Milton Steinberg’s Philosophy of Religion
SIMON NOVECK

ON MARCH 20, 1977, THE JEWISH WORLD will mark the twenty-seventh anniversary of the death of Milton Steinberg, one of the most creative minds in the American rabbinate in recent years. Surely few of his colleagues during the 1930s and 1940s approached Steinberg in the lucidity of his thinking and in his skill in putting his thoughts into systematic discourse.

Steinberg’s theological writings are marked by a complete openness and receptivity to truth whatever the source, by the logical bent of his mind and by his great concern for clarity and fairness in stating other points of view. Though written in the felicitous language which characterized all of his writings, his theological essays are never shallow or superficial. His point of departure is always that of Jewish tradition for which he shows a constant sense of reverence. He also frequently referred to himself as a “Hellene.” Though, in his last years, the Greek view played less of a role in his outlook than it did in earlier life, the rational emphasis of Greek thought, its intellectual freedom and scientific spirit, as well as its aesthetic values, remained permanent influences.¹

Aside from the Jewish tradition and Classical philosophy, the intellectual framework out of which Steinberg’s religious outlook grew was the entire range of modern philosophy from Descartes and Spinoza to Whitehead. However, for the most part, it was from the insights of twentieth century theistic philosophers that he drew the universe of discourse for his thinking about religion. He read with care the works on religion by America’s “Golden Age” philosophers: Royce’s The World and the Individual and Religious Aspects of Philosophy, James’ Varieties of Religious Experience and Dewey’s A Common Faith. He also drew from personalist thinkers like Borden Bowne whose volume on theism served him as an introduction to the philosophical problems about God.

Steinberg was also influenced by several European thinkers in the domain of speculative metaphysics. He was aware of the antimetaphysical temper of twentieth century philosophy, in accordance with which pragmatists, empiricists and existentialists rejected as meaningless all propositions about the essence of the universe. But, at the end of the forties, two major metaphysical schools were still flourishing—the realist


SIMON NOVECK, a former congregational rabbi, has taught Jewish history and philosophy, most recently at Brooklyn College.
metaphysics of Alexander, Whitehead and Hartshorne, and the neoscholasticism of Maritain, Gilson and other Catholic thinkers. Steinberg was drawn to the former precisely because they reasserted the legitimacy and importance of metaphysical ventures.

Out of this technical background and out of his familiarity with the history of Jewish rationalism came essays which helped lay the foundation for a revival of Jewish theology in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.

Religion as Weltanschauung

Religious faith, in the sense of a theistic or God interpretation, was, according to Steinberg, the most neglected aspect of the Jewish heritage. Religion was the “central motif” and the “climactic expression of the whole complex of Jewish living.” That motif, he was convinced, could not be eliminated, without disjointing the entire organism.\(^2\)

Judaism, like other religions, developed in response to four distinct human needs. The first of these is for ritual or folkways which, to Steinberg, represented a “spiritualizing device” to sanctify life, a method of discipline and a way of participating in an historic tradition.

The second aspect of religion—that of ethics—meets man’s need for guidance in his patterns of conduct. Steinberg believed these patterns to be rooted in the nature of the universe and an “inescapable law of reality.” Just as there are universal natural laws, there must also be laws regulating human relationships; otherwise there would be a gap in the unity of the universe. Steinberg did not agree with naturalists like Santayana, Dewey and Hook for whom the universe was morally neutral. He accepted the Jewish view that goodness was a quality objectively present in men and in their conduct.

A third need which religion meets is that of “a focus and stimulus of the religious emotion.” It must find a place for the “religious aestheticism” of Santayana, for the varieties of religious experience discussed by William James, for Schleiermacher’s sense of dependence and for Rudolph Otto’s concept of the Holy. No religion, Steinberg argued, could be called complete that did not find room for all types of internal religious or subjective experience, including the “blinding illumination of the mystic.”\(^3\)

Finally, said Steinberg, religion fulfills the need for a world outlook or, as he put it, a “reasoned scheme of things.” Men have two choices in their attitude towards the cosmos. They can interpret it as a “monstrous horror ground out by some blind chance with no more significance than a tale told by an idiot” or they can see it as the “outward manifestation of the


phenomenology of the spirit." Steinberg held that only a theistic interpretation was tenable. But theistic or atheistic, most people, he insisted, need an interpretation of reality to make life meaningful.

Steinberg pleaded for "equilibrium and balance" in religion so that it would answer all of these needs. He criticized the outlook of Royce for being "pure intellectualism and morality" and that of James as "blankly sterile emotionalism." The blunder of the latter was to take the emotional aspect of religion and identify it with the totality of religious life. Similarly, he protested against what he regarded as an overemphasis in many churches and synagogues on social justice because they neglected the theological aspect of religion. In spite of his plea for a balanced view, Steinberg put more emphasis on Weltanschauung than on the other aspects. "Philosophical reflection is the beginning of piety," he said. "Religion is a matter of cosmology basically and I cannot interpret it otherwise than from that position."

Steinberg was not, however, a detached thinker who engaged in "pure speculation for its own sake." His interest was in "religious speculation" as part of his quest for insight, meaning and goodness in life. Science cannot provide such understanding; it explores particular categories rather than "things as a whole." It deals with phenomena which can be weighed or measured, not with the true or the good or with ultimate reality. Given a God faith, he tells us with a sort of suppressed excitement, "the whole universe bursts into lucidity, the rationality of nature, the emergence of life, the phenomena of conscience and consciousness become intelligible."

In his view, failure to achieve such a coherent religious faith was responsible for some of the severest aberrations of his time—"the upsurge of anti-intellectualism, cultism and religious authoritarianism, the proliferation of neuroticisms and the latter day worship of the state, race or economic class" which he described as modern forms of idolatry.

Steinberg hailed the fact that, at the end of the 1940s, American Jewry was beginning to produce a few theologians. This development, he explained, was caused partly by philosophers and thinkers from Germany and partly by the newer Christian theology, but it was also in response to Judaism's own inner needs. Whatever the cause, for Steinberg it was a hopeful omen.

Criteria for a Rational Theology

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4. Ibid.
frequently describing himself as a "modernist" whose creed he summed up as follows: faith in intellect, confidence in the essential goodness of man and the remediality of evil, and a strong sense of the reality of progress as part of the scheme of things. The modernist was also one who respected science and who felt that Judaism should be adapted to modern ideas and circumstances.\(^9\)

He also referred to himself as a "religious rationalist" whose convictions were, in great measure, the consequence of a "rationalist-pragmatist metaphysics." However, rationalism, to him, did not mean the abstract, analytic and deductive operations of the mind as found in geometry, or the bold "quest for certainty" of a Spinoza who designed his metaphysics and ethics mathematically. Neither did it mean the extreme rationalism of Hermann Cohen, a rationalism composed only of demonstrable propositions from which all undertones of mystery and mood had been eliminated. A religion confined only to the logically demonstrable and indifferent to the emotional hungers of men, he said, would "misrepresent the universe and feed its communicants stones for bread." Religion is also acquired through intuition and feeling, through tradition, revelation and mystical experience; through morality and group solidarity, or a combination of these. Such non-rational approaches, however, could at best furnish tentative conclusions which then required reason to confirm or to upset them.\(^10\)

But even the rational process could provide only "plausible interpretations with a high measure of probability." Descartes and Locke, Steinberg explained, had taught that the senses could not be completely trusted as sources of information concerning reality. Lobachevski and the non-Euclideans had thrown a shadow over the certainty of results obtained from Euclidian geometry. And Freud had shown that underneath logic there was the irrationality of the life drive. Thus, step by step, men had gradually stopped looking to reason for the disclosure of complete truth.\(^11\) Nevertheless, though the vision that reason provided was "blurred, a-stigmatic, doubt-ridden, and always open to challenge," Steinberg insisted that it still remained the "most reliable of human powers, the only (one) universally shared and readily communicated."\(^12\)

Because of its limitations, reason must be bolstered by the pragmatists' emphasis on "practicality" or "workability" as an additional test. Steinberg could not accept the irrationalism implicit in James' pragmatism, just as he could not accept the irrationalism implicit in in-

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9. Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.), pp. 10 and 27. For the attitude of Jewish modernists to other aspects of Judaism, see Ibid., pp. 94-96, 128, 139-142, 149, 162-4.


11. Milton Steinberg, Notes for a lecture to students of the Jewish Theological Seminary, April 1943.

tuitionism. But he did agree that ideas need to be tested, not only in abstract or conceptual terms, but, also, in terms of their consequences. Theism seemed to him not only the most logical but, also, the most practical idea, since it accorded meaning to human strivings and it heightened morale. In addition, it was the best foundation for ethical ideals.

But, for all its utility, James' pragmatism had another weakness—the lack of a clear-cut standard of judgment among different experiences. Steinberg, therefore, set up the additional tests of “congruity,” the requirement that the idea fit the facts, and of “economy,” that is, the choice of the simplest rather than the most complex interpretation. Based on these three tests, he was convinced that the weight of evidence was on the theistic side.13

He saw the universe as an organic unity, subject everywhere to the same law-dynamic, pulsating with energy and life. It is creative, forever calling new things into being, from solar systems to new breeds of animals and new ideas. It is rational, in the sense that everything behaves according to law, and purposive, at least in some of its phases. It also contains consciousness, having produced man who is endowed with intelligence and a thirst for truth, beauty and goodness. While not without difficulties, theism fitted these facts, met the three tests and explained reality far better than did atheism.14

But, though reason could lead to a religious interpretation of the universe, it could not prove the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, or the idea that life has meaning. Therefore, when the rational process had gone as far as it could, faith was also necessary to achieve a religious Weltanschauung. One must make a “venture into the heart of things,” perform an “act of faith” which, together with reason, would bring one to religious understanding.

Such acts of faith, said Steinberg, were also necessary for the scientist, as can be seen in his use of postulates or hypotheses. Scientific judgments are based on such unprovable assumptions as the objective reality of the physical world, the rationality of nature, and its uniformity in time and space. Though the scientist cannot prove these assumptions, he has faith in them because they are necessary for life.15 In such a world where proof is not possible, he held, we have a right to believe.16

What we believe, however, should not be blind or arbitrary. It must be lucid in its presentation, with all terms clearly defined and the grounds of all arguments candidly stated. Essentially, what Steinberg wanted to show was that a religious outlook could be “intellectually respectable;” it

15. Ibid., pp. 102-4.
need not be "obscure in a sense and inconsistent with the spirit of free inquiry."\textsuperscript{17}

The search for God was to be conducted "not by faith alone nor by reason alone but by a polarity of both with a dialectical relationship one with the other." This was what he called "normal religion" or theology.\textsuperscript{18}

Concept of Theism

Based on this dialectical approach, Steinberg arrived at his God faith, which, for him, was the central conviction of Judaism. He accepted the traditional conception that God is One, the Creator of all things, Law-giver, Liberator and Savior, helping the individual to overcome his limitations.\textsuperscript{19} In his envisagement God is an entity or being and not merely the sum of those forces that make for the enhancement of life, as his teacher, Mordecai Kaplan, taught. He is spirit, that is, reason and moral will, the essence and ground of all things. He is the Mind of the universe that contemplates and orders all things. He possesses infinite consciousness before which all things are forever present.

God is also a moral Being, not so much in the sense that He enters into ethical relations with His own expressions, as in the deeper sense that He is the "fountainhead" and "sanction" of man's moral life. He is both transcendent, that is, apart from the world, a separate, independent Being behind the universe and, at the same time, immanent, that is, within man and the world—their ground and life.

The rebellion against the immanent conception by Kierkegaard and Barth had stimulated a return to transcendentalism in contemporary religious speculation. Steinberg saw value in this new trend for it brought modern man back to Biblical tradition which is overwhelmingly transcendental. He recognized that there was danger in conceiving God as residing in all things for it could lead to a blurring of individuality which is so basic in historic Judaism. Nevertheless, he thought that a measure of immanence in religion was also desirable for it brings God near and makes him accessible.

Steinberg did not pretend that there was anything radically novel in his viewpoint. The student of philosophy, he said, would find its antecedents in both Jewish and philosophical thought, in rabbinic works and those of the Stoics, neo-Platonists, Hegel and Bergson. In several respects, however, his concept of theism deviated from that of Biblical and Talmudic Judaism. He believed, for example, that God manifested Himself in natural law and its regularity rather than in miracles which, for him, were part of the "folklore" from a time "when people did not have the

\textsuperscript{17} Milton Steinberg, letter to Sidney Hook, June 17, 1946.
\textsuperscript{18} Transcript of Four Lectures delivered at the Park Avenue Synagogue, January, 1950, Lecture I, pp. 80-81.
\textsuperscript{19} Basic Judaism, p. 36.
same awareness of causal relations as we do." "My position," he wrote in reply to an inquiry from one of his younger congregants, "is very close to that of Spinoza. To me God is revealed in the regularity of nature, a regularity which does not allow for the suspension of nature." Nor did Steinberg believe in providence in the traditional sense. For him, the Bergsonian analogue of a "hand pushing through the sable" which denied absolute equity in the fate of every individual seemed "thoroughly inadequate." He accepted the view that "there is a direction behind the whole but no necessary meaning to the accidents which befall the individual component." It was enough for Steinberg to know that "there is a power which makes for freedom, sentiency, creativity and righteousness even though in the case of individuals the grains may fall helter-skelter."  

Though this last description would seem to bring him close to Mordecai Kaplan's conception, actually there were several differences in their attitudes to God. These were based on what Steinberg considered Kaplan's "most serious deficiency"—his refusal, as a matter of principle, to engage in philosophical speculation concerning God, His existence and nature. Steinberg summed up these differences in a paper that he gave before the Rabbinical Assembly in June 1949.

Because Dr. Kaplan...speaks so generally of the God-idea rather than of God; because, furthermore, he shrinks God to the sum of those aspects of reality which enhance man's life, these being all of God which he regards as mattering to man, because of all this, the following has resulted:

a) The actuality of God is brought under question. It is asked: does God really exist or is He only man's notion?
b) The universe is left unexplained. To say of God that He is a power within the scheme of things leaves the scheme altogether unaccounted for.
c) A need arises for another God beyond and in addition to Dr. Kaplan's who shall account for the world in which they find themselves, concerning which they are insatiably curious.
d) Something alarmingly close to tribalism in religion is revived. A God possessed of metaphysical standing, a Being who is also a principle of explanation for reality, must be beyond the parochialism of time and space, of nation and creed. But a God who is all relativist, especially such a God as Kaplan's who tends to be a function of social life, "an aspect of a particular civilization," is in imminent peril of breaking down into a plurality of deities, each civilization possessing and being informed by its own.

These differences, however, in no way affected Steinberg's complete acceptance of other aspects of Reconstructionism. Kaplan's approach to Jewish ritual as folkways, his concept of organic community and his definition of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization remained basic tenets of Steinberg's Weltanschauung.

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21. Milton Steinberg, letter to Dr. L. Richard Cipes, Jan. 16, 1939.
23. For Steinberg's relationship to Reconstructionism see Simon Noveck, Milton Stein-
Interpretations of Evil

For Steinberg, the most important test of any God concept was whether it furnished an adequate explanation of evil in the world. Why was there so much misery, suffering and tragedy and why did it happen to so many decent, moral human beings? Steinberg was preoccupied with this problem throughout his life.

In his effort to justify God's ways Steinberg considered the various theories which had appeared in Jewish and philosophical tradition and found most of them unacceptable. Until the last years of his life the interpretation that he found most attractive was one based on the theory of emergent evolution suggested by the English zoologist and philosopher, C. L. Morgan, and developed by Samuel Alexander. These philosophers pointed to distinct levels in nature, reaching up from the mineral through the animal to the level of spirit. An "emergent," according to Morgan, introduces novelty which cannot be predicted from the factors already at work in a process. At critical stages new modes of relationship come into being which cannot be interpreted in terms of the factors which operate on a lower level. Steinberg, too, saw life as a kind of "evolutionary ladder." Men are "kin to the mineral, prisoners of time and space, near relatives to the plant, exposed to attack and hunger" and, like animals, engaged in a competitive struggle. In the light of this, evil is the "persistence of the circumstances of lower strata in higher." The whole evolutionary record is the "tale of the hangover of restraints" and the "saga of life's continuous victory over them." The heritage of the beast is still powerful in man, who can be irrational, cruel, destructive. But he has the intellect and skills to emancipate himself and the moral insights to overcome his destructive tendencies.24

Steinberg did not assert that this was the only possible interpretation of evil. But even if only partially satisfactory, he said, the God faith was still indicated and left less unexplained than did atheism.

During his last two years Steinberg became interested in an approach to the problem of evil based on the "unconventional but highly stimulating proposal" put forth by Peirce, Whitehead and Hartshorne of a non-absolute God. According to these modern metaphysicians, a God who is absolutely perfect, unchanging and immutable must also be static, immobile and admit of no relationships. How do we explain a changing world in terms of an absolute God who never changes, they asked?

Steinberg liked Peirce's evolutionary metaphysics which emphasized the role of chance as a factor in the universe. He thought that Peirce had a "unique and original conception of what the Godhood must be" and that

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his doctrine of "tychism," or chance, offered a "helpful hypothesis as to the existence of evil and disorder in a God directed world." Similarly, he credited Hartshorne's social conception of theism with emancipating him from "servitude to the classical metaphysicians and their God, who in his rigid eternal sameness is no God at all, certainly not the God of whom Scripture maketh proclamation nor whom the human heart requires."26

During the fall of 1949, Steinberg came across the writings of Edgar Sheffield Brightman and was also impressed by his interpretation of evil. Just as in mathematics there are irrational numbers which cannot be explained, so in life and the world there exist elements of non-rationality which Brightman calls surds. By this term he meant an evil that is not reducible to good, regardless of the operations performed on it. It is so cruel, irrational and unjust that it could not be the work of a good God. In Brightman's view, if we suppose the power of God to be finite but His will for good infinite, we have a reasonable explanation of the place of surd evil in the scheme of things. Steinberg felt that this notion of the fortuitous and the irrational, for which God is not responsible but against which He struggles, was true to reality and a force for better living.27 While he had no opportunity to work out the implications of these interpretations, Steinberg candidly acknowledged the influence of these metaphysical philosophers on his thinking.

Quite clearly, Steinberg was no longer (if he ever had been) completely a defender of traditional theism. But in spite of the "unconventional" notions that he embraced, he remained a convinced theist, as is evident from a letter which he wrote to The Reconstructionist and which appeared in the issue of March 10, 1950, ten days before he died. In an earlier article, Immanuel Lewy, a member of the editorial Board of that publication, had written:

It is a fact that modern theologians of all faiths do not believe any longer in this doctrine (the theism of a personal, transcendent God). The criticism of theistic metaphysics by Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and modern science has made this belief as untenable as the belief that the sun turns around the earth. I have read hundreds of different philosophers and theologians of our time. None of them still subscribes to the doctrine of theism.

Steinberg wrote in reply:

Dr. Lewy's reading is regrettably incomplete. He seems to have missed Royce, Balfour, Pringle-Pattison, and Hocking; the absolute idealists such as Bradley and Bosanquet; the Personalists from Bowne to Brightman, not to mention a whole line of Continental philosophers and theologians including Lotze and Eucken.

The actual fact is that the number of those who maintain a personalist-

27. Transcript of Four Lectures, Lecture III, pp. 27 and 30.
theistic position is legion and includes not only religious traditionalists (neo-Thomists like Maritain and neo-Reformationists like Barth and Brunner), nor Existentialists (Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel, Buber), but all the sizable company of metaphysical rationalists pointed to above.

Attitude to Man and Human Nature

Until 1944 there is no evidence of any sustained thinking on Steinberg's part on the problem of man. In his earlier period he had shared the commonly accepted optimistic notion of all modernists that the evil in human nature was superficial, due primarily to the environment. But, during World War II, he began to modify his optimistic attitude. The terrible events overseas and the new psychiatry which taught that at the core of human personality there is a complex of blind irrational drives, made him realize that the evil in man was deeper and more intense than he had suspected.

But though he had modified his view, Steinberg did not agree with what he regarded as a morbid preoccupation with sin characteristic of some Christian thinkers. This can be seen in his review-essay on Reinhold Niebuhr which he published in The Reconstructionist in December, 1945. Though impressed with the brilliance of the famous Protestant thinker, he had two criticisms: First, in Niebuhr's insistence that men can never escape the taint and corruption of self love, Steinberg saw a contradiction, as many critics were later to point out, between his position as a conservative theologian and as a left-wing political thinker. Second, there was a spirit of morbidity in Niebuhr's constant emphasis on evil which made his outlook so different from that of Judaism. Drawing on his own experience with illness, Steinberg poignantly explained the difference.

Two men, let us suppose, are both affected with a chronic and always dangerous disease. One makes that circumstance the focal point of his thought and feeling. He knows all along that he has in himself elements of health, that his life situation is still enjoyable and worthwhile. His illness, however, looms most prominently in his spiritual landscape and, so, absorbs his first thought and effort. The other is fully aware of his ailment. He recognizes that he dare not forget it for an instant, or live even most fleetingly in violation of the restraints it imposes, or cease ever to hedge it in. Yet for him the most conspicuous feature of his being is not this, grave as it is. He is, therefore, likely to get along better as patient to his physician, as laborer, as kinsman, as citizen, certainly as a companion to others who, in like case with him, travel the road by his side.

Steinberg felt that Niebuhr's view was too much like the melancholia of the first man; historic Judaism was characterized by the cheer of the second man. With some of the same optimism which had characterized him in the past, he reiterated his view: "Of course, there's evil in the world," he wrote, "terrible evil. It's a riddle and a challenge. But the ultimate fact is God. That doesn't mean that we have to be pollyanna
about it, but neither ought we be nervous Nellies." Though he admitted the presence of evil in man, he still believed that there was no aspect of life which could not be mended.

In the depths of man’s heart burns a moral will, and hedging it in are all the barriers thrown up by indolence and evil habit. For the individual spirit these walls inside him may be as formidable as the walls of outer circumstance for a group, and he has a shorter time to work out his destiny. But the walls within, like the walls without, are creatures of time and subject to change. If, then, only the pressure of spirit continues, any next moment may bring what has so long been denied—a breakthrough.29

If one breakthrough is possible, Steinberg said, any number of break-throughs are also possible. “With each penetration the breach becomes wider and wider until it is a broad avenue through which the spirit marches effortlessly.”30

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Steinberg did not live long enough fully to expose his thought. His essays, therefore, leave many questions unanswered, insights undeveloped and ambiguities unexplained. In spite of this, his theological writings are still very much worth reading and studying. They remind us of the overly practical bent of American Judaism and of the need for philosophical reflection in religion. As a sophisticated religious thinker, sensitive to philosophical issues, he raised at least some of the questions essential for the development of an acceptable theism. For those still in search of a rational theology, his plea that reason not be abandoned in the theological enterprise continues to be a source of encouragement and stimulation. At the same time, his emphasis on the centrality of faith, his constantly reiterated belief that spirit reigns supreme over nature and human affairs, represents an equally relevant message.

Just before the completion of this article, the writer paid a visit to Steinberg’s grave on a hilltop in Mount Hope Cemetery in Westchester. At close range the words which his wife had had engraved on the stone—“Faith and Reason”—though somewhat faded, can still be seen. But the surrounding foliage had covered over the word “Reason” and from the distance all one could see was the word “Faith.” In the end, Steinberg was essentially a religious Jew whose aim was to teach the lessons of faith. The words which, in his novel, he put into the mouth of Rabbi Johanan, the son of Zacai, remained the motto of his own life: “There is no Truth without Faith. There is no Truth unless first there be a Faith on which it may be based.”31

31. As a Driven Leaf (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co.) p. 18.