

A Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Orthodoxy

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AMERICAN ORTHODOXY, IN CONTRAST TO ALMOST

all other groups in Jewish life, has, until most recently, lacked a degree of self-consciousness. This is not surprising. One of Orthodoxy's greatest sources of strength in the past has been in viewing itself as completely identified with all of Jewish history and tradition. Hence it saw no particular reason for self-examination. It was the other branches of Judaism—Conservatives and Reformers, culturalists, secularists, political Zionists, Bundists, etc.—who were forced to examine their own roots, their intellectual heritage and uniqueness, aware that they were suspect of consciously deviating from the major Jewish tradition, and simultaneously anxious to affirm their role in at least a portion of that tradition. American Orthodoxy is only recently turning toward a self-examination because it has only recently begun to acknowledge and define itself as a particular movement in the United States. This is not to imply that Orthodoxy makes no claim to universalism, at least within Judaism. Rather, it no longer pretends to encompass the totality of Jewish life in this country. Consequently, it must for the first time identify itself vis-à-vis other groups within Judaism, chart its course and objectives with its newly perceived status in mind, and create a network of self-contained institutions for its own support and maintenance.

The foregoing deserves some elaboration. By Orthodox is meant the institutions nominally described as Orthodox and all Jews identified with such institutions regardless of their private beliefs and practices. We do not know how many Jews this includes but the figure probably is close to but less than one million. American Orthodoxy was always identified by others with certain institutions. But Orthodoxy itself never perceived these institutions as being uniquely its own. They were simply Jewish. Their function was neither to serve nor to contribute to sec-

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tarianism within Judaism because their leadership viewed them as encompassing the totality of Jewish life. Orthodox synagogues, for example, have until recently been largely ineffectual in their cooperative efforts because there was nothing meaningful around which they could unite. They so generalized and universalized the basic measure of agreement among them that they felt they could afford the luxury of dispute over detail and trivia. Again, this is not to imply that Orthodox leaders in the past thought that all Jews were ritually observant. But they also knew that all Jews were *never* ritually observant. There is a world of difference between viewing the mass of Jewry as being lax and neglectful in their observance, or as being organized in rival movements.

American Orthodoxy has begun to distinguish itself institutionally, to generate its own bureaucracy, to speak explicitly in its own name rather than that of all Jews. It has also begun to define itself intellectually. This involves both a confrontation with a variety of theological and philosophical doctrines, ideas and notions that are outside the realm of tradition, as well as an explication of the uniquely Orthodox in Jewish thought. This is basically what *Tradition*, the scholarly publication of the Rabbinical Council of America, is doing, or what the projected *Yeshiva University Studies in Torah Judaism* seems to be attempting.

As the process of definition and delineation continues it is only natural that Orthodoxy should turn to a sociological self-analysis. That is, having now determined who it is in terms of its institutions, its religious behavior, its theology and thought, it is also interested in learning who it is sociologically. It is with the conviction that increasing attention will be paid in years to come to the sociology of the American Orthodox Jewish community that the remainder of this paper is addressed. This is an effort at some preliminary thinking on the sociological nature of American Orthodoxy and of the major empirical questions on which more information is needed.

American Orthodoxy Under the Impact of East European Immigration

A CONVENIENT BEGINNING FOR ANY DISCUSSION of American Orthodoxy is Marshall Sklare's analysis of the origin of Conservative Judaism, and particularly his section on Orthodoxy in transition.¹ The Conservative synagogue in its inception was not schismatic. Conservative synagogues were by and large not founded in rebellion against organized religion. They were, rather, attempts by offspring of the more successful immigrant families, and sometimes the immigrants themselves, to adapt the form (rather than the content) of Orthodox worship to the prevailing

1. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism* (New York: the Free Press of Glencoe, 1955), pp. 43-82.

social and cultural norms of middle-class urban Americans in the early 1900's. They felt the need to modify certain traditional East European practices which were so out of keeping with the prevailing culture. These practices were not necessarily of a traditionally religious nature. Some, such as the lack of decorum, were unique forms of worship associated with East European peasant origins. Others, such as the non-pastoral role of the rabbi or the absence of English from the worship, were simply indicative of the older society's unwillingness to adopt new mores. Finally, some practices, such as the separation of men and women or the sharply differentiated role of women in the ceremonial function, were more firmly rooted in Halachah (Jewish law). The new Conservative synagogue deviated from these practices without particular regard to the Halachically essential and non-essential. By the same token, the American Jew who remained Orthodox retained his allegiance to the traditional practices of Eastern Europe without regard to those which had Halachic sanction and those which simply reflected a particular form of ethnicity or class or culture. Thus, a study of the role of the old traditional rabbi (in contrast to the modern Orthodox) points out that the laity often sought to introduce changes popularized by the Conservative and Reform groups, such as family pews and a late Friday evening service. One traditional rabbi responded as follows to this dis-sension: "I was against this. After all I am an Orthodox rabbi. I said that things should be as they ought to be."² No distinction is made here between Friday night services and mixed pews. To cite a more striking example, a recent graduate of one traditional Yeshiva reports that his *Rebbe* told him to leave a synagogue as soon as any English is introduced during the service.

Conservatism became predominant in areas of "third settlement." This was the most fashionable ethnic settlement typically located near the city limits where residence "symbolized the attainment of solid middle-class position or better and is indicative of a relatively high level of acculturation."³ Here, Jews constituted a distinct minority of the population and they were surrounded, not by other ethnics over whom the Jews might well feel a sense of status superiority, but rather by Protestant and "old Americans" to whom they were subordinate in status. "The importation of the Orthodox synagogue to areas of third settlement would not help to reduce this status hiatus; it would in fact only serve to underline it."⁴ It is not surprising then that Jews sought to develop a new form of worship. The surprise is that the Con-

2. Jerome E. Carlin and Saul H. Mendlovitz, "The American Rabbi: A Religious Specialist Responds to Loss of Authority," *The Jews*, (ed.) Marshall Sklare (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), p. 383.

3. Sklare, *Conservative Judaism, op. cit.*, p. 47.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

servative synagogue still conformed so closely to the traditional Orthodox one.

To rephrase Sklare, one might say that to the upwardly mobile, status-conscious, economically successful East European Jew of the second or even first generation, there was a tremendous socio-economic cost in identifying with an Orthodox synagogue.⁵ The economic cost was in terms of pressures to refrain from work on the Sabbath or holidays. There was an obvious social and status cost in affiliation with an institution lacking in decorum, unconcerned with physical amenities, and chaotic in worship. There was an intellectual cost in paying lip-service to a faith burdened with real and imagined superstition and so out of keeping with the prevailing spirit of rationalism and secularism.

An impartial observer might have well predicted, as many did, the demise of Orthodoxy in America with the increasing acculturation of the Jew. American Orthodoxy, however, has not died. Instead, it has, at an increasing tempo, divested itself of many of those non-Halachic features most objectionable to second-generation Americans and has been a beneficiary, along with Conservatism and Reform, of the tremendous increase in synagogue membership on the part of the third generation. As early as 1942 Rabbi David de Sola Pool noted that:

. . . American Orthodoxy no longer mirrors East European life. It is adapting itself to the American environment. Innovations like the late Friday evening service or the removal of the women's gallery, or the confirmation of girls or a community seder would have shocked worshippers of a generation ago. Today such practices are accepted in numerous congregations. Distinctively American standards of Orthodoxy are emerging.⁶

A contemporary sociologist, C. Bezalel Sherman, does not preclude the possibility that Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform will in time "converge and form a single circle embracing the entire religious segment of American Jewry."⁷ He notes that suburbia has deepened the division between the various denominations as each competes to establish itself as the all-inclusive Jewish agency. But:

5. We are only concerned here with synagogue-affiliation and forms of public worship. The relationship between public and private observance and devotionism and the distinction between observance and devotionism is a subject far too complex for treatment here. The fact that Orthodoxy has assumed that this relationship was evident betrays its ignorance of the complexity of social forces and the variety of religious beliefs and practices. This is an empirical question that deserves a great deal of attention. An interesting though hardly adequate study because of the nature of the sample is the paper by Howard W. Polsky, "A Study of Orthodoxy in Milwaukee: Social Characteristics, Beliefs, and Observances," *The Jews, op. cit.*, pp. 325-335. Gerhard Lenski's *The Religious Factor* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961) has more of a general nature on this subject.

6. David de Sola Pool, "Judaism and the Synagogue," *The American Jew*, (ed.) Oscar I. Janowsky (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942), p. 54.

7. C. Bezalel Sherman, *The Jew Within American Society* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), p. 193.

In form and content, there is even greater similarity between the synagogues in the suburbs than in the cities. It is therefore safe to predict that the similarity will in time break down the parochialism. There does not seem to exist enough social, economic or cultural differences to sustain separatism for a long time once the impetus of building new establishments has spent itself.⁸

What our observers are saying, in fact, is that the same social processes that took place among Jews a half-century or more ago, and resulted in Conservative synagogues, are continuing to operate within the Orthodox community and are reflected in the development of "modern Orthodoxy."

Modern Orthodoxy

IN THE DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWS "modern Orthodoxy" is surrounded by quotes, because, as will be shown, this is only one form, albeit the quantitatively most significant, of contemporary Orthodoxy.

There is a major problem in the foregoing discussion. Sklare, in his discussion of the evolution of Conservatism, leaves us with an Orthodox community that is aged, unacculturated, financially unsuccessful, and resistant to change. Where did "modern Orthodoxy" come from? Presumably, its adherents are the second- and third-generation descendants of that miserable lot who retained their tradition. But why, once having begun to evolve their form of worship and behavior into what we know today as "modern Orthodoxy," did they not go a step further and become Conservative?

An attempt at answering this question involves one in speculation of a theoretical and empirical nature. The answer will not be known until we have a great deal more hard data. Let us, however, essay a preliminary answer, and list at least some credible solutions.

The most common response to the question is to attribute the maintenance of traditional Judaism to the labor of the American-born Orthodox rabbi. It was the foreign-born traditional rabbi who was most resistant to a change on the part of his congregants. The traditional rabbi had only one basic skill, his "intimate familiarity with the literature, values, and rules concerning the sacred area of a society, and on the fact that he lives his life in such a way so that he commands respect and, more importantly, inspires emulation from the other members of the community."⁹ In America this particular skill was in little demand. The traditional rabbi resisted changes in doctrine or procedure since innovation would have further outmoded his skills.¹⁰ As de Sola Pool comments:

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

9. Carlin and Mendlovitz, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

10. Sklare, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Coming to this country at a mature age, they rarely mastered the English language and while immigrant Jewry rapidly Americanized itself in language and mores, the rabbis remained Yiddish-speaking and their deep and extensive rabbinical knowledge was of little use to the community. They grew more and more out of touch with their congregations and with the community as a whole. They found themselves with a very precarious tenure of office, and often economically strangled in some run-down street which had been a ghetto until their congregants moved away. While the community was constantly adapting itself to American standards, the rabbis and the synagogues of these rabbis stood still.¹¹

The American-born rabbi replaced his immigrant predecessor and no longer stood as an obstacle to change. On the contrary, his prestige and salary were dependent on his attracting more congregants, which meant acceding to and frequently leading the way toward new innovations. The rabbi himself was at least partially acculturated¹² and, if not trained for it, certainly aware of the skills required in his new role. It would be interesting to explore this question further through extended interviews and studies of the backgrounds, education, and aspirations of the American rabbinate and the Orthodox rabbinate in particular.¹³ However, even though the evidence seems to indicate an important role for the American-born rabbi in retaining Orthodoxy while modernizing its form, this is not an entirely adequate explanation. Two questions still remain. First, why did the American-born rabbi himself remain Orthodox? Second, through what mechanism did he reach his congregants?

A second credible explanation for the maintenance of Orthodoxy is the evidence pointing to the highly differentiated intensity of Jewish education received by those who remained in the Orthodox fold. Polsky, in his study of Orthodoxy in Milwaukee, observes that, of those respondents under 40 years of age, over 80% received four or more years of Jewish education, and 82% of them were born in the United States. This is a truly remarkable proportion of American-born Jewishly educated adults, by any standard. Of course, we would want to know what proportion of those receiving the same intense education did not remain Orthodox.

Other explanations of a different variety can also be offered. The filial relationship between American-born Orthodox children and their parents may be of a special nature. The date of the family's immigration may be another factor. One would expect that the earliest immigrants would be the least traditional. Even if nominally Orthodox in behavior, the first East European immigrants, willing to leave their

11. David de Sola Pool, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

12. I am indebted to Marshall Sklare for the observation that, given the general absence of elementary Yeshivas until a few decades ago, most American-born rabbis of today, including Orthodox rabbis, are public-school products.

13. See also Lee Braude, "The Rabbi: Some notes on Identity Clash," *Jewish Social Studies*, 22 (January, 1960), pp. 43-52.

extended family and their home were, no doubt, less committed to tradition than their relatives and neighbors who came much later.¹⁴ The great wave of East European immigration extended from 1880 to 1925. We are dealing here with more than a single generation of immigrants. Although we tend to lump them all together, this wave of immigration included a variety of people reaching maturity not only in different countries and cultures but also in different areas faced with different issues and conflicts, notably the issues and outlooks altered by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. This is a question that deserves intensive study. Suffice to mention that one would expect different religious responses from the immigrants depending on when they came, at what age, and from what part of Europe. We will have more to say later about the role of the approximately 350,000 Jews who immigrated in the Nazi period and the immediate post-World War II era. The late period at which they arrived excludes them from our particular concern here. But, as one might expect, the most traditional element didn't come until this period. (As a matter of fact the extreme traditionalists probably never came to America. It is significant how many Hasidic leaders now in this country waited until they literally had to be plucked from the gas chambers.) Nevertheless, no one who came in the Nazi era felt that immigration then was an act of religious rebellion. By contrast, when the Rabbi of Slutsk came to America and appeared at a public meeting of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations during the first wave of immigration "he chastised the assemblage for having emigrated to this *trefa* land."¹⁵

Finally, the role of new institutions and supra-institutions in maintaining Orthodox loyalty of many immigrants and their children cannot be omitted. Certainly a thorough study of the formative period of the Young Israel movement is essential to understanding "modern Orthodoxy" and the holding power of the Orthodox. Young Israel was

14. Some evidence to this point is the paucity of distinguished rabbis and scholars among the immigrants. Although an estimated 50,000 Jews immigrated from 1881-1885 the leading East European congregation of New York only had a part-time rabbi of meagre scholarship. When 26 Orthodox congregations met to choose a joint leader for New York Jewry no rabbi in America was even considered. In 1887, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor's secretary wrote of American rabbinical leaders as "improper men." Abraham J. Karp, "New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLIV (March, 1955), p. 133.

15. Moshe Davis, "Jewish Religious Life and Institutions in America," *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, (ed.) Louis Finkelstein, Vol. I (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 2nd Edition 1955), p. 405. See also Bernard D. Weinryb, "Jewish Immigration and Accommodation to America: Research, Trends, Problems," in Davis and Meyer (eds.), *The Writing of American Jewish History* (N.Y. American Jewish Historical Society, 1957), p. 386. The author cites the experience of a learned Polish Jew who "did not believe in the existence of America and regarded stories about it as being comparable to heresies." The gentleman in question, however, must have lived in the late 18th or early 19th centuries. For a reference to the immigration after 1860, see p. 319.

the prototype of the "modern Orthodox" synagogue. Its godfathers included many luminaries of the Conservative movement. Interestingly, this is no longer the case. Although the Young Israel movement contains a variety of types of synagogues, its point of view, at least as reflected in its official publication and in many of its synagogues, is far more traditional than "modern Orthodoxy." It would be interesting to study Young Israel's turn to the "right," particularly in the post-war period. Some of the things that are said below may have some bearing on the subject. It is not without significance that the national director of the movement, himself a graduate of the very traditional Chaim Berlin Yeshiva, could, in addressing the 1963 convention, urge a united Orthodox front which would turn to the "*G'doley Torah*," the "giants of Torah learning," the heads of the various Yeshivas, and be bound not only by their decisions on purely Halachic matters, but also by their point of view on non-legal matters. In fact, the national director was urging Young Israel to seek the guidance and inspiration of the very same leaders against whose way of life both Conservatives and "modern Orthodox" had moved.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Young Israel, almost alone at first, and later the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations (which preceded it in time but which for a long period remained totally ineffective organizationally) provided an institutional framework through which Orthodox congregations might affiliate, and once affiliated more easily withstand pressure for change in the direction of Conservatism. The Young Israel charter provides legal obstacles to a congregation from discarding the *mechitza*. On the other hand, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and the more recent Yeshiva University Synagogue Council provide an opportunity for synagogues with mixed-family seating to maintain at least a nominal allegiance to an overall Orthodox institution.

These, and no doubt other, factors account for the development of an Americanized Orthodoxy which was capable of becoming Americanized without breaking nominally with tradition. Of course, the changing temper of American life, the de-emphasis of pure secularism and the increased tolerance for religious worship even among upper-middle-class urban intellectuals has made the row of "modern Orthodoxy" an easier one to hoe.

The "Ultra-traditionalists"

AS WAS ALREADY ALLUDED TO, "modern Orthodoxy" is not the only variant of contemporary American Orthodoxy.

16. For the contrary view that non-Halachic policy decisions should be made by the practicing rabbinate and lay leadership along with the "Masters of Halachah," see Samuel Belkin, *Essays in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 140-141.

Assuming that we can dismiss the various Hasidic groups as static and exercising relatively small influence on the body of Orthodoxy (this dismissal is probably not warranted), there still exists a core of Jews who adhere to traditional folkways both religiously and otherwise. They continue to follow practices which are not viewed by most rabbinic leaders as ritually binding and which are manifestations of class origin or local custom but which the practitioner does not disassociate from his religious behavior. This group of traditional Jews, whose religio-intellectual leadership comes from the traditional Yeshivas, and whose views are probably best reflected in the pages of the English language weekly *Jewish Press* at least up until 1963, present a second variety of Orthodoxy.

Most of these Jews, for purposes of nomenclature let us label them "ultra-traditional," are recent immigrants. They arrived in the immediate pre-World War II and the post-war period. The impact of this immigration on Jewish life in the United States has been neglected and the nature of the Orthodox immigrants has been almost totally ignored. They appear to be centered in New York and are generally segregated by residence. They are suspect of any Orthodox institutions in the United States which preceded their own arrival, and yet they have acquired a veneer of acculturation very rapidly. They have totally engulfed the early East European Orthodox element which resisted the previous trend toward "modern Orthodoxy." Perhaps the most remarkable thing about them is that they have, or at least had, an English-language weekly. Their relatively rapid acculturation may be a feature of their social and occupational level. Jewish immigration in this country, unlike any other previous Jewish immigration in the last hundred years, was of a middle-class character.¹⁷ Of the 75,000 gainfully employed Jews who immigrated to the United States in the period 1933-1943, 62% were in the trades and liberal professions, whereas only 27.5% were skilled workers and 6.4% unskilled. In comparison to the immigrants in the first quarter of the century, this more recent immigration had more than twice the proportion of those in trade, three times the percentage of those in liberal professions, and less than half the percentage of skilled workers.¹⁸

To the extent that there was any professional, financially successfully, Agudas-Israel-oriented community in Europe that migrated to the United States, it was during this period.¹⁹ Until the Nazi period it

17. Jacob Lestschinsky, "Jewish Migrations, 1840-1956," Finkelstein, *op. cit.*, third edition, pp. 1536-1596.

18. *Ibid.* p. 1570.

19. Emanuel Rackman, "American Orthodoxy: Retrospect and Prospect," *Jewish Life in America*, (eds.) Theodore Friedman and Robert Gordis (New York: Horizon Press, 1955), p. 29. For a discussion of Agudas Israel in the United States, see the appendix

had no compelling reason to emigrate. Its very traditionalism would have inhibited it from leaving the relative security of the known. While it may have arrived in this country lacking financial resources (though not in all cases), it did not lack intellectual resources, a strong tradition and some experience with trying to reconcile tradition to a modern secular society.

The "ultra-traditionalists" have been described by one observer as "Hasidim without a *Rebbe*." Their spiritual, emotional, and cultural lives revolve around the traditional right-wing Yeshivas and the "*Gidolim*," the "Torah leaders," who generally head these institutions. Like the Hasidim, perhaps even more so, they have sublimated their own personalities and identities to a Torah leadership. Characteristic of this is the refusal of the "ultra-traditionalist" to exercise independent judgment on almost any political issue. An editorial in the *Jewish Press*, for example, sounded a cautious note on some aspect of federal aid to education and then hastened to add that, of course, this was subject to the final word of the "*Gidolim*." The "ultra-traditionalist" concept is institutionalized in Agudas Israel's Council of Torah Leaders, whose decisions on all matters of organizational policy are supposedly final.

The parallel between the Hasidim and the "ultra-traditionalists" is striking. There is a definite dynastic bias in the selection of Yeshiva leaders and many of the "*Gidolim*" themselves have responded to their followers in the manner of Hasidic *Rebbes*.

Whether the "ultra-traditionalists" can maintain the entire superstructure created in this country is problematical. The evidence is that they are succeeding very well in maintaining their religious traditions, but their religious institutions may be in trouble. Nevertheless, the "ultra-traditionalists" have made an impact on a third element of contemporary Orthodoxy.

The "Traditionalists"

WE WILL CALL THIS THIRD ELEMENT of contemporary Orthodoxy the "traditionalists." They include many children of the "ultra-traditionalists" as well as a more acculturated Orthodox element of the Nazi-period immigration. Numerically, they are no doubt quite small. Qualitatively, their potential influence is tremendous. Many are themselves products of the ultra-traditional Yeshivas. But they have embraced many more elements of contemporary life. They tend to be college-educated and many possess advanced degrees. If there is any institution most characteristic of them it is probably the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, but there are "traditionalist" congregations in almost every major

in George Kranzler, *Williamsburg: A Jewish Community in Transition* (N.Y.: Phillip Feldheim, 1961).

city. They are most visible in the professions and in the natural and physical sciences. Like other young Jews, but unlike any previous generations of Jews in this country, they are found working for large corporate organizations. They are sufficiently numerous at IBM's research center so that that organization keeps "glat" kosher meat. One finds the "traditionalists" around the cyclotron at Columbia University *davening mincha* or at the General Electric research center at Valley Forge with their *tzitzis* out. They are found on the faculties of mathematics and physics in almost every leading university in the country.

The "traditionalists" provide an interesting contrast with the second generation of the earlier American Orthodoxy. Whereas the latter group found the socio-economic cost of Orthodoxy too high and hence turned toward Conservatism, the newer "traditionalists" seem to revel in the fact that they can easily afford to pay the price. One might, after Veblen, label their behavior as conspicuous religious consumption. This is a new generation and a fascinating one. Their occupations make them easily identifiable. We know far less about their age peers whom they may have left behind socially, economically, and educationally. In any event, the development of the all-day school to which the "traditionalists" are so devoted has perhaps secured their behavior patterns in their children, in contrast to the early Orthodox immigrants. The phenomenal growth of the Jewish day school, for whatever reason, not only serves to reinforce the home training of Orthodox children, and perhaps even expand the potential Orthodox community, but at the very least it is creating an environment of receptivity within the Jewish community for those who wish to live the maximal Jewish life.

The "traditionalists" are characterized by an attitude of disdain toward any attempt at compromising the ritual. Unlike the "modern Orthodox" they feel perfectly at home with the most rigid of Halachic prescriptions. They view the rabbi's role in a traditional manner, as a teacher and legal authority rather than a pastor and preacher. The Washington congregation of "traditionalists," made up of many government employees and scientists, sought a rabbi from an "ultra-traditional" Yeshiva and disregarded his lack of college education. My own impression of most "traditionalists" is that they tend to be indifferent to most aspects of modern Jewish scholarship and thought.

The rabbinical group most characteristic of this point of view is the Rabbinical Alliance of America (RAA). However, the RAA ranks also include many who tend to "ultra-traditionalism" and who are torn between two worlds.²⁰

Like the other groups within Orthodoxy, as defined here, the "tra-

20. See the article by Bernard Weinberger, "The Synthesis Motif in American Orthodoxy," *Perspective*, 1 (Winter 1959-1960), pp. 42-48. *Perspective* is a publication of the R.A.A.

ditionalists" are best characterized by their attitudes rather than their institutions. Their attitude is molded by the fact that their total environment is perceived from a Torah, or Jewish, point of view. Secularist, humanist, Christian, American and even liberal democratic values have made a relatively small impact, at least on any issue that might remotely be perceived as affecting Judaism. The current controversy over church-state relations or federal aid to parochial schools is a good example. The "traditionalist" position starts from the conviction that maximal Jewish education is a *sine qua non* to Jewish survival and that Yeshivas can be helped immeasurably by federal aid. On this foundation a rational superstructure as to why the federal government ought to grant aid to parochial schools is based. To the "modern Orthodox," the issue of church-state relations is a complex question involving the intent of the framers of the Constitution, our American heritage, the nature of pluralism and the dangers inherent therein, freedom of religion, the threat of state coercion, Christian-Jewish relations, etc. To the "traditionalists" this is all basically irrelevant.

The "traditionalists," then, are to be distinguished from the "modern Orthodox" more by their attitudes than their religious behavior patterns, although the two are no doubt related. Nevertheless, there are among the "modern Orthodox" those who rigidly adhere to detailed Halachic prescriptions, and by contrast, there are a few "traditionalists" who at times deviate considerably, albeit privately, from Halachic norms. The former group, for example, is found among the Rabbinical Council of America. The latter group, by definition, keeps its own confidence.

The "traditionalists" differ from the "ultra-traditionalists" in their lack of allegiance or total commitment to any one Orthodox leader, any one Yeshiva, or any one leadership group, and their demand for the right to exercise independent judgment. It may very well be, however, that "ultra-traditionalists" simply represent a sub-category of "traditionalists" who are best distinguished by attitudes and values from the "modern Orthodox."

The ranks of the "traditionalists" are augmented by a variety of individuals seeking a more positive Jewish experience. This would include many who were raised in Orthodox homes and abandoned their religion only to return in adulthood; or those whom one author has called the former "apostles of rationalism" who have now embraced a more traditional spirit of Judaism.²¹ They even include some with a minimum of traditional background or education, who seek to return to the Jewish community. As Nathan Glazer has pointed out, one can return to the community out of a sense of convenience and belonging

21. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 123.

with a minimum of religious meaning or one can return by acceptance of the yoke of religion.²² The second category is numerically very small but of great potential impact because of the intensity of its feeling and sense of commitment.

It does not necessarily follow that those who find new meaning in Orthodox Judaism will join the "traditionalists" rather than the "ultra-traditionalists" or "modern Orthodox." Whether they do is an empirical question which merits examination. All three groups can point to examples of members in their ranks who come from non-observant homes or who at some point in their adult lives forsook religion. But it appears much more reasonable to expect that such people would be most comfortable with the "traditionalists." Communication with the "ultra-traditionalists," who still tend to be foreign-oriented and suspicious if not hostile toward many forms of secular education, is difficult. On the other hand, the "modern Orthodox" do not represent a sharp enough break with the past, and the nature of their synagogue membership constitutes a threat to the "*ba'al t'shuvah*," the penitent. The "modern Orthodox" synagogue, because of its very success as well as for reasons to be discussed below, is often able to compete with Conservative and even Reform congregations on a neighborhood basis. That is, where its social, cultural, or educational program is outstanding or where its rabbi is an excellent speaker, a particularly warm personality, a fine intellectual, or where the dues are particularly competitive, the Orthodox synagogue will attract a non-observant membership. In addition, "modern Orthodoxy" has its share of adherents who expect to fulfill their major ritual obligations vicariously through the behavior of the rabbi. It quite suffices for them if the rabbi keeps kosher, or observes the Sabbath; they need not do so. Among such people a "*ba'al t'shuva*" would certainly feel uncomfortable and he would make others feel uncomfortable. Each would reflect the rejected self-image of the other.

The Non-Observant Orthodox

AS HAS JUST BEEN ALLUDED TO, there is a fourth group with formal membership in the Orthodox camp who differ from the previous three in not being identified with any particular institutions. These are the non-observant Orthodox.²³ Their stereotype is the second- or even first-generation American who has lost interest in the religious meaning of any ritual but is devoted to some aspects of religion because of the nostalgia for his parents or childhood which it evokes. Such an individual affiliates himself with a synagogue which most adequately

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

23. See Howard I. Levine, "The Non-Observant Orthodox," *Tradition*, 2 (Fall, 1959), pp. 1-19, for the Halachic view.

evokes this nostalgia, which of course means an Orthodox institution. But he is by no means the only type of non-observant Orthodox Jew and he may in fact not even be the most common type today. There are many others who affiliate with Orthodox congregations for a variety of reasons.

A number of forces are operating today in favor of Orthodox congregations which counter the more obvious anti-Orthodox trends. One can almost posit a state of equilibrium such that as Conservative and Reform synagogues gain at the expense of Orthodoxy, countervailing forces are set in motion which redress the balance. (We are excluding factors already discussed, such as the personality of the rabbi, factors which do not stem from Orthodoxy's position in the general environment.) The forces include religious status, small size, and community of interest. They are operative because we live in an era in which religion has gained not only respectability but even intellectual recognition and some scientific assent.²⁴ In a period in which affirmation of supernaturalism is no longer a cause for embarrassment, when middle-class behavior has become universalized to such a great extent that it is no longer "smart" to be a conformist in all aspects of one's behavior, and where the prevailing mood among the intellectual avant-garde is the stress on individual and personal religious experience of an irrational nature, Orthodoxy finds a receptive ear. We live in a decade when a Reform rabbi writes with a tinge of envy and much sympathy about ultra-religious Hasidic groups coupled with a note of disdain for his own congregants. In this atmosphere a Jew, particularly if he is middle-class in all other respects, attains a certain status among Jewishly alert groups through affiliation with an Orthodox congregation. Obviously, this status and sympathy are inversely related to the degree to which the Orthodox congregation modernizes its service, grows in membership and emulates the Conservative and Reform congregations in the variety of non-sacred activities offered to the membership.

The large size of the Conservative and Reform synagogue propels some Jews to seek alternatives. The physical plant itself, no matter how artfully constructed, which is intended to seat a thousand or more worshippers, to educate hundreds of youngsters, and provide social and recreational activities for an entire neighborhood, may be inspiring and attractive to most people, but it will be forbidding to at least a few. The concomitant lack of warmth, the anonymity of a large congregation, the absence of an intimate feeling of community makes a small Orthodox synagogue attractive to some, who do not in any way identify with prevailing beliefs and practices to which the congregation ascribes. Such people are to be found in both "traditional" and

24. See for example, William Etkin, "The Religious Meaning of Contemporary Science," JUDAISM (Spring, 1963), pp. 179-189.

“modern Orthodox” institutions. They are more likely to be found in the latter, because that type of institution is far more common.

Characteristics of the Orthodox Groups

FOUR CATEGORIES OF JEWS, all of whom are nominally affiliated with Orthodox institutions, have been identified. It is suggested that the major characteristics distinguishing the groups, particularly the three observant groups, is in their attitudes. Their attitudes in turn, generally find expression in religious behavior, institutional identifications, perceived leaders, and is related to the period of immigration. There is, however, much overlapping. No institution, for example, is entirely the captive of one group or another. There are divergent trends within almost every institution. For example, it appears to an observer with perhaps superficial impressions that the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and Agudas Israel are basically “ultra-traditionalist,” but the latter group certainly contains a sprinkling of younger and far more active “traditionalists” who in some respects are rebels in their own camp (the new Agudas Israel publication, *The Jewish Observer*, probably reflects this point of view). The RAA and the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists tend to “traditionalism.” The former are pulled somewhat to “ultra-traditionalism” and the latter to “modern Orthodoxy.” The Religious Zionists of America, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Rabbinical Alumni of Yeshiva University, numerically and financially the strongest supra-Orthodox institution in this country, tend to be dominated, at least administratively, by the “modern Orthodox.” However, all face leadership problems. Orthodoxy defines itself by a commitment to Halachah as the binding force in Jewish life. Interpretation of Halachah rests with the “*Gidolim*.” “Modern Orthodoxy” has not been able to develop its own “*Gidolim*.” Consequently, it must continually look beyond its own ranks for ultimate sanction. In addition, there are many “traditionalists” elements among rank-and-file adherents of these institutions as well.

The nature of Orthodoxy has been painted in broad strokes, but hopefully a more careful study based on institutional histories and a sampling of attitudes and religious behavior of representative Orthodox respondents would refine the categories and make the differences more explicit. The task, of course, would be to identify and categorize both attitudes and institutions, and account also for the respondents affiliated with institutions whose attitudes deviate from their own.

Orthodoxy in Conflict—A Case Study

AT THIS PRELIMINARY STATE OF ANALYSIS it is difficult to predict what the future of Orthodoxy will be, short of saying that it will be reflected

in whether the “traditionalists” or “modern Orthodox” gain control of its image. (I think it quite out of the question that the “traditionalists” will ever represent a numerical majority.) By control of Orthodoxy’s image is meant control of the rabbinical schools, the rabbinical organizations, the teacher-training institutes, and the large congregations. Lest the reader anticipate widespread bloodletting in the controversy, he must recall that Orthodox institutions, the large Yeshivas, rabbinical organizations, and congregations, have already created their own professional bureaucracy whose efforts will be to minimize ideological conflict that is organizationally disruptive. It is interesting to observe, however, what occurred in one synagogue where “modern Orthodoxy” did become an issue. The clash took place in a young and small suburban synagogue. Had the incident occurred in an older and larger, more stable congregation, intense feelings might have been dampened by a group whose stake was in the institution as such and in conflict-resolution rather than any particular point of view.

The congregation, lying on the suburban outskirts of a large metropolitan city, had been founded about seven years before the clash by a group of “modern Orthodox.” Its location in the suburbs was a deliberate attempt by the founders to project a middle-class image and demonstrate the compatibility of Orthodox Judaism with a suburban style of living. Although the institution was within walking distance of a large Jewish concentration within the central city, it was not a particularly convenient walk. Membership was solicited from those who lived at such a distance that Sabbath and holiday attendance was impossible without driving. The whole attitude of the congregation was an effort to demonstrate that a variety of traditional customs and practices could be ignored, and the synagogue still remain Orthodox. The “*mechitza*” was one example. Men and women were seated facing one another with a partition at the lowest height permissible under the most lenient Halachic interpretation. The synagogue revelled in its attraction to non-observant Jews, and emphasis was on never offending them, even at the expense of offending “traditional” members. Thus, for example, objection was raised to a chain across the synagogue driveway on *Rosh Hashonah* for fear of offending those who drove to services. A member who came on a Sabbath to say *Kaddish* carrying a fountain pen in his pocket was never informed of his breach of ritual law, but an Orthodox member from Israel who came without a jacket was promptly told that he was violating the institution’s mores.

Although the majority of the congregation included non-observant Orthodox who did not attend Sabbath services, the membership, which never exceeded fifty families, came to include a few “traditionalists.” At that time their only alternatives were a number of “*Shtiebels*” in the cen-

tral city which were attended by the very elderly and a few "ultra-traditionalists."

In 1961, a new rabbi was hired. He was a young man in his first pulpit, very strict in religious practice, a product of a narrow cultural environment, unworldly in his behavior, but very impressive in his scholarly qualifications. His mannerisms, personal habits and speech were reminiscent of old-style Eastern European Orthodoxy. Prior to his appointment, numerous discussions among the congregants centered around the candidate. One characteristic which a few members found worthy of noting was that he "*shuckled*," moved his body backward and forward while he prayed. Although no one felt that this alone disqualified him for the position, it was included in a list of criticisms given to the rabbi by the congregation's leadership before he was hired. The leader of the "modern Orthodox" group made it explicit that the practice of "*shuckling*" was so abhorrent to him that he could not bring himself to view the rabbi while he was praying. Another point of criticism noted by one of the women was that the rabbi's suits were old-fashioned. Nevertheless, the rabbi was hired over some opposition. Clearly, what swung most of the congregation behind him was the fact that he had already earned a reputation as a Talmudic scholar, and an advanced degree in history.

The rabbi was hired with a one-year contract. The question of renewal of the contract came before the board of directors seven months later. The board voted ten to nine to renew the contract. It is the division of votes on that particular question which is of concern here.

Although the board split ten to nine, there were two married couples, each with two votes on the board. For purposes of analysis the two couples will be treated as individuals, and since one couple voted for reappointment and one against, we are dealing with nine in favor and eight opposed.

Two characteristics which distinguish the participants are readily apparent. Of the nine proponents of the rabbi, four lived in the central city, and five in the suburbs. Of the eight opponents, one lived in the central city and seven in the suburbs. Among the proponents only one was in any way associated with the synagogue prior to the purchase of its building in the suburbs. All of the opponents were among the founders of the institution and were intimately associated with it in its most formative years. In other words, the opponents of the rabbi shared a common value with respect to the purpose and function of the synagogue. Their common choice of a suburban residence suggests they shared certain life-style values as well. They were all committed to an Orthodox institution which expressed a modern suburban way of life.

The founders themselves were predominantly Sabbath-observers. By

defining a Sabbath-observer as one who is a regular attendant at Sabbath services and refrains from smoking or driving on the Sabbath, the most interesting contrast of all emerges between the rabbi's proponents and opponents. Only three of the nine proponents were Sabbath-observers, whereas six of the eight opponents were. This division is all the more interesting in view of the fact that the opponents of the rabbi charged him with engendering an environment of hostility toward the non-observant. In fact, proponents of the rabbi were charged with trying to make the synagogue too "*frum*," too religious.

In the light of the sympathy which the rabbi evoked from the non-observant Orthodox within the congregation, the charges that the rabbi was too religious seemed incredible to many. The additional charge that he was trying to remake the image of the synagogue seemed nonsensical to most of his proponents. But given the basic orientation of the "modern Orthodox" the charges against the rabbi were not without substance. Let us take the example of *kashrut*. Ritually, Jews are not permitted to drink wine made by non-Jews. This law is widely violated. The rabbi, of course, did not violate it and questioned the *kashrut* of those who did. The non-observant Orthodox were not bothered by this at all. They never expected the rabbi to eat in their homes and never pretended to *kashrut*. Since the rabbi's word on Jewish law was accepted as authoritative, they respected the rabbi for being consistent and abstaining from non-kosher wine just as he would from pork products. But to some of the "modern Orthodox" who served non-kosher wine in their homes, the rabbi was a distinct threat. The fact that his standards were higher than theirs was intolerable. In addition, the rabbi evoked a negative image to the "modern Orthodox" because so many of his superficial mannerisms, speech and personal habits were associated with that type of Judaism against which the founders of this suburban synagogue were reacting. All the vices of ultra-traditional Orthodoxy, including its narrow-mindedness and intolerance of diverse viewpoints and non-ritualistic behavior, were attributed to the rabbi. His opponents were so convinced of this they were incapable of recognizing his attraction to many non-observant members.

A few words might be added about the outcome. In the last analysis, the "modern Orthodox" faction won out. They represented a cohesive group sharing common social, religious and status values. The rabbi's proponents represented a melange of backgrounds, viewpoints and aspirations. They included traditionalists, semi-traditionalists, a group of totally non-observant from non-Orthodox backgrounds, and a group of non-observant from Orthodox homes. There was little to hold the group together once the rabbi decided to leave. In the aftermath, the rabbi's observant supporters left the synagogue and joined a newly organized "traditional" congregation in the area. (It is, inter-

estingly enough, a Young Israel congregation.) Others of the rabbi's supporters joined Reform and Conservative synagogues in the area. A sizable number, however, remained in the same synagogue where their needs, unlike those of the traditionalists, continued to be met.

Discussion

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN AN EFFORT to demonstrate that the contemporary Orthodox community is far more complex than the superficial observations of some would lead one to believe. Thanks to the careful collection of data and theorizing of a generation of scholars dealing somewhat with both Jewish but particularly with non-Jewish groups, we have much information and a fairly sophisticated theory to account for the acculturation and assimilation of a variety of minority groups in the United States. The persistence of Judaism remains a difficult phenomenon to explain. In recent years, social scientists have increasingly turned their attention toward religion. We have been told that, for a variety of reasons, none of which are very satisfactory, religious life in America has been strengthened and a supra-ethnic church has replaced the ethnic group in many of its functions. Thus, though ethnicity dies, religion remains.²⁵ Judaism, we are told, has survived not because of its ethnic or racial (in the classic sense) characteristics, but rather because of its religious characteristics. One would anticipate, therefore, a change in the nature of Jewish life in the United States with the ethnic, racial, cultural, national or any other aspect giving way to the religious. Although a fuller discussion of this interesting topic must await a more careful analysis of Jewish life in America, suffice to say that despite some obvious attractions of this theory, it does not fit all the observations about contemporary Jewish life, particularly the attachment to the State of Israel.

Social scientists, however, have gone a step beyond saying that ethnic groups have become assimilated and that religious differences are now one of the last remaining pluralistic elements of our society. They have also sought to demonstrate that despite the religious revival, increased religious identification and church or synagogue attendance, the form and content of the major religious denominations have come to resemble one another more closely in the United States. This is not at all surprising. If ethnic differences between religions die out, if immigrant backgrounds make less of a difference, if all groups are converging toward middle-class values, then it would indeed be surprising if this had no impact on forms of religious behavior. Just as many observers find this to be the case among the major American re-

25. But see Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: Harvard M.I.T. Press, 1963), for a contrary and most recent view.

ligious denominations, other observers (and sometimes the same ones) find this is also the case within Judaism. Orthodoxy, we are told, is moving to the "left," Reform to the "right," and we are approaching a uniform religious service, increasing identity of religious behavior, and a singular attitude toward ritual, etc. There is enough face validity to this observation to make it seem credible. A more careful look at Orthodoxy, however, indicates that this is not at all the case. Certain obvious aberrations remain. The Hasidic community is one example. But the existence of the Hasidic community or communities possibly can be explained, if not understood, by the unique social characteristics of its members, the charismatic nature of the leadership, and its communal institutions. At the very least, the Hasidic community can be dismissed as a sect and outside the purview of discussion. The "traditionalists," however, as we have described them, represent a far greater aberration. Their existence and growing strength belie any simple interpretation as to the nature of American Orthodoxy and the direction in which it is moving.

Social science cannot make its peace with an explanation that accounts for Judaism by dismissing it as *sui generis* or unique and incapable of comprehension through social theory. By the same token, honest scholarship cannot live with a social theory that requires jamming all observations about Judaism into a distorted pattern in order to suit notions derived from exclusively non-Jewish sources, or much worse, from a parochial and biased view of Judaism itself.