The search for modern messianism

The religious messianic movements and manifestations of ancient times ended with the abandonment of society and the creation of exclusive sects; modern messianism seeks to bring about a revolution in society. The Christian revolutionaries owed allegiance to the Lord of the Universe and refused to recognise the rule of man; modern messianism recognises only human reason and seeks to achieve universal happiness within history in the here and now. The Christian revolutionaries, apart from the Calvinists and Anabaptists, recoiled from the use of force; secular messianism tries to reach the absolute by all possible means. The dichotomy of the heavenly kingdom and the worldly kingdom facilitated the spread of religious messianism; the monism of secular messianism is free from this religious dichotomy and from spiritual inhibitions and demands an immediate on-the-spot settling of accounts (Talmon, 2000: 13).

Judaism was not originally a messianic religion. Only gradually did the messianic faith cease to be a marginal concern and gain a central position during the darker phases of Jewish history in Israel and the Diaspora. The messianic hope became a refuge from exile, from religious persecution, from destruction and oppression. The messianic faith represented a hope of national or universal redemption that appeared in particular historical situations. Jewish messianism has been described as a multistoried building to which many spiritual, universal, cosmic, philosophical and mystical levels had been added, and each floor changed the character
of the previous floors. The tension between Jewish existence and Jewish messianism resulted in moments of historical movement towards messianism and movement away from messianism (Werblowsky, 1983: 21–4).

The Jewish presence in general history could be demonstrated by revealing the messianic principle in Judaism and its contribution to universal history. The Jewish idea of Providence overseeing history and moving it towards a redemptive solution nurtured the revolutionary potential of the radical end-time movements that sought to achieve the kingdom of God within history. Jean-Paul Sartre acknowledged in his final interview that Judaism’s special contribution to the world was messianism: ‘For me, Messianism is something important which only the Jews conceived of, which can also be used by non-Jews for additional moral purposes […]. This idea of the final end of a revolution is Messianism, so to speak’ (Sartre and Levy, 1996). This perception of Sartre’s bears a surprising resemblance to that of another Frenchman, Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825), who identified the vision of the redemption of mankind with the Jewish messianic message:

The chosen people of God, has always maintained that a great age will arrive, to which they have given the name of Messianic, an age when the religious doctrine will be set forth in the most universal terms of which it is capable, when it will govern the actions both of the temporal and of the spiritual power, and every human race will have the same religion and the same organization. (Markham, 1952: 84–115).

Gershom Scholem already perceived that ‘all radical Messianism, if taken seriously, opens up a chasm in which through an inner necessity antimonian outlooks and anarchic moral attitudes accumulate’ (Alter, 1973: 69–77). In his investigations of political messianism, Jacob L. Talmon revealed destruction as the other side of redemption, the apocalyptic ruin from which a cleansed and reformed world was supposed to spring forth. In messianism there is a discrepancy between the absolute and the complete and the attempt to achieve it that involves the destruction of all that is not part of it; the hope of redemption is fulfilled at the cost of the elimination of all incompatibilities in human existence. Three such incompatibilities can be discerned: that of liberty with