such penetrating criticism of Kierkegaard which concentrates on this confrontation between conduct of life, way of life, and immediate experience. To be sure, it touches also on a tension in Bergman's own thinking.

Since we are concerned with religious thinking, I want to mention an early paper published by Bergman in 1914, called *Kiddush ha-Shem* (The Sanctification of His Name). This concept of *kiddush ha-shem* has in

<sup>2</sup> הפילוסופיה הדיאלוגית מקירקגור עד בובר • Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem 1974.

Jewish tradition the meaning of total devotion, of sacrificing one's life for the sake of God. In this paper, despite many quotations from the Jewish literature through the centuries, Bergman does not take *kiddush ha-shem* to mean devotion in the sense of sacrifice of one's life, but in the sense of responding to the holiness of God; it is the response of man to God. Central in this attitude of sanctification is the activity of man. Man is responding actively; his self-awareness is not mainly, if we may use this term, creature consciousness, but it lies in responding to God. The finale of this very early article is that since activity is central, Zionism is a new manifestation of human activity. It does away with the Jews' passively drifting on the current of world history, but encourages them to take their own active share in it. The last sentence of that article is: "Zionism is our *Kiddush ha-Shem*", i. e. our sanctification of His Name. Only a few sentences relate to Zionism; they clearly reveal the thrust of the paper to create a sort of spiritual creed directing the activity of the Jews in the modern age.

The aspect of activity is sometimes called 'humanism' by Bergman. Humanism centres around the notion of man's own activity, or (to put it differently) is germane with man's own autonomy or spontaneity. It appears in different manifestations. However, Bergman shows that humanism does not connote human self-sufficiency; this is a major motif in his thinking. Autonomy is limited to those areas which are open to man's own evaluation, even when they appear in religious scriptures, like God's commandment to Saul to destroy Amalek, or even his commandment to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. They are open to human evaluation. Bergman criticised Kierkegaard's view of a scale of attitudes in which the ethical attitude is a preliminary stage, yielding place to the religious attitude. He took the view that there is an ethical attitude which may clash with the religious attitude, leaving it to human autonomy to decide in areas of collision. Man has an autonomous right to decide, and is not subjected to a prescribed hierarchial order in which the ethical is subservient to the religious, as the story of Amalek seems to suggest.

But autonomy is not autarchy, self-sufficiency, or mastering of the world. And here, I think, Bergman tried to show that there is a negative correlation between two views. If one takes the view that the world is a sum-total of meaningless data, this leads one to human self-sufficiency; for then man is entitled to impose on the meaningless data his own order. Therefore meaningfulness on the pole of the object leads to constructivism and prescriptivism on the pole of the subject. But if one takes a different view – and this is the point of departure of Bergman's philosophy of religion and religious philosophy – namely that the world is imbued with meanings, then man cannot master the world, but has to respond to the world. His conscious communicative attempt to know the world, to read the world, is the disclosure of built-in meanings. To Bergman, both the prin-

cial religious assumption and the presupposition for all human activities: is the meaningfulness of the world.

The concept of meaning has many meanings, as the analytic philosophy has stressed. What is the meaning to which Bergman addresses himself in reference to his religious attitude and religious philosophy? He emphasised the correlation between religious experience and revelation. Religious experience is an encounter with the transcendent reality, an experience of something happening to a person, which is only validated by 'evidence' (in the Brentano sense), his self-justification, which means that he remains within his own self-enclosed orbit. Bergman takes seriously those who claim religious experience and listens carefully to them. Also from a humanistic point of view he considers this legitimate, because religious experience is a *humanum*.

But when his philosophical presupposition that the world is ultimately imbued with meaningfulness comes in, revelation becomes possible. Revelation then is a deliberate disclosure of the meaning. The meaning which is inherent in the world is articulated, formulated and presented to man. Bergman does not subscribe to the view held by many religious thinkers, that revelation is *needed* because the world is irrational; he assumes that revelation is *possible* because the world is meaningful. Therefore there can be a correlation between experience and revelation. Religious experience does not take place in a vacuum, but is the human response to revelation. This is the hard core of his thinking which crystallised in a prolonged process of study and reflection. Introducing the concept of the event of revelation, he speaks about different revelations, at least as far as the three monotheistic religions are concerned. In his view, new revelation occurs at certain critical moments of human history. The humanism which Bergman represents is the type of humanism found in Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes*, according to which the three revelations have their own justification, seen as the three rings of Nathan the Wise which are equally valuable. Following certain trends of medieval Jewish philosophy, Bergman characterises Judaism as a revelation which concerns a people and not individuals.

The meaningfulness of the world is a concept that has different shades. It assumes that the world as such has a structure; moreover, that this structure can be discerned by the human mind, and that there is a progress in which new vistas of knowledge and cognition can be gained. This meaningfulness of the world implies that our attempts to know the world are not based on an illusion, but that we can *read* the world. It implies further that it is legitimate for man to expect that revelation guides him as to what to do. If the world is meaningful, it will not lead man astray nor leave him lonely. Here Bergman differs from Buber — to come to that point again. The very prevalence of the 'Thou' is essential for Buber. For Bergman, the presence of the 'Thou' is not enough, but he seeks the meaning of the 'Thou',

the revelation, the commandments, as well as the response that the 'Thou' evokes in us. This difference accounts for the difference in life-style between them. Buber stresses the immediacy, Bergman attempts to shape his life according to the commandments and to incorporate them into the texture of his life, as was also Franz Rosenzweig's aim. Bergman thinks that the dialogue, the correlation which is at the basis of the religious experience, does not only allow for immediacy, which Buber stresses, but also for mediation. The meaningfulness of the world has an additional important, in fact religious, implication. It calls for the affirmation, not only for the cognition, of reality – not only for accepting revelation but also for the human approval of reality. In the last period of his life he considered, in the tradition of Jewish prayer, the various blessings of the things of the world which man may enjoy as epitomising the attitude of affirmation. The blessing (*berachah* or *kiddush*) acknowledges inherently that the world is granted to you; it does not belong to you, it is not created by you, you can "enjoy" the world because it comes to meet you; this encounter is expressed in the attitude of blessing. Otherwise – if the world were not given to you – you would be forbidden to use it.

This early attitude of correlation and responding, which was characteristic for the 1914 article – mentioned above – on the Sanctification of the Name (*Kiddush ha-Shem*) became more and more the central core and substance of Bergman's thinking.

Bergman was a very prolific writer and a very alert and extensive reader. He overcame the abundance by creating for himself a dialogue between these different thinkers, all of them somehow criticising one another. He presented the history of philosophy as a continuous dialogue between philosophers who present only partial views and as such articulate totality, in the sense defined by Cusanus, which becomes manifest in the variety of systems. This way of looking at them was a sort of didactical device he created for himself as a teacher, as a professor, as an instructor; concurrently he tried to incorporate in his own thinking these major trends of the wide spectrum covered by this dialogue of philosophers. This attempt toward integration led him to write a very significant book, in the early 'twenties, on the position of the principle of causality in modern physics, which was recently published in English (originally in German<sup>3</sup>). In it he tried to come to grips with the crisis of modern physics as expressed in the thinking of Heisenberg *et al.* He remained a philosopher of science, a philosopher of knowledge. Yet he maintained a distinction between science and knowledge. Knowledge is broader than science; science can be based on certain presuppositions, knowledge can go out towards transcendence. While confining

<sup>3</sup> *Der Kampf um das Kausalgesetz in der jüngsten Physik*, Vieweg & Sohn, Braunschweig, 1929.

knowledge to the area of the data, he did not arrive at the conclusion that science equals knowledge and that therefore only belief can transcend the boundaries of knowledge. Knowledge transcends the boundaries of science, knowledge discloses the meaningfulness of reality, and thus is the principal position of any religious approach.

*Professor Rotenstreich is professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.*