

The Sociology of Religion and the Study of American Jews

Charles S. Liebman

Jews in the United States are generally classified as a religious group. Paradoxically, they make use of concepts borrowed from a variety of social science disciplines to study themselves; but not concepts peculiar to the study of religious groups. They have relied on the fields of intergroup relations and minority group behavior or policy formation and interest group behavior. The key concepts have been: anti-Semitism, prejudice and discrimination or identity, acculturation and assimilation and more recently pressure group, lobbying and public opinion. Hardly any studies are informed by the sociology of religion. There are exceptions and Marshall Sklare's *Conservative Judaism* which still remains the finest study of American Jewish life is a notable one. But most studies of Jews make little explicit or even implicit use of the sociology of religion. Even those few studies which direct their attention to the internal aspects of Jewish life are more likely to rely on the literature of organizational behavior and/or decision making than the sociology of religion.

One reason may be that there is no recognized field of study called American Jewish life. Students of contemporary American Judaism come from a variety of fields bringing with them the tools and theories of their particular disciplines. Hence, if students of American Jewish life haven't made use of the sociology of religion, perhaps the fault lies with that field. Why haven't its practitioners studied American Judaism? The question is a fair one but doesn't entirely account for the absence of religious sociology from American Jewish studies. Disciplines are not so hermetically sealed in the social sciences that a person in one field cannot inform himself about another. Secondly, increasing numbers of young people are entering the social sciences with a primary interest in learning more about Judaism. Hence, if they or older scholars choose to study Judaism from the perspective of interest group behavior or minority group relations it says something about the assumptions they make concerning what is or is not important in Jewish life. Sociology of religion plays such a small role in studies of American Jews, I believe, because students of American Jewish life don't

DR. CHARLES S. LIEBMAN was the Mendelson Visiting Professor of Jewish Sociology at the Jewish Theological Seminary on leave from Bar Ilan University, 1977-79.

consider the religious behavior of American Jews worthy of study. I also suspect that this bias has prevented their informing themselves about the concerns of the field.

This essay argues two points. First, that the religious behavior of American Jews is critical to understanding American Jews. Secondly, that the sociology of religion has a great deal to say even to those who mistakenly believe that the religious behavior of American Jews is of trivial concern. I hope to accomplish my first objective by relying on some recent empirical studies of Jews. I hope to accomplish my second objective by surveying some of the recent, primarily theoretical literature in the sociology of religion.

Jewish Commitment and Religious Behavior

The American Jewish community is a voluntaristic one. The basic fact of American Jewish life is that the survival of American Judaism depends on the commitment and will of American Jews to survive. Consequently any understanding of American Jewish life must begin with questions of Jewish commitment, often mistakenly labeled as Jewish identity. Now, Jewish commitment is a mental construct. It is a label we attach to certain attitudes and behavior patterns. A moment's consideration suggests that there are many ways to measure Jewish commitment. One such measure is religious behavior; for example, belief in God, or the performance or the frequency of performance of such rituals as candle-lighting on Friday evening, celebration of a Seder, synagogue attendance, observance of *kashrut*, etc. Other measures of Jewish commitment might include: Jewish knowledge, continuing one's Jewish education, Jewish education of one's children, the proportion of one's friends or neighbors who are Jewish, Jewish philanthropic contributions, attitudes about Israel, concern for other Jews, attitudes toward intermarriage, etc.¹

The most striking finding of research on Jewish commitment is that the various measures are related and the most powerful one is religious behavior. This is found in studies of attachment to and identity with Israel² (which, by the way, is no less true for Jews outside the United States³), in studies of Jewish philanthropy,⁴ of Jewish apostasy, i.e., accounting for those born Jewish who no longer identify themselves as Jews,⁵ and for studies measuring Jewish commitment according to a variety of indices with a variety of consequences.⁶ Furthermore, there is a correlation between religious commitment and denominational identification. Orthodox Jews score higher on indices of religious behavior and belief than do Conservative Jews, Conservative Jews higher than Reform Jews, and Reform Jews higher than Jews who don't identify themselves by denomination or who choose to call themselves "just-a-Jew."⁷ Of course there are individual exceptions. But among groups of American Jews the evidence is clear. Socio-demographic factors such as age, income, education, generation in the U.S., geographic location, etc. are related to the various measures of Jewish

commitment. But the best single measure of Jewish commitment, however one chooses to define it, is religious commitment. In addition, the synagogue is the Jewish institution with which the greatest number of American Jews are affiliated and the unaffiliated are unlikely to belong to other Jewish organizations with the possible exception of Jewish community centers.⁸

All this suggests that the religious behavior of American Jews is absolutely critical in understanding other aspects of their behavior. Even if one proceeds from the perspective of a complete secularist, even if one believes that religion is doomed, that Jews are really a nation or an ethnic group or a culture, that Judaism can survive without religion, that synagogue affiliation and even attendance or other ritual behavior is trivial because it engages so few Jews and is of little obvious consequence — the study of the religious behavior of American Jews remains central to a study of American Judaism. It doesn't really matter what the researcher thinks about religion or even what respondents report about the implications of religion in their lives. One cannot overlook the religious factor because, as the previous discussion suggests, it is so critical in defining the essence of being Jewish. By overlooking the religious factor one doesn't know if one is studying Jewish behavior or behavior that happens to characterize American Jews, accounted for by any number of other variables such as class, education, etc. But if one concedes that religion, defined in the narrowest categories of religious belief and behavior or synagogue affiliation, is critical in understanding Jewish behavior and therefore merits study, it follows that one will look to the field of sociology of religion for insights, for methodological tools and for evidence about the correlates and consequences of religious commitment and developments in the world of religion. I will also argue that some formulations in the theoretical area of the sociology of religion can be helpful beyond that which I have suggested.

The Theoretical Tradition⁹

One strain in the sociology of religion traces its origins to concerns of specific religious institutions with their “market research” orientation. Religious groups wanted to know the number of adherents, the locations of their churches and members, and the social characteristics and/or the nature of their adherents' beliefs.¹⁰ Market research type studies have expanded beyond the needs of client organizations. A host of studies have tested the relationship between socio-economic status and religious affiliation or socio-economic status and sectarian or fundamentalist beliefs and behavior.¹¹ Most studies find that the higher one's socio-economic status the more likely one is to be religiously affiliated, but among the affiliated, the lower the socio-economic status the more likely one is to be a fundamentalist in belief and Orthodox in behavior. Some of these studies proceeded, implicitly or explicitly, from hypotheses generated from the work of Max Weber although the researchers' assumptions were sometimes simplistic,

their understanding of religion rather shallow, and their techniques identical to those in the narrower "market research" field. Other studies sought to trace the consequences of religious belief and behavior.¹² Finally, a most popular type of study has been the description of contemporary cults, third world religions and the growth of charismatic, pentacostal and fundamentalist tendencies within established religions.¹³

My interest in this article is not with these studies. Instead, I want to discuss a second strain in the sociology of religion which stems from central concerns in the study of society. Indeed, the classical sociologists of religion began with an interest in man and society, not religion. The concerns of the classicists with social organization and the human condition led them to consider religion as a crucial, if not the crucial, dimension of human culture.¹⁴ Those concerned with theory have, by and large, continued to argue for the important place of religion in society despite its apparent decline in industrial societies.¹⁵ How could they do so?

One method is to argue with the interpretation of the data, to select aspects which support a contrary opinion, or to dispute the validity and reliability of the data. Andrew Greeley is a most skillful exemplar of this method.¹⁶ Greeley argues that modern man is no less religious today, that religion is not in decline, that secularism is not the wave of the future. It is important to remind ourselves that just as not everybody was religiously committed in the past so not everyone is religiously indifferent today. Roughly one-third of the population in Great Britain and the United States report religious experiences and not all of this group are church attenders.¹⁷

The second method is to redefine religion.¹⁸ If church attendance, religious faith and the perceived consequences of religion in the adherents' life are declining perhaps this only indicates a decline of institutional religion, not religion itself.¹⁹

There are two distinguishable though related lines to this argument. One line is the functionalist approach. Functionalists argue that religion cannot be defined by the substance of religious beliefs and practices since there is no belief or practice that all groups commonly thought of as religions share; including a belief in God. They would substitute a functionalist definition. That is, they would define religion by the function which it performs in society. Once a functional definition is adopted one can argue that even if institutional religion, i.e., the Church or the Synagogue ceases to perform its function, other agencies within society may replace them. A functionalist definition of religion permits one to argue for the centrality of religion despite the evidence for its institutional decline. Thomas Luckmann, for example, argues that religion is so basic that one can no more conceive of a society or man without religion than a society without politics or economics.²⁰

Luckmann's particular understanding of religion is also associated with a second group of thinkers who assert the continued importance of religion for society. They share the conception of religion as a set of symbols which relate man to the ultimate conditions of existence. I don't think that either

the functional or the substantive label is quite appropriate to such a definition, although at least one member, Peter Berger, classifies himself as a substantivist. Implicit in this definition is the possibility that religious symbol systems need not necessarily be embedded in such institutional frameworks as the Church or Synagogue. But the fact that these “religious” institutions are so closely associated with core religious symbols means that people are more likely to renew their institutions or to add new symbols within traditional institutional frameworks than to shake loose entirely from them. Some define religion in explicitly substantive terms (e.g., symbol systems pertaining to beliefs in mystical or supernatural powers), but then go on to distinguish sacred symbols from religious symbols. Sacred is not only that which is special and set apart, but also that which is unquestioned. Hence, whereas all religious symbols are sacred, not all sacred symbols, for example, a flag, are religious. In this case, even if religious symbols are no longer important to society, sacred symbols are.

This second group of thinkers to whom I have referred doesn't represent a school of thought though all its members draw upon the work of Alfred Schutz who was concerned with the nature of social reality.²¹ There are certainly differences between the members. The presentation that follows is a distillation of their thought and does not reflect the thinking of any one member.

The key concepts in this group's understanding of religion are: meaning, culture and symbol. I shall try to explain what they mean by each concept.

Man seeks meaning. That is, he seeks a sense of purpose, an understanding of who he is, of his role in life, of assurance that what he does and what he experiences transcends the immediate and the sensory. Otherwise, for example, the suffering man undergoes, or the knowledge of his own mortality would plunge him into despair. Human relationships, for example, would sour because they would be perceived as governed only by immediate needs. Neither friendship nor family have a place in a world where life or activity or experience do not interrelate in any meaningful pattern; where the relationship itself is not grounded in some ultimate sense of tightness.

Family relations provide both example and paradigm for the foregoing. The traditional concept of family encompasses a variety of types of obligatory relationships based on the assurance that family is rooted in the very nature of life, complying in some way with the order of the universe. The family crisis which we are experiencing results, in part, from the breakdown of the *meaning* of family and its transformation into a set of contractual relationships. Commitments to family cease being obligatory once the balance of advantages and disadvantages shifts to one's disfavor.

Religion relates to family by legitimating its ultimate meaning, rooting it in ultimate reality. It does this by prescribing familistic behavior in law whose source is a transcendent authority, by binding family members together through ritual which is celebrated together and by conveying the image of the family and its importance in myth.

Meaning is not the same as cognitive understanding. Cognitive under-

standing is only necessary for those who question the meaning of life. Few of us do because we are raised from early childhood with implicit assurances that life does have meaning. Indeed, in all likelihood no rational explanation of the meaning of life (assuming such an explanation could be given) would satisfy someone who ceased to believe in that meaning, whose own perceptions of reality no longer reinforced the assumptions that life had meaning.

Culture is the system of inherited conceptions of meaning expressed in symbols through which men communicate, and perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and attitudes toward, life. Symbols are the vehicles of cultural expression. They stand for patterns of meaning but unlike signs they also shape these patterns because they are perceived as being part of the reality which they signify. In Geertz's terms, they are models *of* as well as models *for*.²²

Let me illustrate the meaning of the concept *symbol* with an example of an important American Jewish symbol; really a sub-set of symbols — New York's Lower East Side. If American Jews have any sacred history it is surely the history of the Lower East Side and to a lesser extent its counterparts in other urban areas. If it is not a religious symbol it comes very close to being one. Like all symbols it can mean different things to different people. It can even contain contradictory meanings and it remains open to new meanings. Surely, among its most important meanings are: hard work yields success, education is a basic Jewish value, Jews have suffered in the United States, the United States is the land of opportunity for those willing to work, Jews will succeed regardless of how tough conditions are. But the Lower East Side is more than any one or all of these meanings. It evokes a sense of awe and triggers a sense of Jewish belongingness and community as well as a sense of family because it points to genesis, to origins.

Religion is that set of symbols which roots cultural conceptions into the general order of the universe. This is what makes the symbols sacred. But precisely because religion is expressed symbolically, it shapes our conceptions of meaning as it legitimates them. To return to the example of family, religion legitimates family relations by assuring us that family is part of the general order of the universe. Thus, for example, the biblical story of Adam and Eve as a mythic symbol or the Seder as a ritual symbol serves these roles, among others. Each not only legitimates the family but conveys models for particular types of family relationships. A good example of a specifically religious Jewish symbol is *kashrut*. Among its other meanings *kashrut* points to Jewish distinctiveness and separation. As Mary Douglas, discussed below, points out, our body and the ritualized uses we make of our body are symbols of our relationship to society. Emphasis on what we ingest, what we take into our body, symbolizes the emphasis on distinctions between ourselves and the outer society. It suggests separation from others. *Kashrut* is a statement about relations between Jew and non-Jew and participation in the ritual of *kashrut* enforces this separation, both socially and perceptually.

I am most partial to the conception of religion as a system of meaning.

Nevertheless, I believe the works of the thinkers whom I have described have two serious shortcomings. First, I don't think their work clarifies the boundaries between religious and non-religious symbols. In practice, they are often indistinguishable but analytically the boundaries ought to be clearer. Second, there is an anthropological and/or Protestant bias in the conception of religion which places so little emphasis on what any devout Jew or Muslim and perhaps even Catholic experiences as being of central importance in religion; the fact that religion provides normative prescriptions of behavior. It tells one what to do. It is a system of law. Now this conception of religion can be incorporated into the formulation of religion as a meaning system but it seems to me that if a Jew or Muslim were undertaking a definition of religion the normative realm would receive more explicit formulation. Furthermore, if religion is a system of law, it is not mediated entirely through symbol.²³

Beyond institutions

Religion need not necessarily be institutionalized. That is, we can conceive of religion as a set of symbols diffused within a culture which conveys meaning or legitimates meaning systems without a distinctive hierarchical organization, an elite or an explicit structure. Religion was diffused rather than institutionalized in ancient Chinese culture. Those who talk of civil religion or political religion imply that a similar phenomenon may also be present in contemporary society. In fact, it can be argued that only diffuse religion is pure religion. Institutionalized religion means something more and something less than religion as a system of meaning. It means something more because an institution generates its own needs, its own self interests, its own elaboration which may exist quite independently of its function. Hence, we cannot understand institutional religion without knowing a great deal about its recruitment procedures, personnel, finances, authority system, adherents, allies, relationships to other social institutions, etc. All of this will be more or less related to its role in provision of meaning but is clearly not the heart of the religious phenomenon. Obviously one task for the sociologist of religion is to relate these aspects of the religious institution to religion. Unfortunately, some empirical studies of religion concern themselves with the institutional or organizational aspects without noting in what ways, if any, they interrelate with "religion", i.e., in what ways aspects such as "power" or "hierarchy" which characterize all institutions relate to beliefs or symbols that are distinctive to a particular religious group.²⁴

On the other hand, institutional religion may be something less than religion because other institutions may also provide and legitimate systems of meaning for an individual. One thinks, in particular, of professions, business corporations, some political groups, leisure time associations and, in a less institutionalized form, of age groups — particularly the young and the elderly.

But there is yet another way in which we may say that religion shares in the provision and legitimation of meaning with other facets of culture. Religion, whether it is diffuse or institutionalized, is a perspective, a way of viewing reality. We conduct our lives, for the most part, through reliance on common sense. This common sense, the taken-for-granted aspect of behavior and experience, may be informed by, rooted in, or derived from some ultimate religious belief, but most of us are certainly not conscious of this in our daily activity. Rather, we are most conscious of transcendence and turn to religion at those moments when common sense no longer provides adequate meaning, when routinized responses no longer suffice to provide understanding and events seem to challenge the very assumptions on which our lives are built. This may occur as a result of our own particular experiences — birth, death, other rites of passage — or by social crises, or it may be generated by the religious institution itself through special days or ceremonies which remind us of the contingency and precariousness of our every day common-sensical world and world views.

Another related way of viewing religion as sharing in the provision of meaning is suggested by Victor Turner's analysis.²⁵ He emphasizes religion as a liminoid or threshold type experience which stands in opposition to everyday experience. His studies suggest that the relation of religion to common sense may parallel the relationship of what he calls *communitas* to social structure. Society is comprised of structured roles which provide the organization, hierarchy, division of labor and authority system necessary to survive. But this social structure, characterized by heterogeneity, inequality, status and partiality may distort a sense of the basic wholeness of society, the sense of kinship and mutuality. Borrowing "I-Thou" conceptions from Buber, Turner suggests the need for liminoid experiences which affirm the homogeneity, equality, absence of status and wholeness of a community. As the participant undergoes the liminoid experience, as he feels himself totally integrated into a community, he senses that the norms which govern structural relationship are dissolved. This, in turn, is accompanied by the feeling of power and the liberation of new energy. The liminoid experience, by breaking down social distances and structures temporarily, is "a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared."²⁶ Turner's discussion of contemporary religion points to the possibility that the major role of religion today is in the provision of this liminoid experience. Hippie communes and other utopian experiments represent efforts to establish and extend the liminoid experience into permanent forms of living.

Religion viewed as a meaning system raises a number of questions about American Judaism. What is the Jewish meaning system as it is projected in ceremonial observances, the American synagogues (which differ among themselves), Jewish schools, rabbinic sermons, prayerbooks, the Jewish press, statements by Jewish leaders, Jewish fiction, etc? Is it only symbols themselves or what the symbols refer to which distinguishes American Judaism from American Protestantism or Catholicism? Clearly, there is no sim-

ple answer to this question. But, if we know little about the answer it indicates to me that we know very little about American Jews. Marshall Sklare has been among the few who have posed the question. But Sklare's achievement is flawed by the fact that he does not pose it explicitly or theoretically and does not, therefore, explore the problem in all its ramifications or specify those aspects of the problem which he does explore. For example, we want to know whether, where and how American Judaism is speaking to the universal condition of man who happens to be Jewish or to the specific condition of Jewishness. The two are not the same today though they may once have been. The sociology of religion alerts us to seek the answer initially in those Jewish symbols which evoke the greatest resonance. Israel and the Holocaust are the regnant Jewish symbols. This not only suggests that American Jewish meaning systems are rather particularistic but how difficult it is to distinguish Jewish religion from Jewish ethnicity when one necessarily evokes the other in symbolic terms. The power of symbols is in their openness, their capacity to absorb new meaning and to express various levels of meaning drawn from various domains of social experience and normative evaluations. Neither Israel nor the Holocaust need necessarily point to exclusively ethnic or parochial concerns though I suspect they do for most Jews.

Religious Ritual

We have observed that religion is composed of beliefs and practices which are conveyed and expressed primarily through symbols. The major symbols through which religion is conveyed are rituals and myths.

Rituals serve a variety of functions as students of the subject have indicated.²⁷ First of all, they are intrinsically proper. In other words, by performing a ritual the adherent does what he is supposed to do. By not performing a ritual one is behaving improperly. But the source which makes behavior proper or improper is the source of all power and authority. Hence, even when the adherent is unaware of this, the ritual performance itself assures him that there is an order and that he is part of that order.

This is closely connected to a second function of ritual. It is a way of relating the performer to the ultimate source of meaning — to God. In one sense, as we just noted, all ritual does this. But some rituals are especially geared to reinforcing this relationship. One thinks of prayer, or of those rituals which re-enact historically rooted religious experiences thereby recalling a sense of the immediacy of God.

Thirdly, ritual is efficacious. The proper performance of ritual is necessary or at least helpful in bringing about certain outcomes whether they be of a private or public nature. Fourth, rituals serve as evocative devices. They arouse and channel but also sublimate and control such strong emotions as anger, grief, love, hate, etc.

Fifth, ritual is a way of organizing perceptions of reality; of the physical and social world. This may be the world as experienced or the world as it

ought to be and, therefore, as it exists in some prefiguration or in God's mind or as it will be.

Finally, ritual serves a communal function. An increasingly self-conscious religious laity seems to be quite self-conscious about this. Ritual, especially when celebrated with others, evokes the sense of ties to community, the community of the present and the past, and strengthens one's sense of dependence on and an obligation to that community. Analysis of ritual is not confined to the explication of the cognitive referents of its symbols. It includes the analysis of bodily motion, of space and distance, of timing.²⁸ It is hardly an exact science but applications of its method to contemporary settings are, at the very least, highly suggestive of what the participants are trying to do and feel and say even if they are unaware of it.

Individuals and societies differ in the importance they ascribe to religious ritual. Explaining what relationship if any exists between ritual and social structure is certainly a major task for the sociology of religion. The most important work on this topic is Mary Douglas' *Natural Symbols*.²⁹ Douglas proceeds from the insight of Durkheim that the idea of God is constituted from the idea of society. Society is something that we apprehend though we do not experience it with our senses. We nevertheless "know" that it encompasses us, shapes our lives, determines that which is right and wrong. According to Durkheim, our conception of God emerges from our experience of society. Religion enables us to reify society so that we can relate to it meaningfully. Douglas is concerned with the ritual expressions of the relationships between man and society, and particularly man's use of his own body as a symbolic representation of his perception of society. Ritual expresses our sense of order. In those cultures where man perceives himself as intimately related to society, lacking autonomy and individual freedom, where the social group grips its members in tight communal bonds, ritual is most highly developed and symbolic action is perceived as efficacious. Individual autonomy, the breakdown of the individual's sense of group dependence means a movement away from ritual and toward greater ethical concern.

Relying on the work of Basil Bernstein, Douglas describes two types of family systems in our culture which produce different orientations to ritual in the child. One family is called "positional." In this family the child is controlled by a sense of social pattern. He is told he must do things or cannot do things because of a given structure — his age, his sex, his place in the family hierarchy. A child who rebels against such a system is made to feel he is challenging his very culture.

The contrast to the positional family is the "personal" family. Here stress is laid on the unique value of every individual. Questions are answered by reference to the consequences of actions. Behavior is controlled by sensitizing the child to the feelings of others through an analogy with his own feelings. ("You can't do something because . . . 'it would worry your Mother' or 'because I've got a headache' or 'how would you feel if you were a cat?'"') In other words, control is exercised through person-oriented appe-

als. The child of the personal family is not a prisoner of cultural position but of feelings and abstract principles:

The child is being educated for a changing social environment. As his parents move from one town or country to another in response to the need for professional mobility, the child grows in a family system which is relatively unstructured, a collection of unique feelings and needs. Right and wrong are learnt in terms of his response to those feelings. Instead of internalizing any particular social structure his inside is continually stirred into a ferment of ethical sensibilities. We can immediately and from our own experience recognize this as the basis for the move from ritual to ethics.³⁰

Douglas argues that pressures of home and school which result in child-rearing practices of this type predispose one to ethical concerns, open up a vocabulary of feelings, but deny the child a sense of pattern to his social life. The child must now look for justification of his existence outside the performance of set rules. He finds this in good works on behalf of humanity, or in personal success, or both.

The personal family emphasizes verbal elaboration and an impersonal language, the use of words whose meanings are objective, universal, unburdened by emotional or personal or group overtones. Success in the modern world depends on the individual's ability to utilize these modes of unambiguous communication rather than symbols which are always rooted in a particular culture. The paradox, however, is that:

. . . social responsibility is no substitute for symbolic forms and indeed depends upon them. When ritualization is openly despised the philanthropic impulse is in danger of defeating itself. For it is an illusion to suppose that there can be organization without symbolic expression . . . Those who despise ritual, even at its most magical, are cherishing in the name of reason a very irrational concept of communication.³¹

Let me cite one instance where I find Douglas' study most helpful in understanding contemporary American Judaism. I have often wondered about the relative success of the Orthodox in transmitting certain behavior patterns towards which some Conservative Jews have no less a commitment. Let us take the example of *kashrut*. Granted, a much smaller percentage of Jews who identify themselves as Conservative observe laws of *kashrut* however they define them, than do Orthodox Jews. But my personal observations suggest that even in those Conservative homes where *kashrut* is extremely important, grown children are less likely to observe *kashrut* than those raised in Orthodox homes. A reading of Douglas suggests that this may be related to a sense of community. A crucial difference between the Conservative home and Orthodox home is the Jewish community into which each is related. The Orthodox home is related to a *kashrut*-observing community of time and place. The Orthodox Jew lives with the sense of an omnipresent community which mediates relationships to other Jews, to Jewish history, and to major Jewish symbols. At the simplest level this means that relationships to the local Jewish community, the national Jewish community and even to Israel takes place through a network of institutions (the

synagogue, the day school, American counterparts of Israeli political parties, hospitals and other philanthropic societies, etc.) which share an Orthodox orientation. On the other hand, relationships at the most intimate level, family and peers, are, at least to some extent, governed by a sense of obligation toward the rules and customs of that community. The same sense of community governs relationships to the Jewish past. Now this has a double reinforcing effect. Precisely because of the omnipresent sense of community, the notion of ritual and the efficacy of ritual, as Douglas suggests, is natural rather than artificial. Grippled in the web of community bonds, both in a metaphysical as well as a material sense, the Orthodox Jew believes because he experiences. Moreover, the specific injunctions of the community such as *kashrut* observance are backed by sanctions of community favor or disfavor, approval or disapproval.

Even the best Conservative homes often lack this type of linkage to a Jewish community. Their Jewish community is, on the one hand, far more ephemeral and permeable, less omnipresent than that of the Orthodox Jew. Hence, not only are its rules less compelling but rules are not natural. Secondly, the Jewish community to which the Conservative home is linked is not a *kashrut*-observing community. This is not only true in the specific sense that these extended family and peer groups are less likely to be *kashrut*-observing than those among the Orthodox, but in the broader sense that the Conservative home is linked to the broader Jewish community through non-Conservative institutions; institutions to whom *kashrut* is irrelevant. Israel, for example, is the preeminent symbol of Jewish life. The Conservative home relates to Israel without the mediation of *kashrut* observing institutions. *Kashrut*, in other words, is irrelevant in the most Jewishly significant activity which the Conservative home undertakes. One wonders whether this may not even be true of the relationship of that home to the Jewish tradition. Is the relationship mediated by the symbols of Torah and Sinai with their overtly religious connotation or is it mediated through conceptions of Jewish history and shared destiny with their more secular and ethnic overtones?

Douglas' study suggests the importance of institutions such as Ramah, or U.S.Y. which provide broader linkages for young people and thereby combat the sense that traditional Jewish orientations are exclusively familistic or private.

Religious Myth

Perhaps because the term myth has such strong associations with ancient cosmological stories, sociologists of religion have not explored its function and meaning for contemporary man. An unintended consequence of the work of such important contemporary scholars as Claude Levi-Strauss or Mircea Eliade has been to reinforce the association of myth with primitive stories.³² Nor has there been much help from other disciplines.³³

Myth has been defined as "the expression of unobservable realities in

terms of observable phenomena.’³⁴ In a forthcoming study I try to indicate the central role of myth in the construction of Israeli society by analyzing the stories of Tel-Hai, Massada and the Holocaust and indicating how they are experienced through as well as reinforced by older myths.³⁵ Exploring the myths of contemporary American Jewry should be most instructive. Myth, like ritual, can be explored exegetically with emphasis on what the story relates and the different meanings contained in the story, or it can be analyzed structurally. The latter type of analysis which owes so much to the work of Levi-Strauss is most difficult to undertake in the case of contemporary myth. Nevertheless, one can study the types of protagonists, the levels of relationships that exist between them, the use of names, etc. At the exegetical level the analysis is more obvious and is likely to yield more demonstrable conclusions. For example, let us take the myth of New York’s Lower East Side. What is it that Jews choose to tell one another and non-Jews about Jewish life there? Clearly, American Jews are projecting images of themselves as they tell the story of their origins. What do they emphasize and what do they omit in their Hebrew school texts, organizational literature, fiction, etc.? Alternately, how do American Jews recount the stories of the Jewish holidays and in what ways, if any, does their recounting differ from other Jewish versions? Unfortunately, we have no such studies.

Religious and Secular

The analysis of myth and ritual, as we have seen, may be extended to activity that is not generally defined within the sphere of religion. In fact, sociologists of religion have turned their attention in recent years to the importance of religious or quasi-religious symbols in secular contexts. If influence is measured by attentiveness, response, and inspiration for further research then the most influential article in the sociology of religion in the last decade is Robert N. Bellah’s “Civil Religion in America”.³⁶ Bellah’s argument is that “there is a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity”³⁷ whose concern is the American experience and which exists independently of the institutionalized religions of America. We have already noted that religion provides its adherents with meaning. It serves man’s need to order his environment and experiences and to support his “efforts to survive in a world of scarce resources, abundant perils and endless suffering.”³⁸ But it may also reflect, sustain and legitimize the social order. Beginning with Bellah’s essay, increasing attention has been devoted to symbol systems which provide sacred legitimation of the social order under the label of civil or civic religion.

It seems superfluous to suggest the utility of the civil religion concept in analyzing the activity of Jewish secular organizations, in particular, Jewish Federations. A fine example is the work of Jonathan Woocher whose preliminary findings are presented in a forthcoming paper on the civil religion of American Jews. Woocher argues that Federation activities reflect a sys-

tem of beliefs and rituals which form a civil religion by structuring the relationship of the Jewish political system in the United States to the realm of the sacred. While this civil religion overlaps with the Judaism of the synagogue, it is civil Judaism that serves as a common faith of American Jews. Civil Judaism, Woocher maintains, not only functions like a religion but is substantively religious because "its characteristic beliefs, values and symbols point to a transcendent (supra-rational) source of meaning for the activities of the Jewish polity." Woocher then documents his assertion with citations from statements by Federation leaders. He summarizes the faith of civil Judaism in nine tenets whose ethos and world view is activist, communal and this worldly, affirming "the reality and the saliency of the distinction between Jews and non-Jews while continuing to hold universalistic ideals." He notes the important role of such terms as "messianic" and "destiny" in civil Judaism, terms which point to its transcendent dimension. But major elements of traditional Judaism are absent and/or transformed. Thus, for example, Torah and halakhah become the "tradition" or the "cultural heritage" and *mizvot* become "Jewish ethics," and I would add, "giving". The quest for holiness becomes the quest for "quality" and "excellence" in Jewish life and the active choosing God becomes the activist and responsible Jewish community.

Conclusions

The role of the religious elite, of religious leaders, has always been to convey the particular meaning of religion, to impose religious experiences by participation in religious acts, to teach the adherent to manipulate the religious symbols. But contemporary religious leaders must also explicate the points of contact between the religious and the common sense meanings of life. The role of the sociologist of religion is to relate religious meaning and religious expression to social, structural and psychological processes. This kind of information, at least for some, legitimates movement from the common sense realm to the religious realm by making it comprehensible. In other words, I am suggesting that the language and perspectives of social science may offer a bridge to move from the everyday to the sacred. In a "religious" age, or among some type of people — the very young, the very deviant, the very skeptical, the very alienated, the very romantic and mystical — the common sense world may be so devoid of meaning, or the religious world so pregnant with meaning that the latter need not be legitimated in terms of the former. But, for most of us, if the religious world is to serve as more than a temporary refuge from the really real and really relevant, connections have to be made in terms that are comprehensible in the language of the everyday world.

The fact that religion requires legitimation in language drawn from the non-religious realm suggests its difficulty with contemporary culture. It is in this sense that religion is in decline. It is not religion itself that must be made intelligible in the everyday sense of that term. That is impossible. It is a

contradiction in terms. Rather, the religious impulse, the religious activity, the act of doing religion requires explication. And it is at this point that the sociologist of religion can be of assistance.

The best of the sociology of religion literature provides theory and insight which helps us understand behavior as it is embedded in social and psychological structures of society. It also permits us to borrow its findings in the analysis of quasi-religious manifestations in non-religious realms. It makes no claim to reduce religious symbols to social or psychological categories. Rather, it makes explicable in one language and one realm, activity which is only experienced in another language and another realm. To this extent, it not only provides the major theoretical schema for understanding American Judaism but it may become an instrument helpful in shaping programs conducive to Jewish survival. □

NOTES

1. Bernard Lazerwitz has done the most extensive work in developing indices of Jewish commitment. See, for example, "Religious Identification and Its Ethnic Correlates," *Social Forces*, 52 (December 1973), pp. 204-222. Sociologists of religion have devoted a great deal of attention in recent years to measures of religious commitment. The most widely accepted measures are: ideology or belief, private religious experience and devotion, knowledge, and ritual behavior. A recent summary of the literature is Ronald C. Wimberley, "Dimensions of Commitment: Generalizing from Religion to Politics," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17 (September 1978), pp. 225-240.

2. Marshal Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), pp. 231-234; Bernard Lazerwitz, "Some Jewish Reactions to the Six Day War," *Reconstructionist*, 34 (November 8, 1967), p. 23.

3. Doris Bensimon-Donat, "North African Jews in France," *Dispersion and Unity*, 10 (Winter 1970), pp. 124-126. The correlation between religious commitment and attachment to Israel is even found among Israeli youth. Simon Herman, *Jewish Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), pp. 187-191, 197-201.

4. Steven M. Cohen, "Will Jews Keep Giving? Prospects for the Jewish Charitable Community," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 55 (Autumn 1978), pp. 59-71. The paper is based on a secondary analysis of the 1975 survey of Jews in metropolitan Boston.

5. David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow, *The Religious Drop-Outs: Apostasy Among College Graduates* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), pp. 97-105.

6. Harold S. Himmelfarb, "Patterns of Assimilation-Identification Among American Jews," paper presented to the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel, 1977; Bernard Lazerwitz "An Approach to the Components and Consequences of Jewish Identification," *Contemporary Jewry* (1979, in press); and Mervin Berbit, *Today's Young Jews: Patterns of Jewish Identity on the Campus* (forthcoming).

7. Bernard Lazerwitz and Michael Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile," *American Sociological Review* (forthcoming). See also, Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 142-143 and the literature cited therein. Less clear is whether denominational affiliation operates independently of religious behavior. That is, are Orthodox Jews more likely to be Jewishly committed than Conservative Jews, or Conservative Jews more than Reform Jews even if their level of ritual observances is identical? I suspect the answer is yes if for no other reason than peer group and reference group expectations and pressures.

8. Charles S. Liebman, "American Jewry: Identity and Affiliation," David Sidorsky, ed., *The Future of the Jewish Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 142-144.

9. I intend to discuss the contributions of a number of anthropologists of religion without distinguishing them from sociologists. In fact, those aspects which I will emphasize are points of convergence between the two disciplines. Durkheim, Weber, Freud and Malinowski are the intellectual progenitors

for theoreticians in both fields. By and large, it seems to me that those trained in sociology are concerned with the role of religion in society and hence with the boundaries of religion whereas the anthropologists take this role for granted and exhibit greater concern with an analysis of the structure of the religious symbol or the religious act. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization.

10. Jewish organizations have been very slow in undertaking or publishing such studies. The United Synagogue of America, for example, published a "Survey of Synagogue Membership" in 1965, but responses were elicited from synagogues, not from the members. In 1972 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations published a study which it had commissioned by Leonard Fein, *et. al.*, *Reform Is A Verb*. (New York: UAHC, 1972). But synagogue groups are far behind the churches in terms of the quantity and quality of their market research data.

11. Recent studies of American Jews contain information of this sort. See, for example, Lazerwitz and Harrison, *op. cit.*; Fred Massarik, "Affiliation and Non-Affiliation in the United States Jewish Community: A Reconceptualization," *American Jewish Year Book, 1978*, pp. 262-274; and Charles S. Liebman, "Changing Social Characteristics of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews," *Sociological Analysis*, 27 (Winter, 1966), pp. 210-222.

12. One of the most important of such studies and a model for many others was Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), which asked what consequences if any do religious affiliation, belief and association have for family, economic and political activity and attitudes. Other studies have focused on religion and prejudice, religion and pathological behavior, religion and values, etc. A vast number of empirical studies of religious behavior is summarized in Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Social Psychology of Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

13. It is difficult to single out any one item in this vast literature. I suppose that three studies deserve special mention. One, which has received a great deal of attention from sociologists of religion and does make some effort at theoretical formulation rather than mere description, is Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, eds. *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1976). The second book describes the origins of the Moonies and was researched before that group had achieved its remarkable success; John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult* (New York: Halstead Press, 1977). The third book deals with the rise of religious conservatism; Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), but see also "Why Conservative Churches Really Are Growing," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17 (June 1978), pp. 129-137.

14. Charles Y. Glock and Phillip E. Hammond, eds. *Beyond the Classics? Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. xiii.

15. The observation appears so commonplace that perhaps it needs no documentation. However, I will shortly argue for the inadequacy of the commonplace and commonsensical. A good theoretical interpretation of the evidence for the decline of religion is Brian Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

16. Greeley is a voluminous writer. The most relevant of his books on this theme is *Unsecular Man* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

17. David Hay and Ann Morisy, "Reports of Ecstatic, Paranormal or Religious Experience in Great Britain and the United States — A Comparison of Trends," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17 (September 1978), pp. 255-268.

18. Alternatively, one may redefine the concept "secular" and argue that if secularization hasn't increased then religion hasn't declined. For an ingenious treatment see David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Finally, one may argue that religion has indeed declined but this signals the decline of civilization or society itself. Wilson, *op. cit.*, n. 15.

19. Greeley is also associated with this point of view:

. . . religion is not church attendance, ritual observance, doctrinal code, denominational affiliation, or propositional orthodoxy. Religion is, on the contrary, a human's definition of the Real, an interpretative scheme, a primal culture system, ultimate values, answers to questions of injustice, suffering surprise, life and death.

William C. McCready with Andrew M. Greeley, *The Ultimate Values of the American Population* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976), p. 179.

20. Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

21. The discussion relies upon Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) who shares many of Luckmann's perspectives; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), and "Religion As A Cultural System," Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125; Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); and to a lesser extent on Victor Turner and his disciples whose specific contributions are discussed below.

22. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

23. One generally thinks of religious practices in terms of religious rituals or rites which are by definition symbolic. However, there are religious practices such as giving of charity which are neither rituals or rites. Judaism knows many such practices. Secondly, whereas one generally approaches the holy in a ritualized, that is a formalized, manner, this need not necessarily be the case. Both these caveats have been neglected by sociologists of religion. Religious beliefs also need not be symbolic. We can distinguish between cognitive assertions of belief (theology) and mythic assertions. The latter is far more laden with symbol. The former frequently eschews it.

24. An example of a study which does relate religion and organization is Paul M. Harrison's study of the Baptist Church, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

25. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

27. Robert Bockock, *Ritual in Industrial Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974) and Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), are of special interest because their treatment of non-religious ritual illuminates the particular meaning and function of sacred and religious ritual.

28. An excellent illustration is Michael H. Ducey, *Sunday Morning: Aspects of Urban Ritual* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

29. (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1973). Douglas' earlier study, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), is also an extremely suggestive work. Jacob Neusner has utilized Douglas' earlier study in his contribution to our understanding of the mishnaic code of Purities. If Neusner's work is the seminal contribution I believe it to be, then Jewish scholarship is in debt to Mary Douglas. Her more recent work has particular relevance for contemporary Judaism.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

32. This is true despite Eliade's own insistence on the importance of myth in contemporary life. On this point, in particular, see Mircea Eliade, "Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities," reprinted in F. W. Dillistone, ed., *Myth and Symbol* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), pp. 35-50. For Eliade's more general treatment of myth see *The Sacred And The Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Willard Trask, trans. 1959). On Levi-Strauss' treatment of myth see "The Structural Study of Myth" reprinted in William A. Leesa and Evan Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, second ed., 1965), pp. 561-574.

33. There are exceptions. I only mean to contrast the paucity of helpful material on myth with the abundance of material on ritual.

34. The definition by the German theologian Schniewind is cited in Edmund Leach, *Genesis As Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 7.

35. I discuss the Holocaust and its relationship to the Jacob-Esau myth in Charles S. Liebman, "Myth, Tradition and Values in Israeli Society," *Midstream*, 24 (January, 1978), pp. 44-53.

36. Bellah, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-189.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

38. Leonard Glick, "The Anthropology of Religion: Malinowski and Beyond," Glock and Hammond, *op. cit.*, p. 213.