

***Tsimtsum* and Modernity**

Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy & Theology

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Conference Description

If you were to ask a well-educated adept of modern philosophy and theology, whether the concept of *tsimtsum* sounds familiar, she would most probably be at a loss, even if she had taken classes in Jewish thought. Likewise, for many scholars of Jewish Philosophy, *tsimtsum*, although more recognizable, still would not stir much interest. Yet, this seemingly obscure rabbinic notion, radically reinterpreted by Isaac Luria, the 16th century kabbalist from Safed, as the ‘contraction of God,’ appears to have played a crucial role in the evolution of modern philosophical and theological thought writ large – not not merely esoteric thought, and not merely thought of Jewish origin.

The first scholar to draw our attention to the secret presence of *tsimtsum* in European modernity was Gershom Scholem who discerned its traces in the doctrine of Jacob Böhme, German Pietism and finally German Idealism, particularly Schelling and Hegel. Recent developments in the scholarly study on kabbalah demonstrate that this influence was, in fact, much stronger and that it continues to the present day. Christoph Schulte’s *Zimzum: Gott und Weltursprung* (Suhrkamp, 2014) gives an impressive and comprehensive overview of the potential links and connections originating in the Lurianic theory of God’s contraction and branching off in all possible directions: from Christian Kabbalah, via German Idealism, up through Levinas, Derrida, Harold Bloom, and – even more surprisingly – the contemporary German painter, Anselm Kiefer.

What, then, is so special about *tsimtsum* in Isaac Luria’s version? *Theologically* speaking, it is the first ever occurrence of the ‘death of God’: by contracting, God, the primordial Infinite, retreats from being and thus makes room for the creation of something radically other than himself, i.e., the world. *Philosophically* speaking, it is the first ever radical implementation of the thesis on the univocity of being: by pulling in and limiting his original Infinity, God ceases to overshadow the finite existence and grants it autonomy and freedom.

For some, most notably Hegel, the ‘religion of the Death of God’ is coextensive with what he calls the ‘modern religious sentiment’ and its philosophical outcome in thinking under the auspices of the ‘speculative Good Friday.’ And although Hegel here explicitly means the ‘memory of the Passion,’ it well may be that, implicitly, he also thinks in terms of Luria’s *tsimtsum*: the *other* ‘death of God,’ which coincided with the first ‘exteriorisation’ of the Spirit and the creation of the world. Having in mind that the Hegelian term ‘exteriorisation,’ *Entäusserung*, is originally Martin

Luther's term for *kenosis*, we can immediately see the link between the two 'deaths of God,' Jewish-kabbalistic and Christian: the radical *kenosis*-in-creation as juxtaposed with (but not necessarily opposed to) the radical *kenosis*-in-incarnation. For Jürgen Moltmann, whose main inspiration was Ernst Bloch (already prone to read Hegel through Lurianic lenses), these two *kenoses* complement each other and only as combined create the unique strain of modern 'death of God theology': from Luria, via Hegel and Bloch, up to Derrida, Altizer, Zizek and Moltmann himself.

For some thinkers, on the other hand, modern thought is coextensive thinking in terms of *univocatio entis*: the thesis explicitly formulated by Duns Scotus, but, perhaps, executed fully, albeit implicitly, in Luria's striking metaphysical image of God making room out of himself for the finite being. Considering the fact that *tsimtsum* as such is not yet a 'cosmic catastrophe' (in Lurianic thought, this occurs only later, with the 'breaking of the vessels'), this gesture may be read philosophically as the ultimate affirmation of finite existence. And, because of this, it may also constitute one of a highly significant precursor to a secular metaphysics of finitude, already anticipating Spinoza – and thereafter Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy, i.e., all those thinkers who openly admitted to thinking in harmony with the 'univocity of being.' Thus, the two modern lines of thought, theological and philosophical, intersect at the *point* of God's contraction: when examined through their 'secret' source, *tsimtsum*, they both suggest an alternative and far more subtle theory of modernity than the one offered by the thesis on secularisation. They suggest a complex a/theology in which God himself confirms that finite being – in contrast to a way of being that would aim to transcend finitude - is the most 'legitimate' way to be.

Just as the *tsimtsum*-inspired 'religion of the Death of God' offers a subtler theory of modernity, it also delivers an alternative notion of the modern subject, strongly opposed to the Cartesian model of the self-centered *ego cogito*. The most radical critique of Cartesianism, which might have been motivated directly or indirectly by the alternative logic of *tsimtsum*, was formulated by Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. The former never used the concept himself, but his late philosophy of *Sein im Abzug*, 'Being in withdrawal,' as the new paradigm for human subjectivity, may be seen as a case of an 'elective affinity.' Levinas, on the other hand, although generally critical of the Kabbalistic heritage, referred to Lurianic *tsimtsum* openly as the arch-model of ethical generosity for the sake of the Other.

Yet, the modern reception of the concept of *tsimtsum* is not free from controversies. For, although Scholem defined *tsimtsum* as God's withdrawal 'away from the point,' thus emphasizing the moment of divine self-sacrifice and generosity, not all scholars agree that this was, in fact, in accordance with Luria's intentions (at which we can only guess, considering the fact that he did not leave behind a single word in writing, and all we know about him is mediated by his two pupils, Hayyim Vital and Israel Sarug, who mostly disagree with one another). After all, *tsimtsum* is also connected with the opposite connotation of anger and wrath, implied by the sefirah of Din, that of 'severe judgment.' We can thus find numerous occurrences of God's *contraction-in-anger* and 'to the point': in the Lurianic heritage itself (the so-called *kitvei ha-Ari*, 'The Lion's legacy'), as well as in Böhme, Christian Kabbalah, and Schelling, particularly in the *Ages of the World*. The concept of *tsimtsum*, therefore, contains a troubling ambiguity. Is it, as Scholem intended, a gesture of God's generous withdrawal *for* the sake of the world – or, as Schelling envisaged it, a gesture of

God's angry contraction into himself, which removed his presence *from* the world? Are these two completely separate modern traditions of the Hidden God? And – can this difference be reconciled?

This conference's aim is to address all these issues, by staging a discussion between philosophers and theologians who are expected to reflect upon the significance of the concept of *tsimtsum* in a broad range of areas of modern thought. We are interested in the following issues:

1. What is the philosophical meaning of *tsimtsum*: were Scholem and Levinas right to understand it as most primarily a *separation*? And if so, what are the consequences of placing such a strong emphasis on separation in a metaphysical context? Is *separation* a 'root of all evil,' as Schelling or Heidegger still represent it – or is it a positive condition of the emergence of an autonomous being? And is not the ambivalence of *tsimtsum*, hovering between the 'cosmic catastrophe' and 'the most loving gift,' linked to this question which modern philosophy often answers in contradictory ways?
2. Is *tsimtsum* an affirmative act of making room for something other than God, or is it only a negative split within the Godhead: already the first 'cosmic catastrophe'? What is the relationship between God's contraction and the 'breaking of the vessels'? Can the Lurianic doctrine be reworked in a fully affirmative manner, as it is done, for instance, by late Jacques Derrida?
3. In what ways does *tsimtsum* constitute a modification of the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation? Can it be accommodated within Neoplatonism, or does it announce, as Gershom Scholem claimed, a decisive break with Neoplatonic metaphysics?
4. Is *tsimtsum* Luria's original invention? Can precursors or conceptual parallels to *tsimtsum* be found in the biblical and talmudic conceptions of creation?
5. To what extent is Luria's *tsimtsum* a reply to the Christian idea of *kenosis*? Is the *kenosis*-in-creation an antecedent to the Lurianic notion of the divine contraction? Can *tsimtsum* be conceived as God's self-sacrifice or, even more strongly, a Jewish version of the 'death of God'?
6. What is the influence of the Lurianic idea of *tsimtsum* on German Idealism? Can its presence be detected in the mysticism of Jacob Boehme and the Christian Kabbalah, which created the esoteric milieu for Schelling and Hegel?