

IN MEMORIAM

MORDECAI KAPLAN — AN APPRECIATION

by JONATHAN CHIPMAN

Early last year, Prof. Mordecai M. Kaplan, one of the major figures of modern Jewish thought and the founder of the Jewish Reconstructionist movement, died at the venerable age of 102. While primarily an American-Jewish thinker, specifically concerned with the problematics of “living in two civilizations” which he saw as characteristic of Jewish life in the Diaspora, Kaplan spent the last relatively healthy and productive decade of his life — until shortly before his hundredth birthday — living in Jerusalem; Zionism and Jewish peoplehood constituted central themes in his thought throughout his life. Thus, it is fitting that a journal devoted to “religious thought and scholarship in Israel” pay tribute to his memory.

For those unfamiliar with his thought, a brief summary seems in order. His teaching centered around two foci — on the one hand, programmatic suggestions for Jewish life in the modern world, specifically in the open, democratic society of the United States; on the other, his attempts as a religious thinker to create a cogent modern theology based upon a naturalistic conception of God. These two concerns were not separate from one another, but merged and complemented one another to constitute a complete and consistent, if unorthodox, world-view.

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His programmatic suggestions were derived from his conception of "Judaism as a Civilization," which was the title of his first and seminal book, published in 1934. Noting the inadequacy of any description of Judaism either as a church or community of believers, or as a nation in the narrow sense of the word, he saw Judaism as incorporating elements of language, nationality, folk-ways, religious sancta, and culture in an all-encompassing entity, which he referred to by the term "civilization." Drawing heavily upon the sociological constructions of Durkheim and others, he saw religion largely as an expression of the group's self-understanding and its rituals as a means of instilling this awareness upon each of its individuals. He added to this, however, the centrality of the ethical and cultural moment, which transformed religion into a transmitter of ethical values and an expression of the universal human strivings for an elevated life. Against this theoretical background, he attempted to foster the development of American Judaism along cultural and folk-oriented lines. Among the institutional forms he helped to create in which these ideas found expression were the Jewish community center, which serves as a focus for communal activities transcending differences of theological outlook and religious practice; the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, an early ideological forum; and the Reconstructionist movement, a small, independent stream within American Jewry, with its own congregations, publications and rabbinical seminary in Philadelphia.

The central theological concern pervading all of Kaplan's prolific writings is the reconciliation of religion and modern thought. As a child of the first half of the twentieth century, who encountered the full intellectual impact of its thought, Kaplan found no intellectually honest opinion other than the rejection of the supernaturalism, otherworldliness, and a-historic approach to religion itself characteristic of all traditional religions, Judaism included. He reinterpreted the God-idea in a "trans-naturalistic" manner, in which God is not a personal, supernatural being, but "the power that makes for human salvation."¹ Religious rituals and prayer are no longer theurgic acts of metaphysical significance, but celebrations of and educational tools for the instilling of essentially humanistic values. At this point, his naturalistic theology blends with his ethical nationalism. If religion, or at least the "future religion" characteristic of modern man, is a symbolic expression of the highest aspirations of man and of his confidence that the universe is in fact structured in such a way as to make for their realization, it is essential that these be embodied in the culture of the group. Precisely that religion rooted in the culture of a particular group, with all of the richness of historical associations, language, sancta, etc., which go with it, is the most

1. For Kaplan's interpretation of the earlier stages of Judaism, see Chapter 25 of *Judaism as a Civilization*, pp. 350–384. For his method of reinterpretation, see *Ibid.*, pp. 385–405; *The Meaning of God*, pp. 1–39 (for full references, see bibliography below).

effective in carrying and teaching ethical values. In a nutshell, then, Kaplan's thought was built upon the attempt to reinterpret the unique configuration of nationhood, religion and culture found in Judaism for modern man, in light of a sociological conception of the function of religion and a trans-natural conception of God.

While much has been written by Kaplan's critics² concerning the roots of his thought in both sociology and general philosophy (e.g., Durkheim, William James, Bergson, Whitehead, Dewey, etc.) and in modern Jewish thought (i.e., Ahad HaAm), to the best of my knowledge no one has systematically examined Kaplan's thought in terms of contemporary Christian theology, and the reciprocal relations between the two. I will not attempt to undertake a detailed study of this problem in this context, but will only offer a few extremely brief remarks. There seems to me to be fruitful ground for comparison of Kaplan's strictly *theological* concerns and questions with the "Death of God" movement or Radical Theology of the 1960's.³ Like Kaplan, that movement stressed rigorous honesty in approaching religious questions and the refusal to accept propositions which were intellectually unacceptable. Thus, Bishop J.A.T. Robinson speaks of an approach to God which is "non-supranaturalist," "non-mythological" and "non-religious"; the God of traditional religion is criticized as "intellectually superfluous, emotionally dispensable and morally intolerable" — a quote that could have been taken directly from Kaplan.⁴ Tillich's definition of God as the "Ground of Being" or "ultimate reality," which is crucial for this entire group of thinkers, is quite similar to Kaplan's "trans-natural" God. Again, the motif of "demythologization" and the method of re-reading the sources in modern, secular and humanistic terms, first propounded by Rudolf Bultmann and forming a central element in the thought of Paul van Buren, is paralleled in Kaplan, who speaks frequently of "reinterpretation" or "revaluation" and, in one later source, of "demythologization" of traditional sources. Finally, the ethical

2. See bibliography below.

3. The major documents of the "Death of God" movement of the 1960's include: Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: the culture of our post-Christian Era* (New York, 1961); Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia, 1966); *idem.*, with William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the death of God* (Indianapolis, 1966); William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York, 1966); Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of its Language* (London, 1963); John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London, 1963); and, with a slightly different focus, Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York, 1965) and Joseph Fletcher, *Situational Ethics*. For a good selection of the writings of this movement, including its forebears, such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see Thomas J.J. Altizer, ed., *Towards a New Christianity: Readings in the Death of God Theology* (New York, 1967).

4. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 20 ff.; *idem.*, "Can a Truly Contemporary Person *Not* be an Atheist?" *The New Reformation* (London, 1965), pp. 106-122.

mood of the radical theologians, which stressed human autonomy and a non-authoritarian approach to decision making, closely parallels Kaplan's, which is imbued with an optimistic liberal faith in human capacities, combined with the message of human responsibility.

Nevertheless, there are no less significant differences between Kaplan and the Christian radical theologians in the sociological focus and structure of the former. As we have noted, Kaplan developed a general theoretical framework for the understanding of religion in relation to culture and civilization and, contrary to the generally accepted Western view of religion, saw the ideal type, not as a body of abstract universal truths, but precisely in that form of religion embodied in a specific culture, exemplified for him by Judaism. His critique of Christianity is interesting: its very universality constitutes for him its weakness; perhaps paradoxically, Kaplan saw the heyday of Christianity in the medieval past, when Christendom was coterminous with European civilization as a whole.⁵ He looked forward to the revival of such an approach in a modern context through the conscious creation of a "civil religion" — some twenty years before Robert Bellah's landmark paper on the subject — which would embody the *sancta* expressing each nation's ethical aspirations, and to this end even participated in the preparation of a volume of liturgical readings for the various American civil holidays.⁶ The Christian radical theologians, by contrast, seem more sensitive to the specifically spiritual element in religion, and at least some saw their theological enterprise as a means of purifying religion from conceptions which were no longer tenable. Thus, Hamilton writes of a "rediscovered Augustinian-Reformed portrait of God," in which God's holiness may reemerge by separating Him from the archaic language and persona through which He is usually understood.⁷ While he does not draw a specific comparison with the Christian theologians, Charles Vernoff, one of Kaplan's critics, notes that Kaplan saw himself as a "'Realistic' empirical sociologist rather than an 'Idealistic' reflective theologian," thereby, in his view, ignoring the need for transcendence and serious theological reflection needed to make religion viable under the circumstances of modernity.⁸ Indeed, in reading Kaplan one is struck that, in the final analysis, he did not seem to take metaphysics seriously, and that the truly significant questions for him are those relating to the practical, human correlative of any given religious view, and not to its "truth" per se.

5. *Judaism as a Civilization*, pp. 249–251.

6. *The Faith of America: prayers, readings and songs for the celebration of American holidays*, compiled by Mordecai M. Kaplan. J. Paul Williams and Eugene Kohn (New York, 1951).

7. Hamilton, *Radical Theology*, p. 41 ff.

8. Vernoff, *Supernatural and Transnatural*, introduction.

I wish to conclude with some personal reflections. From the perspective of the 1970s or '80s, there is a temptation to criticize Kaplan's thought both for its naive optimism concerning humanity and the acceptance of the positivistic *zeitgeist*, and its critique of traditional religion, in which it sets up an unwarranted dichotomy between literalistic "supernaturalism" and liberal, naturalistic "religion of the future." It must be remembered that Kaplan is speaking from rather different historical circumstances than our own. His thought was nourished by the triumphalist secularism, science, and liberalism of the early 20th century. There is a strong influence of pragmatism, of sociology, and of Rooseveltian liberalism. Today, following the Holocaust and the unleashing of the atomic bomb, and the growing awareness of some of the failures and shortcomings of liberal social policy, of science and technology, and of positivistic philosophy, his essential optimism and confidence in the secularized human spirit seem somewhat dated. The work of an entire school of scholars — Eliade, Cassirer and Levi-Strauss are a few names that come to mind — has also given us a new understanding and appreciation of the nature of religious language and of myth. The mood of contemporary intellectuals therefore seems more receptive to traditional religious commitments and to the personal, spiritual dimension of religious life, beyond the merely pragmatic and social.

Notwithstanding this, we must remember that we are "pygmies seated on the shoulders of a giant." The type of post-modern religious consciousness described above is only possible due to the intellectual rigor of Kaplan and his like, in both the Jewish and the Christian faith communities, who had the courage and honesty to ask the difficult questions about the place of religion in the modern mind. If the specific contents of their solutions are no longer acceptable to many of us, we are nevertheless indebted to them for, so to speak, initiating the process which has brought us to our own particular insights into the perennial problems of human existence — which future generations will no doubt find similarly dated in time.

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