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Judaism and the Secularization Debate

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The secularization debate is widened from the Christian context to include the case of Judaism. Certain characteristics of Judaism, the integral ethnic-religion link and the focus on practice, are expected to mediate the effects of modernity on religion among Jews. Data on patterns of religiosity are presented within a framework of a secularization thesis, emphasizing the ethnic and national basis of contemporary patterns. Four antiseccularization arguments are evaluated: a change in Jewish religiosity from practice to beliefs and ethics; the development of a Jewish civil religion with its own sacred beliefs and practices; the search among Jews for supernatural compensators outside Judaism; and a revival of traditional Jewish religious practices among the fourth generation. The evidence points to two divergent changes, both of which are related to modernity: a stabilization of religious practice among the majority and a more stringent pattern of religious practice among a growing minority.

The debate on secularization has been confined mainly to the Christian context, and there has been disagreement on whether the term "secularization" is useful as a cross-cultural concept (Dobbelaere, 1981). The debate will be extended in this paper by showing how it can be conducted within the Jewish context, and it will be suggested that differences among religions should be brought into the discussion of the effects of modernity on religion.

Most sociologists of religion are likely to acknowledge that the relationship between religion and the processes of modernity is an interactional or, as many prefer to call it, a dialectical one. But although there is a vast debate on the effects of Western religion, especially Protestantism, on the modern world, there has been little consideration of whether the effects of the processes of modernity (industrialization, urbanization, etc.) on religion will depend on the characteristics of the religions. Religions are understood here to include all systems of beliefs and practices that are anchored in notions of the supernatural, and in its barest formulation the secularization thesis states that the processes of modernity are accompanied by, or result in a decline or contraction of, such beliefs and practices.¹

Both proponents and opponents of the secularization thesis have supported their arguments mainly with data from the Christian context, but they have also generally

¹The multiplication of definitions, dimensions, and measurements of secularization (Shiner, 1967; Dobbelaere, 1981; Lyon, 1985) has made it increasingly difficult to single out "the secularization thesis." Some definitional issues in the secularization debate will be taken up in the body of the article, but it will be recognized that I favor a substantive, exclusive definition of religion (Robertson, 1970) rather than a functionalist (Yinger, 1970) or inclusive (Luckmann, 1967) one.

assumed that their arguments are applicable to other religious contexts. Berger (1967) wrote that the seeds of secularization were to be found in ancient Judaism and in Protestantism, but that the modern industrial economy is the major secularizing "carrier" in the contemporary West, and that the spread of Western civilization involves the spread of secularization. Even though other religions may never have carried within themselves the seeds or the potential of secularization, Berger implies that they will be similarly affected by the forces of modernity. Wilson wrote that certain characteristics of Christianity, such as its effective circumscription of the sacred, have made a difference with respect to the secularization process, but he argued that the model of secularization is intended to have general validity, and he expects that similar technological, economic, and political changes will have similar effects on religion in societies with different religious traditions (1982).

Sociologists who have attempted to refute the secularization thesis have made occasional references to religious resurgence in a number of societies, but most of their evidence has been drawn from a single religious tradition (Christianity) in a single society (the United States). They are less likely than "prosecularization" sociologists to include European societies in their analysis, and it has even been suggested that Europe is a nonrepresentative case (Hadden, 1987b). However, Martin's comparative analysis of patterns of secularization, encompassing both European countries and the United States, provides a point of departure from which comparative analysis may be extended to non-Christian contexts (1978).

Problems of comparing possible secularization patterns among societies with different religious traditions are compounded because, not only may the different religious contexts make a difference, but the many factors, such as industrialization, urbanization, growth of science and technology, and political developments, that many believe to have produced secularization in the West, also vary enormously in their relative importance and patterns. The thesis of a uniform process of modernization has long been questioned by sociologists, and if neither the "dependent variable" (religion) nor the "independent variables" (the various dimensions of "modernization") are strictly comparable, the problems of extending the secularization debate beyond its current Western Christian focus do appear formidable.

The comparative problems in this area do not appear to me to be insurmountable or of such magnitude as to make comparative analysis worthless, but there is the question of where we should begin the comparison. Although a case could be made for a number of comparative strategies, I believe one profitable strategy is to begin with Judaism. This may not take us very far outside the Western context, but it takes us out of the Christian one, and it has the advantage at this stage of widening the comparative range while retaining Western patterns of modernization as parameters. The minority position of Jewish communities has meant that modernization has affected Judaism in special ways, but the comparative analysis can include the case of Judaism in Israel, where Jews are in the majority.

Two characteristics of Judaism that differentiate it from Christianity are likely to be relevant in considering the effects of modernity on religion or on patterns of secularization: the integral tie between the religion and a particular people, and the emphasis on practice. Martin has shown, in his comparison of Christian societies,

that where religion has become an important component of ethnicity or nationality, as in Poland and Ireland, religiosity has continued at relatively high levels. The importance of religion in such cases has been contingent on factors in the nations' histories, but where there is an essential identity of religion and peoplehood, as signified by the covenant in Judaism, the implication for secularization may well be different.

The differentiation in the modern period of what are now termed "ethnic" or "national" components of Jewish identity from religious elements may itself be considered one aspect of the secularization of Jewish communities. In the traditional society, there had been no consciousness that Jewishness was made up of elements that could be distinguished in this way, and their differentiation in the postemancipation period made possible a Jewish identity in which there was a self-conscious focus on either the religious or the ethnic component. The reformulations of Jewish identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included those with an exclusively religious or nationalist basis, but they are rarely found today (Sharot, 1976, 1982). The exclusively religious identification that was given ideological and ritual expression in "classical" Reform Judaism lost its attraction in the face of vehement racial antisemitism, the Holocaust, the achievements of the Zionist movement, and the establishment of the state of Israel. The destruction of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe and the decline of its remnants in the West also undercut the foundations of a Jewish ethnic identity that could draw upon rich cultural resources with little regard to, or in opposition to, the religious heritage. Today, the ethnic or national component in Jewish identity may be the focal one for the majority of Jews in both the diaspora and Israel, but it is expressed through symbols taken from the religious heritage. Rather than reject religious symbols, most contemporary secular Jews tend to reinterpret them, and this has meant that a level of religious observance has continued even among atheists and agnostics.

The core of Talmudic Judaism is not theology but *halakha* (religious law) and its practice, and it has been argued that the absence of theology helps account for the rapid secularization of Jews once they entered open societies and were exposed to modern scientific beliefs. Nathan Glazer (1972) writes, concerning Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the United States, that "it may be said Jews lost their faith so easily because they had no faith to lose; that is, they had no doctrine, no collection of dogmas to which they could cling and with which they could resist argument." Jews had observed a complex system of practices within the segregated society, but once the first step had been taken and certain practices that were felt to limit participation in an open society were abandoned, there was no religious principle that could stem the abandonment of further practices. Religious practice fragmented into a great variety of levels and patterns of observance, but the majority of Jews are likely to retain a few common practices that appropriately express their Jewish identity.

If the combination of ethnic identity and the absence of a theology results in an attenuated religiosity among the majority who accommodate to Western norms, for the minority of Orthodox Jews who reject such accommodation the halakhic system of religious practices (*mitzvot*) provides a clear boundary between themselves, the pious who observe the *mitzvot*, and those who do not. Jewish Orthodoxy is better termed an *orthopraxy*, and its boundaries, based on the distinction between observance and

nonobservance or partial observance, are clearer and easier to defend than Christian orthodoxy, whose beliefs are subject to various interpretations.

Scientific and secular ideologies have posed threats to the traditional beliefs of both Christians and Jews, but these ideologies are likely to pose a more direct threat to a conservative religion whose core is theology than to one whose core is practice. The defence of Christian evangelicalism or fundamentalism by theologians and other members of its intellectual elite has involved clarifications and reinterpretations of their doctrines, and an adoption of the scientific tools of their adversaries (Hunter, 1987). The Jewish ultra-Orthodox elite may feel much less need to defend their practices; scientific and secular beliefs have little relevance for the core of their religion, and they may be ignored or compartmentalized and relegated to a relatively unimportant sphere of human knowledge.

Both Christian conservatives and Jewish traditionalists have emphasized moral boundaries, but they may be subject to greater erosion when doctrine rather than practice is the core of the religion. Among Christian evangelicals, the loosening of the strict moral, ascetic regimen of the past has followed a decline in their consensus over beliefs and an increasing vagueness about their basic doctrines (Hunter, 1987). In Christianity the legitimation of moral codes by core beliefs implies some differentiation of morality from theology, but in Judaism religious practices *are* the moral codes. For example, family purity is constituted by rules that regulate such matters as sexual relations and attendance of the *mikveh* (ritual bath). A more stringent ritual observance means, therefore, a more stringent morality.

A comparison of the educational institutions of Christian orthodoxy and Jewish orthopraxy reinforces the argument that, whereas modernity may weaken traditionalist doctrine, it can strengthen traditionalist practice. Hunter writes that, although the universities of evangelical Protestantism were founded as a defensive response to secular trends in higher education, the very nature of the education, in which students are introduced to more ambiguous and complex ideas, has weakened evangelical orthodoxy. A strict indoctrination into the truth of doctrines does not appear possible in the context of modern higher education. In comparison, the Jewish *yeshivot* (advanced religious educational institutions) can strengthen orthopraxy; they need be concerned much less with the interpretation or defense of a few basic beliefs than with the interpretation of the vast corpus of the Talmud or religious law. The emphasis on interpretation and application in talmudic study enables yeshiva students to engage in sharp and lively intellectual debates without challenging the validity of fundamental beliefs (Helmreich, 1982; Danzger, 1989). Individual and original thinking can be channeled into finding and justifying the most stringent interpretations of the law.

Thus, insofar as the effects of modernity are channeled or mediated by these particular characteristics of Judaism (the ethnic factor and the focus on practice), divergent patterns are possible: a highly stringent, encompassing pattern of Jewish practice could emerge alongside a highly attenuated one. I will now turn to a review of the evidence of Jewish religious practice, setting it within the framework of the debate on secularization. Sasaki and Suzuki (1987) have suggested that the most relevant means to test the secularization thesis in a number of societies is to use the most salient dimension of religious commitment in each society. In most Jewish communities the most

salient dimension is the observance of the mitzvot (cf. Himmelfarb, 1975), and this will be used in the following section in order to present the evidence for secularization. Objections to this approach will be considered in the subsequent section in which a number of antiseccularization arguments will be reviewed.

SECULARIZATION AMONG JEWS: ETHNICITY AND PATTERNS OF RELIGIOSITY

In comparison with the traditional community, in which the great majority observed a comprehensive system of mitzvot that guided their everyday life, Jewish religious observance today is highly selective and fragmented. Rituals that were observed by the great majority in the past, such as donning *tephillin* (phylacteries) during weekday morning prayers or following the many dietary laws, are observed today by only small minorities. Attendance at synagogue has also become a highly selective practice; in most communities in the United States only between ten and twenty percent attend synagogue on a regular weekly basis, but only between fifteen and thirty percent never attend. The majority attend occasionally, or once or twice a year on *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) and *Rosh Hashannah* (New Year).

The historical identity of Judaism and the Jewish people has meant that a predominantly ethnic Jewish identity can be expressed only through religious symbols and practices, but the symbols and practices that are chosen by most contemporary Jews are those that relate the individual and his or her family to the themes of the continuation of the Jewish people and its historical emergence and struggles for survival.² The rites of passage, circumcision, barmitzvah, religious marriage and burial, can be interpreted in this way, and they are observed by the great majority, who also signal their Jewish identity by placing the *mezuzah* on the door posts of their homes. The most popular ritual occasion in all Western communities (including Israel) is the *Seder* meal at *Passach* (Passover). This is a family occasion, often of the extended family, which celebrates deliverance from Egypt. Surveys of American Jewish communities in the 1980s found that between 80 percent and 90 percent participate in the *Seder* (Tobin and Chenkin, 1985), and surveys in other countries such as England and Israel have found the same high level (Gould, 1984; Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979). The second most popular religious ritual in the United States is the lighting of candles during Hanukkah, which commemorates the successful struggle against Syrian-Greek rule and the rededication of the desecrated Second Temple. The widespread observance of this ritual in the United States, between 75 percent to 85 percent in most communities, is also found in England (86%) and Israel (88%), but lower percentages in South Africa (40%), Italy (41%), and Denmark (49%) have been recorded (Tobin and Chenkin, 1985; Gould, 1985; Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979; Dubb, 1977; Della Pergola, 1971; Blum, 1973).

²Jewish religiosity has often been analyzed as one aspect of Jewish identification (Lazerwicz, 1973; Krausz, 1977), and in this context it has been implied that secularization is concomitant with a diminishing Jewish identification or a decline in Jewish solidarity. However, it has been argued that, while there is a continuing process of secularization, Jewish ethnicity and solidarity are not diminished and are not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future (Goldscheider and Zuckerman, 1984; Goldscheider, 1986).

The Passover Seder and the lighting of Hanukkah candles meet the criteria listed by Sklare (1971) in accounting for the continued observance of certain rituals among American Jews: (1) they can be effectively redefined in modern, nonsupernatural terms; (2) they do not demand social isolation or the adoption of a unique life-style; (3) they accord with the wider religious culture and provide a "Jewish" alternative when such is felt to be needed; (4) they are centered on the child; and (5) they are performed annually or infrequently. With respect to the first factor, it should be emphasized that the rituals are redefined not so much in the sense of giving them new meanings, but rather by diminishing or removing the traditional focus on God and his law, and giving precedence to the traditional themes of kinship and peoplehood (Frankel, 1980). The fourth criterion, child-centeredness, reflects not only a general characteristic of modern Western culture but also connects the family to the perpetuation of the Jewish people. The ethnic theme becomes central, but as the second and fifth criteria indicate, this can be done with little if any limitation on involvement in modern society. With respect to the third factor, it is perhaps relevant that Passover falls close to Easter, but it is the closeness of Hanukkah to Christmas that has often been emphasized in accounting for the centrality of this holiday in the ritual calendar of American Jews. It has become incorporated by schools and other public institutions into the festivities of the Christmas season, and practices such as Hanukkah cards and presents have enabled Jews to participate in the season's festivities in a Jewish fashion. This consideration is not relevant for the popularity of the holiday in Israel, but it should be noted that, whereas in the United States Hanukkah has become the major children's festival, in Israel there are other ritual occasions, *Purim* and *Lag B'Omer*, in which, for the majority, the major celebrations have come to focus around the children (fancy dress and bonfires respectively).

No other religious practices come near to the almost universal observance of the Passover Seder and Hanukkah candles, but another yearly ritual, fasting on *Yom Kippur*, is observed by about half of the American Jewish population and by high proportions in other Western communities.³ High overall percentages have been recorded in France (65%) and Israel (74%), but it would be somewhat misleading to compare these populations with American Jewry because they include large proportions of first generation immigrants from the more traditional communities of North Africa and Asia (Bensimon and Della Pergola, 1984; Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979). A more appropriate comparison is with French Jews born in France (37% fast) and Israeli Ashkenazim (56% fast). These are still high proportions, and it could be argued that *Yom Kippur* cannot be fitted into the interpretation that emphasizes that only rituals whose central theme is Jewish peoplehood are observed by the majority. The major themes of *Yom Kippur* are confession, repentance, and judgment of the individual for his or her acts over the year. A survey of Israeli Jews in the early 1970s found that *Yom Kippur* had little meaning for 16 percent of the sample because, unlike other religious holidays, it could not be

³A survey in 1981-1982 of American Jews found that 55% of those between ages 18 and 39 fasted on *Yom Kippur*, 59% in the 40 to 59 age range, and 47% of those over 60 years (Cohen, 1983b). The 1981 survey of New York Jews found that 67% fasted (Ritterband and Cohen, 1984). In 1975 in Boston, 55% fasted (Cohen, 1983a), and in Los Angeles 73% of the affiliated and 37% of the nonaffiliated fasted (Sandberg, 1986).

reinterpreted in strictly national terms (Katz, 1973). The meaning of fasting on Yom Kippur among contemporary Jews has yet to be investigated, but in Israel, where even the most secular of Jews refrain from travel on Yom Kippur, the major meaning of fasting among many does appear to be an expression of solidarity with the Jewish people. It is possible that the "Yom Kippur War" reinforced this tendency. Many fast without any ritual participation, such as attendance at synagogue, and it should be noted in this context that the proportion who fast in Israel (74%) is greater than the proportion who say that they believe in God (64%).

Only a small minority observe the Sabbath in a traditionally full manner (a survey in 1981-1982 of American Jews found that 5% refrain from working or shopping on the Sabbath), but like another traditionally important ritual area, dietary regulations, certain selected practices continue to be observed by larger minorities. The survey found that 22 percent regularly lit Sabbath candles, and 15 percent had separate dishes for meat and milk (Cohen, 1983b). Higher percentages have been found to retain dietary regulations in a selective manner. For example, some buy kosher meat but are prepared to eat nonkosher outside the home. Many eat predominantly nonkosher but draw the line at pork or bacon. In contrast with the Passover Seder and the Hanukkah candles, the proportions who observe these practices vary considerably among different communities; recent surveys of American Jewish communities recorded that the lighting of Sabbath candles varies from a quarter to two-thirds, and having separate meat and milk dishes varies from 10 percent to about a quarter of the populations (Tobin and Chenkin, 1985; Wertheimer, 1989). Data on other Western communities and Israel indicates similar patterns of Sabbath and dietary practices as those found in the United States.⁴

OBJECTIONS TO THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

No writer has disputed the evidence of a decline of religious practice among the majority of Jews in the postemancipation period, but it is possible to distinguish four

⁴On Jewish religious observance in England, see Sharot, 1976; Gould, 1984. For South Africa, see Dubb, 1977; Hellig, 1984. For Israel, see Sharot, 1990. For France, see Bensimon and Pergola, 1984. In a recent report of a survey of French Jews, carried out by Erik Cohen in 1986 and 1988, three levels of religious practice were distinguished: 15% observed the Sabbath, kosher laws and religious festivals in a strict fashion, 49% observed the most important religious festivals and a minimum of dietary laws, and 36% were "non-observers" (*Le Monde*, February 23, 1990). Surveys of American Jews have rarely included questions on religious beliefs, and the data that we have from some other communities is not extensive. A belief in God was assented to by 64% in Israel, 71% in Johannesburg, 75% in Liverpool (the same percentage has been recorded for the total British population), and 46% in Amsterdam. There is little data on how Jews conceive the nature of God; in Israel 47% believed that there was "something beyond nature that directs the history of the Jews"; in Johannesburg 69% agreed that each individual could approach God through prayer, and 42% believed that God rewarded the good and punished the wicked. The central religious myth that legitimates Jewish peoplehood, the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, was believed by 56% in Israel and 64% in Johannesburg, but only by 23% in Amsterdam. In Israel 57% believed that the Jews were the "chosen people," but this notion, which doubtless has many different meanings among respondents, was assented to by only 26% in Johannesburg and "very few" in Liverpool (Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979; Dubb, 1977; Kokosalakis, 1982; Wijnberg, 1967).

countersecularization arguments that either question the use of the term secularization or point to recent developments among Jews that challenge the secularization thesis. Definitional issues are central to the first two arguments: the first disputes the criterion of a decline of practice by pointing to a transition from practice to beliefs or ethics, and the second redefines the religion of Jews in nonsupernaturalistic terms. The third argument admits secularization within Judaism but claims that many Jews are finding an alternative supernatural form of religion outside Judaism. The fourth argument is that there has been a revival of traditional forms of Jewish religious practice in recent years. Each argument will be reviewed and criticized, and in the main the secularization thesis will be defended. However, points from the fourth argument will be incorporated into a discussion of religious polarization within Jewish populations. This discussion will point to the divergent effects of modernity on patterns of religiosity.

The First Argument

An objection to equating a decline in practice with secularization can be made by defining nonsecularity in terms of minimal religious requirements. Kokosalakis, for example, rhetorically asks whether it is correct to refer to recent generations as secular Jews because they are so distant from the ritual practices and cultural values of their Eastern European forefathers. He writes: "For purposes of analysis any Jew who acknowledges belief in God and practices even a few rituals will be assumed to be religious" (1982:23). If, on the basis of such all-or-nothing formulations, a secularized society is taken to mean one in which the majority do not believe in God and there is no religious practice, or where religious practice has shrunk to a tiny minority, most Jewish communities would not qualify. We can agree that the abandonment of particular religious practices need not be classified as secularization when there is no indication of a decline in the importance of the supernatural in the life of the community (cf. Dshen, 1974), but if it is admitted that it is possible to make judgments regarding the relative importance of supernaturalistic beliefs and practices in societies, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the majority of Jewish communities today are relatively secularized compared with those of the past.

A further objection to labeling a decline in religious practice as secularization is that such an equation makes orthopraxy synonymous with sacredness and thereby religiously devalues forms of modern Judaism, such as Conservative and Reform Judaism. There is evidence that some Reform Jews in the United States have defined their Jewish religious commitment in terms of moral directives rather than religious observance (Sklare and Greenblum, 1979; Furman, 1987). In so doing they have adopted the characteristic moralist orientation of religion in America with its equation of good deeds with the religious life. The abandonment of many religious practices has been legitimized in Reform Judaism by viewing Judaism as a self-transforming faith whose single enduring essence is the principle of ethical monotheism, and "classical" Reform Jews have pointed to a contradiction between the ritual prescriptions of traditional Judaism and their commitment to an activist social ethic.

Thus, if the test of secularization is the most salient dimension of religious commitment in each community or congregation, without regard to whether or not

it relates to supernatural notions, there would have to be a different test for each Judaism. Furman has shown, in her study of a classical Reform congregation, that many members express a social activist ideology with little actual involvement in social action programs, but even if there were high involvement, the application of the term “secularization” might still be considered appropriate if it is taken to refer to a decline in religious beliefs and practices anchored in supernaturalist notions. She writes: “God forms no active part of the motivational base for [the Reform congregation’s] ideology, nor is God used in a justificatory way.” God-language is absent: “When God is mentioned, even by the rabbis, the referent is usually the God of history — ancient history — and not a transcendent reality, which potentially confronts people today” (1987:61, 79).

The Reform Jews in Furman’s study give their political liberalism a Jewish legitimation by linking it to the prophetic tradition, but although this link is passionately held, it is made without reference to a supernatural source. Because the “reality of God is an uncertain proposition,” ritual is attenuated and devalued (1987:65). The main manifest motive of collective prayer is not communication with God but the experience of community. Thus, if we adopt a supernaturalist definition of religion, this type of Reform Judaism would have to be described as an expression of secularization.⁵ This does not imply that Reform Judaism is any less sacred than Orthodox Judaism, because the sacred, a system of beliefs and practices anchored in ultimate concerns, is not necessarily identical with the religious, a system of beliefs and practices anchored in supernatural notions (on the sacred/religious and profane/secular distinctions, see Spiro, 1968).

The Second Argument

This argument also turns on a conflation of the sacred and the religious. It differs from the first position insofar as it points to the emergence of a system of Jewish sacred beliefs and practices that are, at least in part, a functional alternative to all forms of synagogue or temple Judaism (or Judaisms). Jonathan Woocher, in his recent book *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*, does not confront directly the secularization thesis, but his analysis is the best example of this type of counter-secularization thesis. Woocher writes that his central thesis is that “the religion of American Jews may be found not only in the realm of synagogue and denominational life, but in the activity and ideology of the vast array of Jewish organizations which are typically thought of as ‘secular’.” He focuses on the welfare federation movement, “the central core of the American Jewish polity,” and argues that through these organizations American Jews “have achieved unity, purpose, and identity as a moral community which transcends (without excluding) the overtly religious ideology and practice of the denominational movements of American Judaism” (1986:vii). The division of American Jews along denominational lines (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) means

⁵Classical Reform has been in decline since the 1930s, and there has been a reemphasis on ritual in many Reform congregations. This might be considered a reversal of secularization within the Reform movement, but it is, in part, the consequence of an influx of new members from Conservative and Orthodox family backgrounds.

that "traditional" religion does not fully express, sustain, or direct American Jewry as a united moral community. This function and task is performed by a civil religion that endows the commonality with a transcendent significance. Transcendence does not refer here to God or to the supernatural, but to the meanings and values of the collectivity that go beyond the individuals who compose it.

Woocher delineates seven major traits of the civil Jewish faith on which there is a fundamental consensus among activists in the federations: the unity of the Jewish people, mutual responsibility, Jewish survival, the centrality of Israel, the enduring value of Jewish tradition, philanthropy and social justice, and Americanness as a virtue. Civil Judaism in America also has its central myths and rituals. The myth "from Holocaust to Rebirth" recounts a process of destruction followed by a rebirth or redemption in which the state of Israel is a symbol of a new era and a new power of the Jewish people. Another myth emphasizes that America is different: it has provided American Jews with unprecedented opportunities and a unique security (antisemitism in America is regarded as an aberration from the "true" America). A third myth is that of Jews as a chosen people with a special destiny and mission. The rituals include those that are appropriated from traditional Judaism, and those of the polity itself: the "missions" to Israel and the rituals of the fundraising campaign and the General Assembly of the federations. These beliefs, myths, and rituals embody a particular religious sensibility, "the conviction that the meanings of Jewishness is located centrally in the experience of Jewish peoplehood" (1986:172).⁶

By describing the beliefs, myths, and rituals of civil Judaism as sacred, Woocher appears to mean that they are referring to a transcendent phenomenon, but he is wary and hesitant about the meaning of transcendence. He writes that God or "some form of transcendent reality" is insignificant in the American Jewish civil religion. The collectivity is at the center of its meaning system, and the antagonism of supporters is avoided by remaining silent on the role of God in Jewish history and destiny. Civil Judaism differs from "traditional Judaism" in which the notion of the Jewish people as a religious entity, a "holy nation," is derived from the people's covenantal relationship to God. An emphasis on such a difference between traditional and civil religion would support a secularization thesis, but Woocher writes that, although the symbols of civil Judaism "do not have obvious transcendent referents," it is necessary to look below the surface of the stories and ceremonies to determine "whether they serve as functional equivalents of traditional myth and ritual for the civil religion's adherents, indeed whether their secularized language may even mask a genuine transcendent

⁶Although the civil religion concept may be usefully applied as an analogy in an analysis of the American Jewish "polity," Woocher's adoption of the concept raises a number of problems. There are many definitions of civil religion, but most refer to a system of shared beliefs and public rituals that symbolize or integrate the nation or state (cf. Bellah, 1967; Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 1983). Most American Jews are citizens of, and identify with, the American state, and they also identify with the Jewish nation or people, but American Jews as a collectivity are neither a nation nor a state. From the perspective of American society, American Jews constitute an ethnic group, and from the perspective of the Jewish nation they constitute one of the communities of the diaspora. If American Jews have a civil religion, this would have to be a civil religion of an ethnic group or a civil religion of a section of the Jewish nation. American Jews are not the only ethnic group in America with common beliefs, myths and rituals, and it is not evident that an analysis of ethnicity is deepened by adding the concept of civil religion. The usefulness of the concept may be diluted by such an application.

dimension" (1986:130-31).

But what is this "genuine transcendent dimension"? On the one hand, Woocher does not want to imply that civil Judaism is a case of collective self-deification; he writes that civil Judaism acknowledges that the values of the Jewish tradition transcend the characteristics of the people. On the other hand, he writes that because the ultimate source of the tradition is left unclear, the source of accountability is often history or the people. Woocher is critical of the absence of a serious theology in civil Judaism that would actively affirm "vertical transcendence," as contrasted to the "horizontal transcendence" of the people in time and space (1986:93), but I would argue that it is the absence of a clear notion of a supernatural transcendence that is an indication of secularization.

It is appropriate to note the difference between Woocher's thesis and Herberg's thesis of three decades ago (1960). Herberg argued that the "return to religion" of the immediate postwar and 1950s period was related to the identification problems of the third generation. The third generation grew up in homes that had adopted American secular culture, and because ethnic culture was unacceptable as a basis for identification in America, religion became the focal point of their identity, both as Jews (or Catholics or Protestants) and as Americans. In fact, the only unambiguous evidence of a "return to religion" among Jews in that period was a rise in synagogue affiliation (Sharot, 1973). Because the synagogue became an important center for secular social activities and the transmission of an ethnic identity, it appeared legitimate to refer to the secularization of religious institutions. In the 1980s, when ethnic identity requires less of a religious facade, Woocher has argued that the unity of American Jewry is to be understood in terms of the sacralization of its "secular" institutions.

The Third Argument

Secularization has also been denied by writers who have retained an approach to religion that emphasizes its distinctive supernatural beliefs and related practices. One variation of this approach, as represented in the work of Stark and Bainbridge, is to acknowledge that Judaism has been eroded by secularization but to argue that this is being offset by the movement of Jews into cults or new religious movements. Although they give little space to an analysis of the Jewish case, Stark and Bainbridge see it as providing excellent evidence for their thesis that secularization, in the sense of a long historical trend, is impossible because religion is the unique supplier of compensators for ubiquitous desires.⁷ They write that the relatively low formal religious affiliation and attendance at synagogue of Jews shows that secularization has eroded Judaism more than Christianity. A relatively high proportion of Jews have not had a religious socialization, but because the demand for the compensators that only religion can supply does not disappear and Jews are reluctant to adopt Christianity, there is "an extraordinary overrepresentation of Jews" in the new religious movements (1985:402).

The fact that the proportion of Jews in new religious movements is three times

⁷Stark and Bainbridge present what might be called a partial secularization thesis: a persistence of religion but a decline of magic. For a critique of such partial theses see Sharot, 1989.

or more than the proportion of Jews in the population is a significant one, but it is hardly sufficient to discount a secularization trend among Jews. Jews in new religious movements are a small proportion of the number who are not affiliated with a synagogue or who do not identify with a particular Jewish denomination, and from what we know about the age composition of new religious movements and life cycle religious patterns among Jews, it is likely that those in the new religious movements are mainly youth or young adults who will return to at least a nominal affiliation or identification with Judaism at a later stage in their life cycle.

The Fourth Argument

This argument not only retains a supernatural definition of religion but also suggests that a countertrend to secularization is occurring within the framework of Judaism. Waxman (1983), in particular, writes that the late 1960s and 1970s not only saw a revival of ethnicity among Jews, but a revival of the Jewish religion as well (see also Silberman, 1985). He relates the "swing of the pendulum" to the emergence of the fourth generation of American Jews and their response to the losses of community, meaning, and identity in American society. The major sign of a reversal of secularization appears to be the revival and increasing influence of Jewish Orthodoxy, but Waxman acknowledges other trends, such as increasing nonaffiliation, that do not support an antiseccularization thesis. Waxman argues that a deinstitutionalization of Judaism is not the same as a decline of Judaism, but he does not show that noninstitutionalized forms of Judaism have increased in importance or are replacing institutionalized forms. A number of *hevrot* (small prayer circles held in homes) have emerged in recent years, but only a small minority of American Jews are involved, and many of these are also synagogue members (Bubis and Wasserman, 1983).

DIMINISHING DECLINE OF RELIGIOSITY

Evidence on the religious patterns of the fourth generation of American Jews has begun to appear, and it indicates a process of stabilization of religious practice rather than a reversal of secularization. A process of a diminishing decline of religiosity was already evident from comparisons among the first three generations; the decline of religiosity from the second to the third generation, although significant, was of smaller magnitude than the decline from the first to the second (Sklare and Greenblum, 1979; Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968). The differences between the third and fourth generations appear to be minor or insignificant. Himmelfarb and Loar (1984) analyzed the 1970-1971 national Jewish population survey and found a sizeable increase in nondenominationalism among the fourth generation, but this was not accompanied by a decline in religious observance. These findings, together with the longitudinal data of the Boston community (Cohen, 1983; Goldscheider, 1986), indicate an increasing correspondence between synagogue affiliation and ritual observance.

An analysis of the 1975 survey of Boston Jews found that, with respect to the most widely practiced rituals, such as the Seder meal of Passover, there were no significant differences among any of the generations, but with regard to other practices,

such as keeping kosher at home and lighting Sabbath candles, there were declines from the first to the third generations and no significant differences between the third and fourth generations (Cohen, 1983). Findings on the fourth generation from a recent survey of Los Angeles Jews portrayed a mixed picture (Sandberg, 1986). The difference between the third and fourth generations in synagogue affiliation was very small (24.6% to 28.1% respectively). With respect to religious observances, among those affiliated with a synagogue there was a small increase in some observances such as fasting on Yom Kippur, but among the unaffiliated, who are more than two-thirds of the total, the decline in religious observance continues in the fourth generation.

Cohen's study of New York Jews, based on a 1981 survey, showed that a smaller proportion of fourth generation respondents fasted on Yom Kippur (54%), lit Hanukkah candles (76%), and attended Passover Seder (75%) than third generation respondents (whose respective percentages were 70, 89, and 95), but Cohen points out that care has to be taken in interpreting the findings on the fourth generation (1988). The number of fourth generation respondents is small, they include a higher percentage of the youngest category than other generations, and they are likely to be descendants of pre-1881 immigrants who tended to be less observant than later immigrants. Cohen shows that older fourth generation respondents (aged 35-49) were likely to have parents with very low levels of observance, and the respondents demonstrated a higher level of observance than their parents.

Cohen's analysis of the 1965 and 1975 Boston surveys is the only one that compares Jewish religiosity over a historical, albeit limited, period and takes into consideration both generation and age (1983). Data for the fourth generation appears only from the 1975 survey, but comparisons for each of the first three generations show no change over the ten years regarding the Seder and declines in kosher practice, Sabbath candles, synagogue membership, and synagogue attendance.⁸

As far as Jewish religiosity is concerned, the data rule out a "religious revival" or a reversal of secularization in recent years. The question of whether the dominant trend among American Jews is still one of decline or of stabilization at a minimal level of observance remains open. It is evident, however, that the rate of decline in religiosity has been diminishing with each subsequent generation, and with regard to participation in the Seder and lighting Hanukkah candles, stabilization has occurred.

Comparisons of religious patterns among the Jewish populations in Europe and Israel with those in the United States are somewhat limited because the non-American surveys do not include data on a number of generations, but those studies that have compared the ritual practice of respondents with that of their parents have shown the same pattern as in the United States: only a small minority (about 10%) observe more practices than their parents; the majority observe fewer practices but retain at least two or three yearly rituals (Sklare and Greenblum, 1979; Cohen, 1983, 1988; Dubb, 1977; Gould, 1984; Wijnberg, 1967; Bensimon, 1968, 1971; Goldscheider and Friedlander, 1983; Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, and Sharot, 1986). The findings from surveys in Israel are particularly interesting with respect to the secularization debate and Judaism

⁸The proportion of the third generation in the age group 18 to 39 who participated in the *Seder* was 85% in 1965 and 84% in 1975; the proportion who lit Sabbath candles was 37% in 1965 and 27% in 1975. In this category *kashrut* observance remained stable at the low percentage of 9.

because the situation of a Jewish dominant majority allows some comparative test of whether the Jewish minority position in the West continues to depress religiosity over and beyond the effects of involvement in modern industrial, urban society.

Trends in religiosity in Israel are, in fact, very similar to those in the United States. We have noted that average religiosity is comparatively high in Israel because the population includes large proportions of first generation Jews who came from relatively traditional communities in North Africa and Asia. However, a comparison of Israeli Jews of European origin with American Jews shows very similar levels of religious observance.⁹ A trend of diminishing decline in religiosity is also indicated in Israel: although Israeli Jews of European origin have lower levels of religiosity than Israeli Jews of North African or Asian origin, the decline in religiosity from first to second generation was much greater in the latter category. As among American Jews, Jews of European descent in Israel appear to have reached or to be approaching a stage of stabilization at a minimal point of observance (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, and Sharot, 1986).

A comparison of Moroccan immigrants and their sons in Israel and France provides further evidence that minority position cannot account for secularization among Jews in modern industrial society. The least secularized Jews from Morocco tended to migrate to Israel rather than France, and this is evident in the higher level of religiosity of first generation Moroccans in Israel. Secular trends among the second generation are evident in both France and Israel; in both cases the level of religious observance is considerably lower than that of young Jewish workers who remained in North Africa and retained a high level of observance. However, the decline in religiosity between the more religious fathers in Israel and their sons was considerably greater than that between the less religious fathers in France and their sons. As a consequence, the level of religious observance of the younger generation of North African origins is now almost identical in Israel and France.¹⁰

POLARIZATION

Waxman (1983) has suggested that a process of polarization in ethnic identity is occurring among American Jews, between a sector with a more intense Jewish identity than their parents and a sector who are becoming more assimilated than their parents.

⁹The 1970-1971 Survey of American Jews found that 51% fasted on Yom Kippur, 19% recited *kiddish*, the prayer recited over wine before the Sabbath meal, and 22% had separate dishes for meat and milk (Tabory, 1983, quoting unpublished material of Lazarwitz). The respective figures for Israeli Ashkenazim are 56%, 34%, and 33% (Tabory, 1983, quoting unpublished data from the survey of Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979). The respective figures for a sample of Israeli Jews of Polish origin were 55%, 27%, and 16% (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, and Sharot, 1986).

¹⁰Surveys by Bensimon (1968, 1971) found that 60% of Jewish young workers in North Africa did not travel on the Sabbath compared with 74% of their fathers. The respective figures for young workers in France of North African origin and their fathers were 25% and 34%, and for young workers in Israel of North African origins and their fathers, 27% and 74%. A survey of Israeli Jews of Moroccan origin found that 39% of respondents did not travel on the Sabbath compared with 87% of their fathers (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, and Sharot, 1986). On the relationships between religion and Jewish ethnicity in Israel, see Ben-Rafael and Sharot, 1991.

Although Waxman does not state explicitly that polarization is occurring with respect to religious practice, his emphasis on the revival of Jewish Orthodoxy indicates that this may be the case. If, as we have shown, the trend among the majority of American Jews is one of stabilization at a minimal level, a thesis of polarization would not be appropriate because it implies a pull in opposite directions. It remains a possibility, however, that an Orthodox or orthoprax minority is growing and pulling away from the secularized majority.

Himmelfarb and Loar (1984) write that the development and increase of Orthodox institutions (day schools, yeshivot, etc.) has given an impression of growth, but their data indicated that whereas, in comparison with previous generations, there had been no further defection from Orthodoxy in the fourth generation, there was still no growth in numbers. However, changes in the number and proportion of American Jews who are Orthodox remains problematic; the ultra-Orthodox were probably underrepresented in the national survey, and given their high birth rate, it is likely that at least this sector of the Orthodox is growing. Himmelfarb and Loar treat the Orthodox as a single category, but the differentiation within this category is highly relevant to the polarization thesis. Once the traditionalist or ultra-Orthodox, who reject compromise with the secular culture, are distinguished from the modern Orthodox, who attempt to avoid social insularity (cf. Davidson, 1990), a better case can be made for at least a modified version of the polarization thesis.

The decline in the proportion of Orthodox Jews from the first to the third generation may have left a core of committed Orthodox Jews, but it was the post-World War II immigrants from Europe, the survivors of the Holocaust and their children, who were in the forefront of the revival of Orthodoxy in the United States in this period. In contrast to the abandonment of Orthodoxy by children of earlier immigrants, the children of the more recent Orthodox immigrants are more likely to maintain the high levels of observance of their parents. In New York, the center of Orthodoxy, Cohen (1988) found that the "Orthodox retention rate" had risen dramatically, and that among those reared by highly observant parents it was the younger respondents who most often reported the maintenance of high levels. Wertheimer (1989) reports that, although the highest proportion of Orthodox Jews in the American Jewish communities is found in the 65 and over age category, there is a higher percentage of Orthodox Jews in the 18-34 age category than in the middle age categories. There will be ongoing losses to Orthodoxy because of the death of its older category, but this may be offset as children are born to its younger category. Demographic growth of the ultra-Orthodox community is especially likely because of its high birth rate; a study of yeshiva alumni found an average of four children per family compared to 1.8 among Jews in general (Helmreich, 1982).

Recent changes in American society have also been favorable to Orthodoxy. General prosperity has enabled both modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews to develop and expand their institutions. An increasing number of Orthodox parents have been able to support their sons financially in advanced yeshivot, and students have been able to afford to stay in the yeshivot for longer periods. The questioning of American values from the mid-1960s may have discouraged the attempts of American Jews to integrate with the "American Way of Life," but probably more important in

the strengthening of Orthodoxy was the greater cultural pluralism that reduced the social costs of Orthodoxy. The modern Orthodox are still concerned to achieve social acceptance in the wider society, but they have found that this is obtainable without abandoning visible expressions of an Orthodox level of observance. The open, pluralistic society makes it easy for Jews to discard their religious practices, but it does not motivate them to do so, and it has permitted the Orthodox to draw sharper boundaries between themselves and the wider society (including non-Orthodox Jews). The replacement of the term "modern Orthodox" by "centrist Orthodox" is an indication of this change, and within the "centrist" Orthodox institutions there has been a shift to stricter patterns, such as the elimination of mixed dancing at synagogue functions.

The tendency toward more stringent regulations has been encouraged within the Orthodox day schools, which draw many of their teachers from ultra-Orthodox circles, and by parents whose fear of assimilation has motivated them to send their children to schools that are more Orthodox than themselves. There is now less tolerance in Orthodox congregations toward members who are only nominally Orthodox, and because Orthodox rabbis no longer have to accommodate the varied requirements of communities that are heterogeneous in their religiosity, they are less hesitant in interpreting the religious law in a strict fashion (Liebman, 1979; Mayer and Waxman, 1983; Kranzler, 1983; Bulka, 1983; Heilman and Cohen, 1986; Wertheimer, 1989). We may conclude, therefore, that alongside the stabilization of the majority of American Jews at a minimal level of observance, there is a section of the Orthodox population that is growing in size and is pulling away from the majority by its increasing stringency of religious practice.

In Israel, even more than in the United States, the trend of a diminishing decline in religiosity among the majority has occurred at the same time as a growth in ultra-Orthodoxy or neotraditionalism. The ultra-Orthodox or *haredim* (God-fearing), as they are known in Israel, are not generally represented in surveys of religiosity, but demographic evidence shows that they have been growing in numbers and spreading into an increasing number of neighborhoods, especially in Jerusalem where they represent about 27 percent of the Jewish population (Shilhav and Friedman, 1985). Only a small part of this growth is a consequence of the *baalei teshuvah*, "repentents" from secular backgrounds who become fully Orthodox Jews (Aviad, 1983; Danzger, 1989). Most of the growth is a result of a very high birth rate.

Demographic growth and spread of the *haredi* population has been accompanied by the adoption of stricter and more rigorous standards of religious observance, segregation from other Jews, and a rejection of modern life-styles. These trends of sectarianism and pulling away from the majority of the population followed the destruction of the traditional Eastern European communities in the Holocaust and the development of a new religious framework, a voluntary community, that encouraged competition in degrees of stringency and intrasigence (Friedman, 1987; Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 1984).

In terms of identities, Israeli Jews are more polarized between "religious" (*datiim*) and "secular" (*hilonim*) than American Jews. The context of religious pluralism in America has encouraged American Jews to differentiate themselves along denominational lines, to accept the legitimacy of different forms of Judaism, and to formulate different meanings of a "religious Jew" (Harrison and Lazerwitz, 1982). In Israel, religious

movements of religious accommodation to modernity have had little success; there is an Orthodox establishment, and for most Israeli Jews, secular and religious alike, "religious Jew" is understood to mean Orthodox (Sharot, 1990).¹¹ The depth of this polarization should not, however, be exaggerated. Israeli society has not entered a vicious spiral of conflict of the type that Martin (1978) describes in cases of Catholic "monopoly" such as France. Many secular Jews may oppose what they regard as the limitations imposed on them by the Orthodox establishment and its supporters in Israel, but most do not attack religion per se because they define Israel as a Jewish state and this necessarily requires their tacit acceptance of its religious symbols.

The religious observances, performed within the context of the family, that have retained their importance in Israel, are the same as in the United States: the Passover Seder and the Hanukkah candles. As in the past, these festivals continue to commemorate events in the history of the Jewish people and to relate each family to the people's history, but the traditional emphasis on God's miraculous intervention is marginalized or ignored by many participants.

DISCUSSION

The authors of a number of recent discussions of the secularization thesis have begun by noting that the conventional view among sociologists is to support the thesis, and that by questioning the thesis the author is questioning and doing battle against accepted wisdom (Bell, 1977; Fichter, 1983; Hadden, 1987a). However, the reader of recent sociology of religion might easily obtain the impression that, at least in the United States, it is the antiseccularization thesis that has become the accepted wisdom and that the supporters of the secularization thesis are in the minority. The anti-secularization thesis is not new (Parsons, 1963; Greeley, 1969; Martin, 1969), but the number of its proponents among sociologists of religion appears to have grown considerably in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Hertel and Nelsen, 1974; Glasner, 1977; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; most of the contributors in Hammond, 1985; Nelson, 1987).

The secularization thesis is held to be refuted empirically by studies that show that religion is alive and well in the modern world and has not been affected adversely by dimensions of "modernization" such as urbanization and the development of the mass media (Hadden, 1987b; Finke and Stark, 1988). The growth of conservative religious movements, the success of television evangelism, and the proliferation of new religious movements are believed by many American scholars to demonstrate the invalidity of the secularization thesis (Hadden, 1987b; Fichter, 1983; Anthony, Robbins, and Schwartz, 1983; Richardson, 1985). This conclusion has been challenged by those who have argued that the growth of the conservative movements has been negligible in proportion to the population, that conservative religious growth has been internal and has not attracted the growing numbers of unaffiliated, and that the membership of new religious movements is relatively small and has not provided an alternative

¹¹A national sample of Israeli Jews found that, when asked to identify themselves in terms of religion, 17% said "religious," 41% "traditional," and 42% "non-religious" (Ben-Meir and Kedem, 1979). In the Israeli context, Jews identify themselves as "traditional" when they practice certain observances because of the value that they attach to the Jewish tradition.

for the majority of those who have disaffiliated from the mainline denominations (Bibby, 1987; Hunter, 1987; Wallis and Bruce, 1986). An alternative interpretation characterizes the trend in the United States as one of increasing polarization between religious and nonreligious sectors of the population (Roof and Hadaway, 1979; Himmelfarb and Loar, 1984).

The data presented in this article on Jewish populations do not support a simple straight-line secularization thesis according to which there is a continuous decline and foreseeable disappearance of religion. Nor do they support a steady-state model of religion or a model according to which religious declines are countered sooner or later by religious revivals. Although the data point to elements of polarization, they do not support polarization in the sense of two sides moving in opposite directions. There are two trends, both of which have to be understood in terms of the effects of Western patterns of modernization on Judaism. The trend among the majority began with sharp declines in religiosity, followed by a diminishing decline of religiosity, and has now reached a fairly steady-state of minimal observance. The trend among a growing minority is toward an even stricter pattern of observance than was prevalent in the preemancipation traditional society.

The Jewish population does appear more polarized in its religious and secular patterns than the Christian. On the secularized side, the majority of Jews do not hold most of the fundamental beliefs that were taken-for-granted by traditional Jews, only a small minority regularly attend synagogue, and religious practice is limited to two or three yearly observances. If the majority of Jews are more secularized than their Christian counterparts, the minority of neotraditionalists is less compromising and moving farther away from the dominant trends than their Christian counterparts. Whereas Christian evangelicals or conservatives have become less austere and ascetic in recent times (Hunter, 1987), Jewish neotraditionalists have become more severe and militant.

Because Judaism has become the closest world religion to Christianity in its involvement in the processes of modernity, explanations for the greater polarization in the Jewish context should be sought in the characteristics of the religion. At least two differences between Judaism and Christianity appear to be relevant. The first is the integral tie between religion and peoplehood or nationhood in Judaism. Accommodation to modernity has been accomplished by focusing on the ethnic component and expressing it symbolically through a few religious rituals. This has meant that the secularized majority and the traditionalist minority differ greatly in the meanings that they attribute to the religious symbols and rituals. The second difference, the focus on practice, contributes to the greater polarization of the Jewish population because it lends itself to the establishment and strengthening of clear boundaries for those who wish to defend traditional religion.

In conclusion, the case of Judaism in modern society suggests that the classical thesis of secularization should be modified by attention to polarization. Among the majority of Jews, an often steep decline in religiosity followed the breakup of cohesive local communities, exposure to scientific education, and involvement in legal-rational structures. At the same time, the processes of modernization encouraged the counter-trend of neotraditionalism. This was not simply a matter of a rejection of modernity,

or important aspects of it, by conservatives or fundamentalists who felt threatened by change; the processes of modernity have themselves also provided congenial conditions for the growth and strength of neotraditionalism. In Judaism, it was the reorganization of traditionalism on the basis of voluntaristic communities and reorganized institutions that produced growth, greater militancy, and a radical alternative to the secularized pattern of the majority.

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