

On the prospect of a religious renaissance  
in America, or “Do not go Gentile  
into that good night”

# To Be Jewish in God's Own America

Andre Ungar

As Napoleon's armies were advancing into Eastern Europe, a Jew ran gleefully to his rabbi. “Master, the liberators are coming! At long last we shall be free and secure, treated like human beings, given dignity and....” But the sage shook his head. “Yes, we shall be rich and safe. And we shall forget all about God and His Law, break His commandments, run after worthless goals. I'd rather have us poor and oppressed as we are now, but faithful to our Judaism.”

Or as another rabbi in another age put it: “What profiteth it a man to gain the world and lose his soul?”

In the course of some twenty centuries of history Jews have had to confront two very different types of questions: How shall we stay alive—and, if possible, free and prosperous? How shall we stay Jewish? Both are issues of survival. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, what proved helpful in solving one problem has often aggravated the other. Under conditions of ease and acceptance the Jewish commitment of Jews has tended to diminish, at times to vanishing point and beyond. Conversely, persecution appears to have elicited passionate loyalty toward both the faith and people of Israel. Naturally enough, Jews would prefer to have it both ways at once. Is that but a dream, or does the American situation favor its realization—and, if so, under what conditions?

More specifically, it has been asked whether a more religious public ethos in the United States, as against a dominantly secular orientation of Gentile society, would promise gain or danger to Jewry. Suppose there were a genuine revival of Christian fervor in this country. What would it imply for the Jewish population? One begins with the assumption that *any* significant change in the overall mood of a country would have *both* welcome and deleterious consequences for the Jew. It might be argued that whatever made Jewish

bodies more comfortable would seem to pose risks for Jewish souls, and vice versa. What helps Jews in one way is bound to hurt them in another. A neat logical poser, this, but a baffling human tangle as well.

The traditional stance of major Jewish organizations—American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, and so forth—has been on the side of secularity. The constitutional provisions for the meticulous separation of Church and State were viewed as the very foundation of Jewish rights and success in America. Without always saying it in so many words, the assumption was that Jewish life and liberty are safer in a secular society than in a religiously committed environment. Officially it may be that Jewish organizations have opposed only the encroachments of religion on the public domain. In substance, however, it was the power of religious institutions—that is, Christian, Protestant, or Catholic—that inspired fear and evoked defensive measures.

There are excellent historical reasons for fear and defensiveness. Indeed, anti-Semitic excesses throughout Western history were all too often associated with religious frenzy. Primarily within the Christian orbit, but to a minor extent also in the world of Islam, the zeal of true believers who are in the majority has wreaked calamity upon nonconforming minorities and, most typically, upon Jews. One can hardly ignore the role of the Church in making European Jewry's experience one of recurring martyrdom. The Crusades massacred Jews, the Inquisition burned Jews, the Lateran Councils branded, banished, and humiliated Jews, Capistrano and Luther demanded death to the Jews ...and all in the name of Christ. More recently, while Hitler was exterminating Jews, and today, while some Arab leaders speak of annihilating Jews by the millions, the Christian silence is in curious contrast to the pious noises that were elicited in favor of Biafra, Bangladesh, or Vietnam.

For the sake of balance, one might add that the

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advent of the Almoravides and shortly thereafter of the Almohades in Moslem Spain meant a resurgence of Islamic consciousness—and, it seems inevitably, the violent persecution of the Jews. You don't have to be a Christian to hate, and kill, Jews.

The other side of the coin appears to be equally clearly minted. When religious fervor relaxed, conditions became far more endurable for the Jewish inhabitants. Humanism rather than theology characterized the Italian Renaissance; and indeed, the fortune of Jews improved all over the peninsula. The sway of religion weakens after the French Revolution in Western Europe—and for the first time in centuries Jews are treated as human beings, more or less. Perhaps the best exposition of this thesis (in generalized form) can be found in Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*. He argues that as long as the Church had real power it was oppressive and obscurantist; when it eventually began to yield to progress, it was more a matter of bowing to the inescapable than of freely, joyously advancing to nobler insights. Little wonder, then, that Jewish sensitivities are alerted by signs of Gentile—and most specially Christian—religious revival.

But there is another less obvious, or at least less often mentioned, side of the question. Indeed there is evidence pointing toward a quite different conclusion. It is simply not true that secular societies were always paragons of tolerance, while religious systems preached and practiced persecution. Both sides of such a claim are demonstrably false. Jews have lived in India for many centuries, surrounded by a profoundly devout native population, yet have never experienced oppression or violence, at least not on a theological basis. During the so-called Golden Age of Jewish life in Moslem Spain the general society adhered loyally to the teachings of Mohammed. In seventeenth-century Holland Jews enjoyed an island of tranquillity and wealth amid an almost mystically Christian environment. Thus in certain places and at certain times deeply religious societies have made Jewish life quite secure, pleasant, and humane. On the other hand, militantly secular orders such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia have far exceeded all religious fanaticisms in their ruthless destructiveness.

In the American experience some patterns are clearly noticeable. The Puritan pioneers could hardly be accused of undue tolerance toward dissenters, be they Catholics, Jews, or one another. Bible Belt fundamentalism in most of its variants also had little love for Christ-killers, Pharisees, and the brood of Judas. Too, the most virulent and violent anti-Semitism known on these shores to emanate—and possibly still does—from Polish, Ukrainian, and Hungarian immigrant enclaves in the mining and manufacturing regions of the Middle West. These groups continue to have strong ties with Catholic or Protestant churches.

On the other hand, in many Southern communities Jews have lived in idyllic harmony alongside their fervently Baptist and Methodist neighbors. They had, on the whole, unruffled relations with New England

Congregationalists and big-city Italian Catholics. No trace of conflict, it seems, ever arose between Jews and Quakers, Mennonites, or the Amish (surely fervently devout enough groups?). Just as the global scene appears to shrug off simplistic formulae, the American situation also defies a naive schema.

The past few decades have witnessed a significant decline in Christian loyalties, both in name and in substance. Church membership and church attendance figures appear to have lagged behind the increase of the population; public opinion polls and the general mood of the media reflect an unmistakable eclipse in Christian beliefs, ethical values, and symbolic enactments alike. Parallel with this tendency there has been a notable improvement in the condition of Jews in America. Open exclusion from residential areas and occupations has diminished. Reinforcement of this direction by legislation is an important index of society's thinking and feeling. Anti-Semitic expression, either violent or verbal, has become less and less acceptable in ever widening circles of Gentiles. Is there a causal connection between these two concurrent processes? Are people more tolerant of Jews because their ties to traditional religious doctrines have become more attenuated? Or are both tendencies mere outward manifestations of more fundamental underlying causes—or, possibly, are they wholly coincidental? Many Jews, and Jewish organizations, regard them as cause and effect. Consequently they view with less than enthusiasm any indication of a possible return by Gentiles to more committed Christian orientation.

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Yet it must be noted that while Jewish lives may have become more secure, prosperous, and free than ever before in this country, all is not well with Jewry and Judaism in America. Precisely because of the new opportunities open to them, Jews seem to have taken advantage of economic, educational, and social opportunities at the expense of their Judaic loyalties. By and large, Jewish education is a failure—and lack of motivation is at the core of the problem. Religious observance and affirmation are at a pretty low ebb too; if

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anything, American Jews have far outdone the Christian majority in the drift toward secularity.

Synagogue attendance is way below church attendance. The manner in which American Jews, of all ages and classes, vaunt their emancipation from religion—any religion—is disproportionately higher than the disaffection of Catholics or Protestants from their theological background. Especially the Jewish intelligentsia, from Henry Roth through Philip Roth to Erica Jong and Susan Sontag, is marked by at best an aloofness from, often a disdain for, classic Jewish bonds. A Cynthia Ozick is a rare exception that tests the rule; while the Wouks and Urises and Potoks are strictly non-U compared to the major talents.

Even on the purely ethnic level there has been a steady decline in Jewish feeling and conduct. Concern for Israel, Soviet Jewry, and world Jewry in general has been on the wane by and large. Occasional emergencies do galvanize Jews into panic, compassion, and a momentary frenzy of action. But soon enough the apathy sets in anew; other, more personal, more American things are more pressing. Of course, intermarriage—now around the 40 per cent mark—is only one more symptom of steady disintegration. The real peril to Jewish survival in America is not anti-Semitism, but assimilation. Surveys are duly commissioned, reports published, sermons given, fingers wagged, alarm buttons pushed—but the process continues unabated.

Viewed from this angle, it is very possible that a swing toward a more religious public ethos in America would prove positively helpful to the perpetuation of Jews as Jews in this society. Their protestations to the contrary, all minorities always and everywhere tend to model themselves on the pattern set by the majority. A Jewish adage puts it quaintly but truly: "As one Christians, so one Jews." In a society where adherence, both in appearance and substance, to religion was socially and culturally approved, minority enclaves would be shamed into taking their own tradition of faith more seriously.

True, there might well be a resurgence of missionary zeal, a new wave of polemics and disputations on the printed page, on the screen, in living rooms, offices, and carpools. Some Jews might switch sides and become Christian, either out of newfound conviction or as a means of social climbing. But the bulk of Jews might well find themselves prompted into a new exploration of their own spiritual and cultural heritage (and simultaneously, a new appreciation of their ethnic bonds of cohesion). A veritable rebirth of Jewish piety and creativity could be the result.

Finally, there is the possibility—and the hope—that a Christian revival in America would assume nonoppressive forms. Though the weight of past experience is not encouraging in this regard, there is at least a theoretical chance, and a modest measure of historical evidence, to suggest that a society could be sincerely and consistently Christian and yet genuinely hospitable to others, in particular to Jews. Jews would have every reason to welcome such a situation in which they are allowed to prosper in freely chosen devotion to their Jewish ideals, community, memories, and hopes.

Can a genuine Christian renaissance be as tolerant as it is sincere and profound? Will it find the moral restraint against evangelical proselytism? By the very definition of "gospel," can the good news be kept from those hitherto untouched by it? Or, at the least, will the missionary methods be tempered by intelligence, scholarship, sensitivity—and love? There are also questions facing Jewry and Judaism. Will the Jew, individually as well as collectively, learn to define his Judaic loyalties in terms of choice rather than compulsion, of conviction rather than shared danger and discomfort, of genuine decision rather than shame? Will the Jew rejoice in the freedoms and opportunities of an open society and yet cling to the ancient faith, culture, and group solidarity? There are vast risks as well as great rewards in an essentially unpredictable situation.

The gift of prophecy, Judaism teaches, is dead since Malachi; or, if alive, it is granted only to children and to fools. So we must wait and see. But the Jewish stakes in whatever happens are clear enough.