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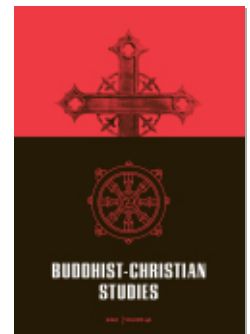
Clouds Speaking and Words Singing: Patterns of Revelation
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Clouds Speaking and Words Singing: Patterns of Revelation and Piety in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a cross-reading of the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible, two sacred narratives that have received very little joint attention in terms of comparative religious study. In the line of Buber's "dialogical hermeneutics," using a reflective approach, I identify and analyze similar patterns of revelation and piety in both bodies of texts: the colors, blue and gold, through which the sacred is seen; the stormy sounds of collective revelation, the dual verticality, both in space and in time, of transmission, and the prescribed ubiquitous forms of repetition and devotion of sacred texts in each tradition. Through content analysis, focusing on the terminologies used in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible, I first examine the way the two traditions depict their mystical visions—in other words, how God is being described; and second, I will examine how piety is being prescribed.

By comparatively examining two "revelation" narratives and the religious practices that stem from it, respectively, in Buddhist piety and in Jewish piety, this article hopes to contribute, from a pluralistic stance, to the study of Hierophany and its consequences.

KEYWORDS: comparative religion, pluralist approach, dialogical hermeneutics, hierophany, revelation, piety, visual, religious culture, Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, *Lotus Sutra*, Hebrew Bible

INTRODUCTION: THE LIGHT OF DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTER

Upon discovering the *Lotus Sutra*, the reader familiar with biblical patterns of revelation and piety, especially as displayed in the Pentateuch, cannot but be struck: both in its structure and in the metaphors used, the narrative of the *Lotus Sutra* mirrors in many ways that of biblical text. It does so when it comes to encountering the divine and when it comes to how to relate to it. First, the form of narration, often poetic, uses word repetitions, specific expressions as literary patterns, and teaches through stories and parables. Second, a number of motives in the *Lotus Sutra*, be it at the level of

“revelation”—a mountain shaking and a voice in the clouds, the divine seen in blue, light coming from the forehead, or at the level of religious “prescription”—the power of repeating the teaching, the task of transmitting it, many elements in the text cannot but strike chords for the reader of the Torah.

Both texts display similar patterns of mystical sensuality when it comes to perceiving the divine through the divine body. And both are being similarly translated, on the level of practice, in terms of pragmatic piety: the practitioner is to understand that repetition creates protection. From a Jewish perspective, a comparative reading of these texts would shed a new light on the biblical text.

Yet, while among Jewish scholars and practitioners, Vipassana Theravada, Zen Mahayana, and Tibetan Vajrayana forms of Buddhism have become subjects of cross-cultural and cross-spiritual enquiry over the past decades, the *Lotus Sutra*, this later Mahayana Buddhist text, redacted between the first century BCE and the second century CE has so far received much less attention. Comparative studies of the encounter between Judaism and Buddhism in the twentieth century have mainly focused on the mirror reflections between Judaism and Zen (Heifez 1978), Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism (Kamenetz 1991), and Judaism and Insight meditation (Kasimow, Keenan, and Keenan 2003).

In this paper, in order to remedy this lack, I would like to offer a cross-reading of the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible, following Buber’s “dialogical approach” to comparative religion. What interests me, in this endeavor of “dialogical hermeneutics” exemplified by Buber in his approach of Eastern religions, is the idea of the encounter, not so much between “religions,” which would pretend to some objective knowledge and impossible truth claims, but rather, as Kepnes highlights, “between the reader and the text” (1992: 19).

In examining both texts as a scholar of Judaism and as a Jew myself, I am endeavoring to encounter the *Lotus Sutra* on the level of a Buberian “I and thou” ethos: a mode of encounter based on the premise that “all real life is meeting” (1958: 12). I therefore take on a journey of reflective reading, accepting to be transformed by the encounter and expecting to understand my religious tradition better and differently in the light of a heterogeneous mirror: a mirror constituted, as Levinas (1963) said, by the “face of the other”: similar enough that I can identify, different enough that I won’t see in it, reflected back, my own image.

In the field of comparative religion, this stance is what has been called the “pluralist approach”: an approach to dialogue, which starts from an acknowledgment of the “inadequate nature of any truth” (Brill 2010: 129). With Soloveitchik, I consider religious commitment as an existential choice rather than an ideological one based on any truth claims. In that perspective, dialogue with other religious cultures becomes, like the Buberian and Levinassian mirror, a way to help one understand others, but also one’s own tradition better.

In order to do so, I will be focusing comparatively, on two bodies of texts: The *Lotus Sutra* and the *Tanakh* (also called the Hebrew Bible or the “old testament”), and on two dimensions of these sacred texts: revelation and piety as well as description and prescription.

Both in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Torah, the reader is being made the vicarious witness of a hierophany—an episode of experiencing of the divine. Both experiences present a similar scenario: in these transcendental encounters, the divine¹ reveals itself to men in order to teach them his doctrine. In both texts, the point seems to be about turning the reader too into a witness of the Revelation, as he imagines himself standing at the mountain.

Mircea Eliade defines hierophany as an event expressing “some modality of the sacred and some moment in its History” (1958: 2). Yet, as he specifies, Hierophanies are not only “historical events.” They are also, more deeply, relational ones: they impact their witnesses, but also the reader of Sacred text.

In this article, I will focus, in a sense, on Hierophany and its consequences: I will comparatively examine these two “revelation” narratives and the religious practices that stem from it, in Buddhist piety and in Jewish piety.

Through content analysis, focusing on the terminologies used in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible, I will first examine the way the two traditions depict their mystical visions—in other words, how God is being described; and second, I will examine how religious practice is being prespecified—in other words, how piety is being described.

MYSTICAL VISIONS: REVELATION THROUGH THE SENSES

In the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Pentateuch, both “Revelations” take place on a mountain. Mountains are among the “Sacred Space” Mircea Eliade counted in his typology of world religious patterns (1958)—only here the “sacred space” is not one of “devotion,” but of revelation. What is being revealed in each tradition, while differing in content, takes in many ways a similar form. In these two texts, the visions that both the crowd and the reader get to witness at the mountain have very similar features. These can be classified in two main categories: sight and sound. The first category is about the appearance of the divine itself, which is depicted mainly through two colors: blue and gold. The second is about the conditions of the revelation and the sounds it makes: in both instances, a collective, “mass-event” comes to shake the natural world as well as human minds.

Blue, Gold, and Light: Colors of God, Colors of the Buddhas

Two themes about the visual appearance of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* could not but remind the biblical reader of the ways the divine lends itself to be “seen” in the Jewish tradition—or rather, to be approached through its surroundings or emanations, as God in itself is in principle not “visible” according to the Torah. First, in both the *Lotus Sutra* and Hebrew scriptures, the divine colors share a palette of blue and gold/light, which, in turn, becomes reflected on human objects and bodies. Second, both the Buddha and Moses, God’s first prophet in the Hebrew Bible, are seen as emitting a ray of light from their forehead.

(A) COSMIC COLORS: SPIRITUAL BEINGS IN THE SKY

In the *Lotus Sutra*, the color blue, often associated with gold, seems to be a recurring motive to depict the appearance of spiritual beings—not just the Buddha itself, all of them. Indeed, while the Buddha is being described as blue and gold, so are the bodhisattvas²—and so does the lotus flower, to highlight the supernal, spiritual symbolism it takes. In fact, both symbols: the lotus and the color blue are so central that they became the name of this sutra, both as a whole—the “*Lotus Sutra*,” and of a particular extract, the “blue sutra.”³ First, in a preliminary sutra, the Buddha is depicted as blue and gold:

“He reveals his body, ten feet, six inches in height,
Glittering with purple gold,
Well proportioned, brilliant,
And highly bright.
The mark of hair curls as the moon,
In the nape of the neck there is a light as of the sun.
The curling hair is deep blue,
On the head there is a protuberance.
The pure eyes, like a stainless mirror,
Blink up and down.
The eyebrows trail in dark blue”⁴

It is mostly the head—hair, eyebrows, and especially, the eyes, which are depicted as blue, as we see in other extracts (Reeves 2008: 391): “His eyes are (. . .) deep blue.”

In Judaism, because of an iconophobic ethos according to which God cannot be seen nor depicted⁵, one could think the allusions to the color blue would be used only to describe attributes surrounding the divine presence, as in this passage describing a divine vision:

“Under His feet was the likeness of sapphire brickwork, and it was like the essence of the heaven in purity.” (Exodus 24:10)

This allusion to a blue “divine throne” is being repeated in the prophetic writings of the *Tanakh*:

“Then I looked, and behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the *keruvim*⁶ there appeared over them something like a sapphire stone, like what appeared to be the shape of a throne.” (Ezekiel 10.11)

However, in other texts—from the Jewish mystical tradition but also from the *Tanakh*, the color blue comes to describe allusions of the divine presence itself. Hence in the Song of Songs (5.11), the mystical “lover”—often understood as being God itself—described in the verse has an abdomen “overlaid with sapphires” (5.14). Just as in the *Lotus Sutra*, in this spiritual-erotic poem, blue and gold are being weaved to depict him:

“His head is as the finest gold; his locks are curled, [they are as] black as a raven” (5.11)

“His eyes are like doves beside rivulets of water” (5.12)

“His hands are wheels of gold” (5.14).

The words used to describe the beauty of the celestial lover—locks and eyes, gold and blue, echo strikingly not only those used in the *Lotus Sutra* to depict the appearance of the Buddha, but also of the bodhisattvas (Reeves 2008: 365):

“That bodhisattva’s eyes were like the big broad leaves of the blue lotus. (. . .)

His body was pure gold in color and adorned with innumerable hundreds of thousands of signs of blessings.

The flourishing of his dignity and virtue was radiant and brilliant.”

Even what comes out of their bodies reflect the spiritual qualities of blue: “and their mouths will always emit the fragrance of a blue lotus flower.” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 249)

In the *Lotus Sutra*, the fact that the bodhisattvas share the Buddha nature of enlightenment is illustrated by their taking on the colors of the Buddha. In the Torah, by contrast, the blue of God doesn’t reflect on the skin of men. But it is imprinted on the ritual objects by which they surround themselves. Hence the curtains protecting the holy arch of the tabernacle are commanded to be blue:

“And they shall put on it the covering of *tachash* skins, and spread over it a cloth wholly of blue . . .” (Numbers 4.5)

Tachash, or *Tarshish*, a fish deemed to produce a pigment of deep blue color, is commonly alluded to in the Bible as designating the color of the ritual garments of the tabernacle. But blue is not only used for holy objects. Closer to Jewish bodies, it is also the color of fringes of wool designed to surround at all time the hips of Jewish males:

“They shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue on the fringe of each corner.” (Numbers 5.38)

It is when wondering about the color of these ritual fringes (the *tsitsit*) that the Talmud Yerushalmi traces back, through a series of inferences, the meaning of “blue” in the Torah:

“Said Rabbi Meir:

What is so unique about the color blue that it was the one chosen from all the other colors?

This teaches you that blue resembles the sea, the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles the Throne of Glory” (*Brakhot* 1.3)

Hence the color blue in Hebrew scriptures, just as in the *Lotus Sutra*, as hinted by the mention of the moon and sun, stands for a reflection of the divine presence, which is in the sky. One could think that a major difference between the *Lotus Sutra* and Hebrew scriptures would be that the latter describes the face of the Buddha, and the second only the divine throne.

Yet other texts from the Jewish mystical tradition go further, as they describe what seems to be the divine body itself: in his vision, the prophet Daniel sees a “man” who may be a Divine appearance, whose “body is like *Tarshish*” (Daniel 10.6). Likewise, the *Shiur Komah*, a sixth-century Kabbalistic midrash (commentary) on the verses of the Song of Songs abovementioned (15.11–16), describes not only measurable proportions of the divine body, just as the *Lotus Sutra* does, but also its color: “blue as *tarshish*,” says the text, alluding to the abovementioned verse of Daniel, “or as sapphire”) the other reference to blue in biblical and mystical Jewish texts.

Sapphire in particular has a spiritual meaning in the Jewish tradition. For Joseph Jacobs and Immanuel Benzinger, the word sapphire (*safir*), which appears in several instances in the (Exode 28.18, Isaiah 54:11), actually stands for another one: Lapis lazuli, a stone more common in the Middle East, “in which are interspersed many pyrites that glitter like gold against the blue background.”

Gold and blue again, just like the Buddha Hierophanies in the *Lotus Sutra*: “Each Bhagavat appeared like a golden image, In the midst of lapis lazuli” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 17)

Hence, from two traditions whose religious ethos is opposite: iconographic in Buddhism, iconophobic in Judaism, the parallels in the physical descriptions of the divine and its attributes between the *Lotus Sutra* and the Bible, notably around the colors blue and gold, are striking. One distinction between the two, however, seems to be that in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha alludes to the sky himself, while in the Bible, the sky alludes to God. This is coherent with each theology, since in Buddhism, the purpose of the Buddha is extinction, dissolving into the sky, if you will, whereas in Judaism, the world is seen as a creation and a reflection of a divine deemed eternal.

BUDDHA AND MOSES’S LIGHT: HIEROPHANY EMBODIED

Another pattern in the *Lotus Sutra* could not but evoke the biblical narrative: the ray of light that emanates from the Buddha’s head strikingly resembles the episode where Moses, back from conversing with God on Mount Sinai, comes back among men with a ray of light shining from his forehead. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this depiction of the Buddha emitting a “ray of light” is expressed no less than twenty-seven times throughout the text, starting as early as in the introduction:

“Then the buddha emitted a ray of light from the tuft of white hair between his eyebrows. (...) it illuminated all the eighteen thousand worlds” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 9).

“The ray of light from between his eyebrows, Illuminates the eighteen thousand worlds, which shimmer like gold” (ibid., 19).

From the onset, twice in a row, the text wonders what this sign means:

“Why did the Bhagavat emit this ray of light? O Heir of the Buddhas, now answer! Resolve our confusion and gladden us! Why is he emitting this ray of light?” (ibid., 12).

This question is preamble to its own answer: the ray of light is an auspicious sign, a preparatory symbol. The metaphor around light starts as a cosmic one, alluding to the Buddha’s head as a sky filled with its luminaries: “The tuft of hair between his eyebrows is as white as a bright moon” (Ibid., 312). But the function of the metaphor shifts: it is not so much about describing the Buddha as a celestial figure, but about focusing on how he helps humanity, by literally enlightening it—by shedding light on men:

“Because the buddha has emitted this ray of light.
I and those with me in the assembly can see.
These worlds of marvelous and varied beauty.
The wisdom and transcendent powers.
Of all the buddhas are extraordinary.
By emitting a single ray of light. He has illuminated innumerable
lands” (Ibid., 16).

Lastly, the ray of light is a public signal: it announces that the Buddha is about to reveal his teaching to men:

“The Buddha has now emitted this ray of light. In order to reveal. The essential character of dharmas. Now it should be clear to everyone” (Ibid., 20).

Likewise, in the Torah narrative, when Moshe comes back from his epiphany with a ray of light shining from his forehead, it is a sign for everyone that he is imbued with a divine presence and inspiration, which he is about to partake with the Jewish people:

“When Moshe came down from Mount Sinai – and the two Tablets of Testimony were in Moshe’s hand when he descended from the mountain – That Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke with him. (Exodus 34:29)

Both in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the biblical narrative, the spiritual light is made literal through an actual ray of light. But the reaction of the witnesses of the hierophany is very contrasted. While in the *Lotus Sutra*, the light of the Buddha is something described as attractive, in the Torah, the spiritual light is something humans are afraid of:

“And Aharon and all of *Bnei Yisrael* saw Moshe, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him.” (Exodus 34:30)

And they are afraid for a good reason: earlier in the biblical narrative, God warned Moses: “No man can see my face and live” (Exodus 33:20). So when Moshe pleads to see the divine glory, he is granted to see only the back of the divine presence, while god himself “protects him with his hand” so he doesn’t die from the epiphany: “as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by” (Exodus 33:22).

In a Jewish perspective, the direct light of spirituality is too intense, and it can kill. Which is why it has to be veiled, concealed. Hence Moses, after speaking to God, has to veil his face. And hence today in the Jewish tradition, during the “priestly blessing” performed each Shabbat in Israel by members of the tribe of the priests (Cohanim), both the priests who bless them, and the congregants who receive the blessings, must hide under their tallit (prayer shawl), and are forbidden to look at each other during the blessing.

From this also comes the fact that the Jewish mystical tradition, the kabbalah, by contrast with Buddhist teachings such as the *Lotus Sutra* that are destined to everyone, is traditionally esoteric: hidden, especially from the masses.

Sound, Light, and Crowd: The Grand Show of Revelation

In the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Bible alike, revelation appears as twice an impressive event: first, in both cases, it is a mass event; second, it occurs through striking manifestations of nature: thunder striking and mountains shaking and musical instruments in the sky. This theatrical narrative mode seems to be inviting the reader to imagine the scene, and to keep in mind that what is happening is, indeed, foundational.

COUNTING THE EYEWITNESSES: PARALLEL PATTERNS IN COLLECTIVE REVELATION

In their first hierophantic accounts, both Buddhist and Jewish revelation narratives are rather intimate: the Buddha gets enlightened alone, and Avraham, Yaakov, and then Moses each experience an individual encounter with the divine. Moreover, the revelation is not a visual, outward phenomenon, but an inner experience: it happens within human consciousness, through voices heard or dreams dreamt.⁷ Yet in both the *Lotus Sutra* and later passages of the Bible, hierophany becomes a collective eye witness event: a mass revelation.

In the *Lotus Sutra*, from the onset of the narrative, emphasis is placed on the number of witnesses of the event: the first words of the introduction mention “a great assembly of twelve thousand monks” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 3). Later on, chapter 7 goes on describing the Buddha expounding the Dharma “to the great assembly of the devas and humans, at that time six hundred myriads of koṭis of nayutas of people” (ibid., 127).

Strikingly, it is also through the multiplier of “six hundred” that the Hebrews who left Egypt *en route* toward the collective revelation at Mount Sinai are being described:

“The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot, the men, besides the young children.” (Exodus 12-37)

Aside from a similar numbering, the metaphor given to describe how numerous the witnesses are is the same in both texts:

The *Lotus Sutra* describes the bodhisattvas as being “as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River” (Ibid., 17). Likewise, in the Torah, God blesses the patriarch Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous “as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Genesis 22.17), while in his Psalms, King David praises God for having friends “more numerous than the sand” (Psalms 138.18).

Yet, where a difference between the two systems appears is when it comes to the definition of the crowd who receives the revelation: in the Buddhist scripture, the assembly is as diverse as including “humans and nonhumans as monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, the devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, kings, and noble emperors” (Ibid., 4). Here the emphasis is placed on the universal character of the revelation and of the transmission of the dharma, which is destined to all.

In the biblical scripture, by contrast, insistence is placed on the collective as “one”: not only as one family—the Hebrew people self-qualify as “*bnei Israel*,” the “sons of Israel,” but even, at the moment of revelation, as one being. Which is why they reply “in unison,” as one heart and mind, say the commentators (Exodus 19.8).

This distinction points to the very different ethos of these two traditions: universalist and inclusive for the Buddhist one, familialist and exclusive for the Jewish one.

The stage of revelation is not only similar in terms of who witnesses it, but also in terms of what is given to witness: in both narrative accounts, the hierophany appears nothing short of a sound and light pyrotechnic show.

EARTHQUAKE AND DRUMS IN THE SKY: THE STORMY SOUNDS OF REVELATION

At the very onset of the *Lotus Sutra*, a sort of paradoxical image is given: after his teaching, the Buddha sits perfectly still and calm, and flowers fall from the sky, to complete this idyllic vision. But at the same time, the world is shaken and the earth quakes:

“After having taught this sutra, the Buddha sat cross-legged, entered the samādhi (...) and remained unmoving in both body and mind. Māṇḍārava and great māṇḍārava flowers, mañjūṣaka and great mañjūṣaka flowers then fell like rain from the sky, scattering upon the Buddha and all of his attendants; and the whole buddha world quaked in six ways.” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 7)

This oxymoric image, both ravishing and intimidating, will be recurrent throughout the Sutra—the mention of the world “quaking” or shaking appears at least twelve

times. But it appears mostly as a joyous convulsion, borne out of the “ray of light” emitted on the Buddha’s forehead.

In the torah, the divine revelation also shakes the world. The narrative of the theophany at Sinai, which, as I am writing these lines, has just been recounted in synagogues all around the world, during the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, presents once more striking similarities with the *Lotus Sutra*: it is also about mountains shaking and earth quaking:

“There were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered.” (Exodus 19:15)

But it adds to it more threatening weather manifestations, such as thunder and flashes and fire:

“And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the Lord had descended upon it in fire,
And its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain quaked violently.” (Exodus 19:18)

In both narratives, the revelation takes place on a mountain, it causes an earthquake, and these visual manifestations are accompanied by sound manifestations.

In the Jewish narrative, it is the sound of the shofar, a ram’s horn, which is traditionally blown at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. In the *Lotus Sutra* narrative, the sounds seem more enticing: “Hundreds of thousands of heavenly musical instruments sounded spontaneously without being played” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 291).

While the theme of “heavenly drums” in the *Lotus Sutra*, recurrent all throughout the narrative⁸, seems rather enticing, the Biblical image of the shofar and its strong, plain, strident sounds are much less so—especially as it keeps growing “increasingly stronger” (Exodus 19:19) during the hierophany. This, for the Jewish people, calls for more fear than mystical rapture:

“And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled. So they stood from afar.” (Exodus 20.15–16)

As a consequence, they withdraw and ask Moses to be their intermediary and to speak to God for them. The revelation of the biblical God is indeed frightening. It even takes the same forms as when God is angry, as recounted in the psalms:

“the earth shook and quaked, the foundations of the mountains did tremble;
and they were shaken when He was angered.” (Psalm 18-8)

From a Jewish perspective, the intimidating quality of revelation can be understood as a pedagogic device: one of the highest values in Jewish piety is “*yirat shamayim*,”

the “fear of heaven,” as reminded in the *Pirke Avot*, a Mishnaic tractate of Jewish ethics: “one whose fear of sin takes precedence over his wisdom, his wisdom endures” (3.9).

Yet, in spite of some contrast in the natural manifestation, the agenda of the two texts seems similar at its core: in the biblical text, the violent manifestation of revelation (both in sight and sound) is there to do more than instill a sense of awe and fear: it is to wake Israel up and impress them enough that they would be open to revelation and to entering the covenant.

Likewise, in the *Lotus Sutra*, the answer about the didactics of the earthquake seems contained in its own question:

“to get the attention of the beings, The Buddha shook the entire world?”
(Ibid., 133)

It seems like it. According to the sutra, if the Buddha’s revelation has “split the earth” (209), it is to better “illuminate” it (117).

Likewise, in the Torah, if the divine revelation has shaken human beings, it is to better enlighten them.

In both stories, the fact that the revelation is so dramatic, and that it shakes the foundations of the world, means to say that what is being revealed is indeed foundational. In both places, the purpose is persuasion: the power and reality of spiritual revelation are being made palpable as it makes the world shake and touches humans as a whole.

MYSTICAL PRACTICE: UBIQUITOUS PIETY

In both the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible, the stories appear as didactic devices: they aim at calling humans to play their part in creating a better world, by practicing the teachings. The centrality of piety, in both traditions, is evidenced by the insistence placed on the observance of the precepts or commandments. While the types of practice advocated differ in content, they share a similar structure of piety: in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible alike, the direction of piety is vertical both in space (from sky to earth) and in time (from fathers to sons). But it is also horizontal both in space (one is to recite in all postures) and in time (one is to recite at all times). This instruction for omnipresent practice is what I call “ubiquitous piety,” and it is being displayed in the two bodies of texts with again, striking terminological similarities.

Vertical Piety : Transmitting Devotion in Space and Time

Because they both use the metaphor of bounty falling from the sky, and because they both use the metaphor of parents and children, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible, beyond deep cultural differences, show a common structure of spirituality: one that is vertical, both in space and in time. This sense of vertical structure in time demands to

go beyond the Eliadian notion of “God in the sky,” as verticality can also be purely symbolic, and this-wordly: verticality in time being a transmission device between lineages.

VERTICALITY IN SPACE: SKY, EARTH, AND THE DIVINE CLOUD

After the blue and gold of the divine, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible seem to share another metaphor: the cloud as a vehicle for the divine and as an intermediary between sky and earth.

In the *Lotus Sutra*, the image of the cloud is used to show how the buddha “nourishes” spiritually humans through his teaching, just as rain nourishes the earth (Tsugunari and Akira, 96). And he does so by taking the appearance of a cloud, from where can be heard a “great voice”:

“He appears in this world like a great overspreading cloud. His great voice resounds over the devas, humans, and asuras in the world, just as the great cloud thoroughly covers the great manifold cosmos.” (Ibid., 95)

Such is the manifestation of God to the Hebrews in the Biblical narrative:

“Behold! I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.” (Exodus 19.9)

Yet the goal of the cloud pedagogy seems to differ in the Bible, this miracle is meant to cause humans to “believe” in God, so that they will be faithful to him. By contrast, in the *Lotus Sutra*, the goal is simply to share the wisdom of enlightenment with human beings.

Still, in both cases, spiritual nourishment comes in a similar form and, it seems, with a similar ethos.

First, in both cases, God and the Buddha make rain something from the sky. In the *Lotus Sutra*, as we have seen, it is flowers, “raining down from the sky” (Ibid., 291, 302): a spiritual nourishment. In the Bible, by contrast, what rains down is physical nourishment: the *manna*, the magical food that the sons of Israel will receive during their forty years in the desert.

“When the children of Israel saw [it], they said to one another, It is manna, because they did not know what it was, and Moses said to them, It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.” (Exodus 16.15)

If the type of nourishment differs, the didactics is similar. The cloud, for the Buddha, is “skillful means”: it is a way of spreading differently the same universal teaching, in consideration of each one’s needs and possibilities:

“Out of this cloud the same rain waters these grasses, trees, and shrubs Each according to their capacities.” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 98)

Likewise, in the biblical narrative, while the manna falls equally for everyone, each of the Israelites is invited to gather it according to their own capacity:

“Gather of it each one according to his eating capacity, an *omer*⁹ for each person, according to the number of persons (. . .).” (Exodus 16.16)

What is transmitted vertically in space from sky to earth, from God and the Buddha to men, is also called to be transmitted vertically in time: from generation to generation.

VERTICALITY IN TIME: FATHERS AND CHILDREN

In the *Lotus Sutra*, the followers of the Buddha are referred to, on numerous occasions, as “sons and daughters” of the Buddha: usually called “sons or daughters of a virtuous family” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 157), they are spiritual children. What makes them “children” of the spiritual family is that they considered as “born from the mouths of the buddhas” (Ibid., 28), that is, from the spiritual teachings. This tends to equate spiritual transmission with intergenerational transmission, as spiritual lineages are considered as family ones and as spiritual ties become emotional ones.

As a “parent,” the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* reminds that the world(s) are His, and that because humans are his “children,” he will, as a father, “protect them”:

“Now this triple world is my property. And the sentient beings in it are my children. There are now many dangers here. And I am the only one who can protect them.” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 69)

A very similar discourse is to be found in the Torah: while God affirms in Leviticus “the whole earth is Mine” (Leviticus 5.23), and then calls *Bnei Israel*—the Jewish People who self-identify of “sons of Israel”—“strangers and residents among him,” in a later book of the Pentateuch, he also calls the people of Israel his own children:

“You are children to the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 14:1)

The idea of lineage, symbolically considered as family lineage, is thus central both in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible. As we have seen above, Jews consider themselves members of a same family: the patriarchal founding lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, when God reveals Himself the first time to Moses at the burning bush, he describes himself as a familial divinity: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” (Exodus 3.6)

Thus the difference between the two systems may lie in the fact that in the biblical system, the idea of family is quite literal, whereas in the *Lotus Sutra* one, family is spiritual and symbolic. Still, in both cases, spiritual transmission becomes the duty of each, through either family lineages or spiritual lineages—the two often overlapping in social reality.

Ubiquitous Piety: Recitating Sacred Texts at All Times and in All Postures

The type of piety prescribed in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Bible is not only vertical in space and time. It is also horizontal, both in space and in time as well: in each tradition, one is requested to keep the teaching omnipresent in their own life—in time, by repeating it continuously, and in space, by repeating it in all postures. This type of horizontal piety can be called “holistic” in that it involves both the mind, through the recitations, and the body, through practicing in various positions.

PIETY IN THE BODY AT ALL TIMES: SITTING UP AND LYING DOWN

The last parallelism observable in the pietistic ethos prescribed both in the *Lotus Sutra* and in the Hebrew Bible—and their last common dimension of horizontal piety, concerns horizontality in space. On the plane of one’s own life, whatever one is doing and whichever position one’s body is occupying in space, the practitioner, whether Jewish or Buddhist, is invited to keep practicing at all times.

The practice, in both cases, refers to a constant, daily regular recitation of the prescribed mantras or prayers. If this is made more obvious in the *Lotus Sutra*, as its pietistic form is based on mantra-like recitations, such is also the case of Jewish prayer, and in particular, again, with the prayer of the *Shema*. This commandment of ubiquitous piety in space and time is displayed in the first paragraph of the prayer, which every Jew with a minimum of religious socialization learns to recite by heart in Hebrew, in their childhood:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
and with all your might.
And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart.
You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of
them
When you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie
down and when you rise.
You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for a
reminder between your eyes.
And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon
your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:7)

This faith declaration, which a Jew is to recite three times a day, and at the time of death, has to encompass his whole body and soul and surround him at all times—hence the expression “sitting and walking and lying.” Here too, the terminological parallel between the two systems is striking: the expression “sitting or lying down,” which can be found in classical Buddhist meditation instructions, is also repeated several times in the *Lotus Sutra*.

One dimension differentiates them however: in the biblical text, the commandment to recite the *Shema* at all times and in all positions is a tool for self-discipline. The purpose is for the practitioner to keep the teaching alive in him. In the *Lotus Sutra*,

two agendas can be distinguished. The first one, similar to the biblical agenda, aims at the cultivation of individual practice. The promise is that the one who recites the mantra in all stances of life will achieve greater understanding of the teaching:

“If they are constantly persevering toward the Dharma, if they are either sitting or walking, reciting this sutra; Or if they are diligently Meditating under forest trees. They can also smell and know exactly The Lotus Sutra.” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 258)

Yet there is a second agenda in the *Lotus Sutra*, about the ubiquitous repetition of the teachings, and this one cannot be found in the Jewish didactics: it is the goal of using the omnipresent repetition for the sake of teaching the sutra to the greater number:

“I always teach the Dharma and nothing else. Going or coming, sitting or standing, I never tire of satisfying the world. Just like the rain that gives nourishment universally. I tirelessly pour down the rain of the Dharma Equally on those who are noble or humble.” (Ibid., 100)

For the purposes of this didactic ethos, the sutra calls on the metaphor of rain again: the rain that falls from the sky and distributes its bounty abundantly and equally to all. This is where, again, the parallels between the Jewish and the Buddhist theme of ubiquitous practice, “walking, sitting and lying down,” stop at a difference of agenda, which points to a core distinction between the two systems: the *Lotus Sutra*, as the Buddhist system in general, is universalist, therefore proselytist: it aims at sharing the teachings to the maximum number of human beings. By contrast, the Jewish ethos being particularistic and exclusivist, the aim of repetition is self-deepening of the practice and reinforcing the cohesion of the people via a strong common adherence to the same rules.

Lastly, there is another repetition practice, which the two traditions have in common: the repetition of the name of the divine. In the *Lotus Sutra*, chapter 25 is dedicated to the repetition of the name of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. In the Jewish tradition, there are also mystical practices dedicated to the repetition of the divine name—especially the *tesrufim*, a contemplative practice depicted by twelfth-century Spanish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. In both practices, the agenda seems comparable, in that spiritual strength is deemed to stem from the very repetition of the name of a spiritual entity. However, what differentiates them is that repetition in the *Lotus Sutra* is considered as a mainstream practice destined to everyone and aiming at protection. By contrast, name repetitions in the Jewish tradition aim to bring the practitioner to transcendental states, from which he will reach a sense of closeness to the divine (*devekut*). As a consequence, such practices, in the Jewish religion, traditionally belong to the elite, hidden world of Jewish mysticism.

PIETY IN THE MIND AT ALL TIMES: REPEATING THE TEACHINGS

In the *Lotus Sutra*, after several chapters dedicated to revelation, the insistence of the text is placed on practice: a practice consisting not only of offerings, but also, and

most of all, of reciting and transmitting the sutra. This practice is not only reserved to monks, but to all, men and women alike. This is why throughout the chapters, the text invites each individual to “preserve, recite, explain and copy even a single line of the Lotus Sutra” (Tsugunari and Akira 1993: 157). This, according to the sutra, will make them ambassadors and reflections of the Buddha himself:

“After my parinirvāṇa, if there are any sons and daughters of a virtuous family who expound even a single line of the Lotus Sutra in private to even a single person, they should be acknowledged as the ambassadors of the Tathāgata.” (Ibid., 158)

Text recitation, in the *Lotus Sutra*, seems to have two functions: First, the goal is to bring humans to enlightenment (bodhi):

“These people joyfully expound the dharma and shoes who hear it even for an instant, will fully attain the highest, complete enlightenment” (Ibid, 171).

But there is another goal to the practice, more pragmatic, from a human standpoint: the recitation would bring protection on the one who performs it. Just as the practitioner is in charge of protecting the dharma (Ibid., 140), the dharma will protect him. Chapter 26 of the *Lotus Sutra*, dedicated to *Dharaṇīs*, displays a series of mantras dedicated to the protection of the expounders of the sutra, as shown in the following verses:

“I will now give the dhāraṇīs to the expounders of the Dharma and protect them.” (Ibid., 303)

“I also will teach a dhāraṇī in order to protect anyone who recites and preserves the Lotus Sutra.” (Ibid., 304)

“With this mantra-dhāraṇī I protect the expounders of the Dharma; I will also protect those who hold to this sutra. All heavy cares shall be banished for a hundred yojanas around.”

“We also want to protect those who recite and preserve the Lotus Sutra and rid them of their heavy cares. Those who try to strike at the expounders of the Dharma through their weaknesses shall never be able to do so.” (Ibid, 305)

A similar pattern is to be seen in the Torah, where a famous verse in Leviticus, used in a central prayer in the Jewish liturgy called *Shema Israel* (“Listen, Israel”), promises abundance and protection if the Jews observe the divine commandments:

“If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.” (Leviticus, 26:3.4)

While protection comes in the *Lotus Sutra* as a promise—therefore “top-down,” in the Hebrew Bible, it appears as a request—therefore “bottom-up”: protection, which is promised in some verses, is more often requested, in many Jewish prayers. An archetypal example of this is the prayer before bed—called the “night time *Shema*.” In this

daily prayer, before going to sleep, Jews ask that God—here again depicted as a father, help them get through the night:

“Help us, our Father, to lie down in peace; and awaken us to life again, our King. Spread over us Your shelter of peace, guide us with Your good counsel. Save us because of Your mercy. Shield us from enemies and pestilence, from starvation, sword and sorrow.
Remove the evil forces that surround us, shelter us in the shadow of Your wings. You, O God, guard us and deliver us.
You are a gracious and merciful King. Guard our coming and our going, grant us life and peace, now and always.”¹⁰

While the notion of protection and what it entails (what it protects against) is not necessarily specified in the *Lotus Sutra*, it is very concrete in the Torah: the observant Jew will be protected from death and threats, by receiving physical sustenance and protection from his enemies.

CONCLUSION: THE PROTECTION ETHOS AND THE SPIRIT OF POSTMODERN RELIGION

When recalling his encounter with the Dalai Lama at Dharamsala in 1990, American orthodox rabbi Yitz Greenberg (1990: 61) reflects: “The Dalai Lama taught us a lot about Buddhism, even more about *menschlichkeit*¹¹ and most of all about Judaism. As all true dialogue accomplishes, this encounter (...) opened us to the other faith’s integrity. (...) The encounter reminded us of neglected aspects of ourselves, of elements in Judaism that are overlooked until they are reflected back to us in the mirror of the Other.”

In this article, I have myself, as a Jewish reader of a Buddhist texts, seen, in the mirror of the other, elements of my own tradition reflected in a new light. Beyond the comparative intellectual exercise, I hope to have been able to shed some light, for the Jewish reader, on less obvious aspects of Jewish revelation and piety.

One of them, in particular, as I have tried to highlight in the last part of this essay, is the centrality of the notion of protection in both traditions.

Indeed, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Hebrew Bible do not only share similar patterns in structure and in terminology on the level of their revelation narratives and of their pietistic prescriptions. They also meet, as we have just seen, at the level of one of the central agendas, which is, from a human standpoint, one of the foundational rationales for religious practice: the need for protection. Of course, the major point that differentiates both traditions is who this protection is directed to:

In the *Lotus Sutra* tradition, in a universalist stance, it extends to all beings; in the Jewish tradition, in particularistic stance, it turns internally, to the members of the group. This exclusivist dimension is one of the reasons so many Jews have turned to Buddhism along the twentieth century (Niculescu 2017).

Another dimension differentiates the two tradition: the mechanism of religious protection, and the way this device is meant to work. In the *Lotus Sutra*, protection seems guaranteed directly by the very recitation of the sutra. This entails a form of

piety mainly focused on a mantra-style recitation of the texts. In the Jewish tradition, protection will rather be an indirect consequence of a proper lifestyle lived according to the commandments to the Divine commandments (mitzvot) detailed in the Jewish Law (Halakha). Hence there is a kind of Jewish paradox, which is that at the same time as a Jew prays for protection and observes the numerous commandments in order to “obtain merit” and have a good life, he is being asked to observe the Torah “*lishma*,” for itself, as if he was looking for no rewards. This hasn’t prevented more popular forms of Jewish piety, in the *sepharad* (Mediterranean) and in the *ashkenaz* (Eastern-European) Jewish worlds alike, to have developed throughout the century, through recitations, amulets, and the like, which, similar to the explicit prescriptions of the *Lotus Sutra*, aim directly at ensuring them protection.

In today’s secularized postmodern Western societies, the need for protection hasn’t decreased, to the contrary. In a world that has been characterized as a “risk culture” (Giddens 1991: 3), protection devices, secular (insurances, alarms, security) and religious (mantras, objects, positive affirmations) alike are only multiplying.

On the religious field at large, this ethos of protection is impacting the shape of contemporary piety. This is being illustrated, for instance, with the popularization, over the past few decades, of a para-Jewish universalist New Religious Movement, the Kabbalah Center, which blends elements from the Jewish religion and from other secular and religious traditions such as coaching and self-development (Altglas 2014). Just as in the *Lotus Sutra*, piety in the Kabbalah Center focuses on the mantra-like repetition of specific texts, to ensure the reader well-being, prosperity, and protection, and this, undoubtedly, has been one of the reasons of the rapid and widespread success of this group and practice.

To paraphrase Max Weber (1905), one could describe this turn in World Piety at large as the elective affinity between the “protection ethics and the spirit of postmodern religion.”

The enduring human need for protection, which finds itself renewed in an Age of increased uncertainty and vulnerability in the face of global threats such as global terrorism or global warming, may be one of the reasons that explain the contemporary success of more modern versions of ancient religious traditions such as, in the *Lotus Sutra* tradition, Nichiren, or Soka Gakkai, or in the para-Jewish tradition, the Kabbalah Center. In such New Religious movements, the forms of Piety focus not only on enlightening the individual, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on protecting him, in the world as it is.

NOTES

1 I will not discuss here the question of the divinity of the buddha, which is a complex one, to classify the Buddha in the category of divine just like the god of israel, as the transcendent and supreme teacher who is the referent of this particular religion.

2 Humans who have attained *bodhi*, enlightenment, but who did not engage into nirvana, extinction, as they are waiting for the whole world to join them.

3 “The blue Sutra”: <http://www.bluesutra.org/>, accessed June 10, 2019.

- 4 Source: "The sutra of innumerable meanings" Chapter 1 "virtues," http://www.buddhasutra.com/files/lotus_sutra.htm. accessed June 10, 2019.
- 5 Exodus 34.29.
- 6 Cherubs, or angels surrounding the divine presence.
- 7 Even if Moses sees a burning bush, it is rather the voice of God that reveals the divine to him, than this vision.
- 8 This image appears on 16, 115, 133, 234, 236, and 291 (Tsugunari and Akira 1993).
- 9 Measurement in biblical times.
- 10 Source "Bedtime Shema," *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/bedtime-shema/>, accessed June 12, 2019.
- 11 "Being a good person," in Yiddish.

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