Defining Judaism: Accounting for "Religions" in the Study of Religion

Michael L. Satlow

Despite the wide scholarly recognition of and dissatisfaction with the first-order essentialism inherent in the academic study of individual "religions" or "traditions," scholars have been far slower to develop nonessentialist models that take seriously both the plurality of religious communities that all identify as part of the same religion and the characteristics that allow these communities to see themselves as members of a single "religion." This article, building on earlier work by Jacob Neusner and Jonathan Z. Smith, attempts to develop a polythetic model for Judaism that has implications not only for the study and teaching of "Judaism" but more broadly also for how scholars might develop individual "traditions" as useful second-order categories of analysis.

AS MOST READERS of this journal know, "religion" is a heavily, perhaps even over, theorized term. What is it, precisely, that scholars of "religion" study? Is "religion" a natural phenomenon, some universal response to the numinous? Or is it a second-order category created in the "scholar's study," as Jonathan Z. Smith called it, a hypothesis that accounts for certain aspects of human social relations (1982: xi)? Is it, following Clifford Geertz, a "system" of meaning or, following Robert Orsi, a network of relationships (Geertz 1973: 87–125; Orsi 2005: 2)? Is it *sui generis*, requiring its own unique disciplinary tools, or are existing disciplinary approaches more appropriately applied (McCutcheon 1997)? Not a few departments of religion have tied themselves into knots as they

Michael L. Satlow is an associate professor in the Program in Judaic Studies and Department of Religious Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

debated these meta-issues, thus seeking to forge their own identity within the humanities.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, far less theoretical attention has been paid to individual "religions" or "traditions." In his definitional essay, "Religion, Religions, Religious," even Jonathan Z. Smith problematizes the term "religions" by using scare quotes but dodges the definitional quandaries that the term presents (1998). Although the definitional problem posed by individual "religions" can be seen as a genus of the larger question of the meaning of religion *tout court*, the importance of this problem is more concrete and immediate. Much of the field, from individual faculty hires to the program units at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, is organized along these lines; most of us are educated, slotted, and evaluated as scholars of a particular "religion." I am a scholar of Judaism (with a research focus in antiquity), but should I decide, for example, to describe myself instead as a scholar of asceticism, I would do so at considerable professional peril.

As anyone who has stepped into a classroom with the task of teaching one or more of these "religions" has become immediately and painfully aware, defining a "religion" is no easy matter. What, after all, is Judaism? Most academic writing on "Judaism" has tended to avoid this foundational question. As William Scott Green pointed out in an incisive critique, the articles that deal with "Judaism" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* consistently side-step the critical issue of definition, most frequently slipping into essentialist definitions (1989). In his introductory book *Judaism*, Michael Fishbane clearly recognizes the problem of grouping hundreds if not thousands of religious communities under the rubric of "Judaism" but then somewhat unhelpfully declares that "the Jews the world over were and are one people sharing deep bonds . . . . Judaism is thus the religious expression of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present day as it has tried to form and live a life of holiness before God" (1987: 11–12). In his 590-page textbook, *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice*, Dan Cohn-Sherbok side-steps the problem entirely: "Who are the Jews? What do they believe? What do they practice? This volume is designed to provide a comprehensive picture of Jewish life and thought from ancient times to the present" (2003: xi). Louis Jacobs, in his definitional article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, locates the essence of Judaism in its beliefs and norms (1971). To my knowledge, Neusner is one of the few scholars who has grappled seriously with the definitional problem. I will discuss his views in more depth below.

This article attempts to wrestle with the definitional problem posed by "Judaism." I begin with a short genealogy of the term to disrupt some of the understandings implicit in its common scholarly use. My contention

there is that the essentialist and normative assumptions in the "first-order" use of the term have been implicitly smuggled into many scholarly second-order definitions of the term. I will then discuss and critique Neusner's definition, which attempts to shake free of these first-order limitations. Building on Neusner's work, I then suggest and develop a model with which scholars can use "Judaism" in a useful and meaningful way. Relying especially on Jonathan Z. Smith's notion of polythetic classification, I reject an essentialist definition. Instead, I argue, "Judaism" is best seen as a family of communities that generally share a common sense of identity, a discourse transmitted through a more or less bounded set of authoritative texts and traditional practices. This model has both specific and more general implications, which I attempt to draw out in the conclusion, for how scholars can meaningfully teach and discuss individual "religions."

JUDAISM: A SHORT GENEALOGY

The first attestation of the word "Judaism" occurs in 2 Maccabees, a Greek abridgement of a history of the Maccabean revolt that was written ca. 124 BCE. The Greek term *ioudaismos* appears first in the prefatory letter attached by the abridger: "[Jason of Cyrene, the author of the history] has also given an account of the wars with Antiochus Epiphanes and with his son Eupator, and he has described the apparitions from heaven that were made for those who were struggling with bravery and honor for *ioudaismos*" (2 Macc. 2:21–22). Jason of Cyrene himself, though, appears to have coined the word. 2 Macc. 8:1 describes how Judah Maccabee gathered those who, in the face of persecution, remained faithful to *ioudaismos*, and at 14:38 he describes a certain man Razis, known as "father of the Jews," as having been tried and having risked his life "for *ioudaismos*." 2 Maccabees understands *ioudaismos* as the antonym to another new word, *hellenismos*, often translated as "Hellenism" (2 Macc. 4:11–13; Schwartz 2004: 95).

As scholars have noted, in all Jewish sources from antiquity *ioudaismos* means something akin to "Judaeanness," a complex distinctive identity that intermingled characteristics that we might call "religious" with those that we would call "ethnic" (Amir 1972; Cohen 1999: 7–8, 105–6). It combined a kin identity, whether actual or fictive, as in the case of those non-Judeans who "converted" or who otherwise entered the Judean community, with adherence to a way of life that was authorized in some fashion by the Law of Moses.

In his recent book *Border Lines*, Daniel Boyarin has argued that it was the early Christians who brought "Judaism" as a more strictly religious

category into existence: "[O]ne cannot speak of Judaism as existing before Christianity but only in part of the process of the invention of Christianity. . . . Christianity, in its constitution as a religion, therefore needed religious difference, needed Judaism to be its other—the religion that is false" (2004: 11). Although this claim might be exaggerated, it does highlight the transformation that the term *ioudaismos* undergoes in non-Jewish writings of late antiquity. The Church fathers constructed "Judaism" as an antonym to "Christianity," as a definable entity that contained an identifiable essence and stood in relationship to "Christianity." When the Church fathers wished to stress continuity with Christianity, they were more likely to locate this essence in God's covenant; when they wanted to sharpen Christian self-identity, they emphasized the Law as the essence of Judaism. In both cases, however, their construction of "Judaism" was clearly self-interested, deployed for their own needs of self-identification and divorced from the lives of real Jews. This understanding seeps into imperial legislation in late antiquity, which increasingly conceived of the "religion" of the Jews, most often denoted with the Latin terms "religio" and "superstitio," as a voluntary religious system similar to that of the Christians (Schwartz 2001: 179–202).

Whether Jews themselves accepted this "colonial" understanding of their own Judaism is not entirely clear. Boyarin claims that by the second century CE, the Rabbis had created "the rudiments of a full-fledged heresiology" that knows of "historical and genealogical Israelites who are not 'Israel' " (2004: 61). That is, the rabbinic project mirrored that of the Church fathers, understanding membership in true Israel to be determined by rules of faith. Yet "[t]he Rabbbis, in the end, reject and refuse the Christian definition of religion . . . " (2004: 224). Moreover, at the same time the Rabbis were more rigidly drawing the lines of Jewish identity (cf. Cohen 1999: 263–349). Jewish—or at least rabbinic—understandings of Judaism might flirt with an essence, but they never seem to adopt it.

Only in the Middle Ages do we find the penetration of the concept of "Judaism" into Hebrew. One of the first, perhaps even the first, attestation of the Hebrew term for Judaism, *yahadut*, appears in Abraham Abulafia's *Book of the Testimony*. In it, Abulafia describes his attempts to meet with the pope in 1280 to speak "in the name of *yahadut*" (Idel 1982–83: 6). According to Moshe Idel, by *yahadut* Abulafia meant the different permutations of God's name, knowledge of which would help to hasten redemption (1982–83: 13–14). Abulafia's eclectic use of the term mirrors other medieval Jewish writers, who never seemed to use the term to denote a complete religious system.

Whether or not Boyarin's dating of the birth of "Judaism" in late antiquity is correct, Jewish self-understandings changed in the modern

period. Several factors played a role in this emerging Jewish self-definition. The enlightenment category of "religion" drew heavily upon prior Christian understandings (Asad 1993: 27–54; Smith 1963: 37–50). This definition of religion emphasized an intrinsic essence located in a system of rational belief. Western and Central European Jewish thinkers, seeking to understand their "religion" in Enlightenment terms, naturally adopted a similar notion (cf. Hertzberg 1968: 268–313; Sutcliffe 2003: 165–90, 2000). This, however, was not a mere intellectual exercise of categorization. The Jewish need for religious self-definition in secular terms was exacerbated by the political situation in which they found themselves. Jews were fighting for civic rights, and at least in the public discourse the primary obstacle was "Judaism": Was it a "religion" that was compatible with civic society (Meyer 1988: 10–61)? Perhaps this issue was nowhere as starkly presented as in the "Paris Sanhedrin" of 1806–7, at which Napoleon put to a Jewish assembly twelve questions meant to elicit from it a commitment to French law and social intercourse (cf. *Transactions* 1985).

From the perspective of most European Jewish thinkers in the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, the answer was clearly affirmative. Moses Mendelssohn asserted that Judaism's essence, its universal morality, was identical to the essence of Christianity—only Judaism, through its distinctive ceremonial laws, realized this essence more effectively (cf. Arkush 1994; Sorkin 1996). Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, this self-defining articulation of Judaism as having a distinctive moral essence became increasingly attractive for western Jews. Leo Baeck entitled his 1905 book *Das Wesen des Judentums*. Nineteenth century neo-Orthodox thinkers such as Samson Raphael Hirsch and ultra-Orthodox thinkers such as Akiba Joseph Schlesinger both subscribed to essentialist notions of Judaism, even if the former located that essence in the covenant made at Sinai and the latter, increasingly, in peoplehood (Silber 1992).

The notion of Judaism as a distinctive religious system with an essence has been remarkably persistent, albeit not unchallenged. As some Jews in Europe joined the Zionist movement, they began to see "Judaism" as a national phenomenon; "Judaism" was the complex of distinctive customs and practices of the Jewish nation. As Green states, "Although all who practice and affirm Judaism are Jews, not all Jews affirm(ed) and practice(d) Judaism. This habit of mind subsumes Judaism under Jewish social identity and mistakes ethnicity for religion" (Green 1989: 9–10). In the United States at the beginning and through the middle of the twentieth century, where despite their repeated attempts at presenting themselves as Americans of a different religion they were most often seen as a

distinctive ethnic group, Jews began to reconceptualize "Judaism" as a matter of ethnicity and culture. As Mordechai Kaplan succinctly put it, Judaism was a "civilization" (1934). For Kaplan, Jewish laws were "folkways," part of the culture of the Jews.

Kaplan's definition, of course, joins "religion" and "culture"; they are, for him, almost synonymous categories. On a theoretical level, as has been well observed, "the relation between 'culture' and 'religion' appears to be multiple, complex, and contradictory to some extent" (Masuzawa 1998: 70). This is an apt characterization of Jewish life in contemporary America and Israel, where "Judaism" sometimes anchors and at other times stands in opposition to constructions of "Jewish culture" (Whitfield 2002). As Cohn-Sherbok's definition of Judaism illustrates, this popular blurring of the categories "Judaism" and "Jewish culture"—which in turn is symptomatic of modern understandings of religion as individual and subjective (e.g., Judaism is whatever I consider it to be)—has also crept into the scholarly literature.

This survey is, of course, far too brief and schematic, but it nevertheless highlights the fact that all of the understandings of "Judaism" surveyed above are first-order definitions, created by communities for their own definitional purposes. When early Christians used the term "Judaism," they did so to help define themselves—"Judaism," as they understood it, was necessary for them to tell the story of Christianity. These Christian definitions of Judaism ultimately had an impact on Jewish self-understandings, and to the extent that Jews have understood themselves as practitioners of "Judaism," they have primarily adopted a model of a religious tradition that emerged from the Enlightenment's adaptation of a Christian notion. In this respect, Judaism is but one example of a more general phenomenon, in which the new scholars of "religion" defined religious communities in their own terms, only to see the members of those very communities come to see themselves in that way.[1]

FROM FIRST ORDER TO SECOND ORDER

The preceding survey brings into focus the very blurriness of the relationship between the first-order definitions of religion and their use as second-order, academic, and value-neutral categories of organization. "Judaism," without critical reflection, brings with it the basic elements of its first-order formulation—either the notion of an objective essence and

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[1] This phenomenon has been best documented for the nineteenth-century Western creation of "Hinduism" out of the Indic religions. Cf. van der Veer (2001) and Flood (1996).

a normative set of belief and practices, or, following Kaplan's influential definition, a messier cultural complex that gives no place to religion, however defined, *per se*. Moreover, as has been amply documented, the implicit assumption that "Judaism" stands in opposition to Christianity, a legacy of first-order Christian definitions of Judaism, permeates modern scholarship. In an extensive review published in 1921, George Foot Moore argued that beginning in the nineteenth century scholars increasingly presented a Judaism that stood directly opposite Christianity, and E. P. Sanders (1977: 33–59) has shown that the very understanding of Judaism that Moore sought to discredit was alive and well through the 1970s.

First-order self-definitions are useful as data; they tell us about a group's self-perception. They are, however, far less useful as analytical or explanatory scholarly categories. First-order definitions of "Judaism" do not seek to describe a religious phenomenon but to create an "authentic" community by drawing lines between "orthodox" and "heterodox" manifestations (cf. Boyarin 2004: 22–26). They are inherently normative. Such definitions might be entirely appropriate for the community that wishes to define itself, but they are less appropriate for the academic student of Judaism who seeks to develop descriptive and analytical models. Any study of religion must begin, as Jonathan Z. Smith has frequently insisted, with the development of second-order concepts and definitions.

To my knowledge, Neusner has been one of the few scholars who has sought to offer a second-order definition of Judaism. For Neusner, *a* Judaism is a "religious system" that can best be described through attention to its ethnos, ethics, and ethos:

> [A Judaism] is composed of three elements: a world view, a way of life, and a social group that, in the here and now, embodies the whole. The world view explains the life of the group, ordinarily referring to God's creation, the revelation of the Torah, the goal and end of the group's life in the end of time. The way of life defines what is special about the life of the group. The social group, in a single place and time, then forms the living witness and testimony to the system as a whole and finds in the system ample explanation for its very being. That is *a Judaism.* (1993: 8, original emphasis)

At any given time, according to Neusner, there may be either competing "Judaisms" or a single dominant one, but each requires investigation in its own right. Despite this diversity of Judaism, Judaism, more so than even the Jewish people, has a history: "[W]hile there may be no single, unitary 'Jewish history,' there is a single (but hardly unitary) history of Judaism. The history of Judaism itself is extraordinarily complex, involving,

as it does, the construction of definitions of 'Judaism' capable of both defining and linking data spread over a long continuum" (Neusner 1975: 218). Indeed, in *The Way of the Torah* Neusner attempts to describe the four "periods in the history of Judaisms and the paramount status of one Judaism" (1993: 9). That one Judaism, he goes on to explain, is made into a coherent whole through the single "conception that the Jews are in exile but have the hope of coming home to their own land, which is the Land of Israel (also known as Palestine)" (1993: 14). This is the story of the Five Books of Moses, the Torah, which each Judaism "retells in its own way and with its distinctive emphases" (1993: 15).

There is much that is attractive about this definition of Judaism. It starts by taking seriously a community's first-order definition: "The first requirement is to find a group of Jews who see themselves as 'Israel'. . . . That same group must tell us that it uniquely constitutes 'Israel,' not *an* Israel . . . " (Neusner 1993: 7, original emphasis). Neusner's definition thus grapples with the critical problem of explaining how a group of diverse religious communities can all see themselves as "Israel." That any adequate description of a Jewish community ("a Judaism," in Neusner's terminology) must take into account its "worldview" (or ethos) and "way of life" (or ethics) is also undoubtedly correct.

Yet there are also weaknesses with this definition. Neusner's definition of Judaism posits (1) a religious system anchored (2) by a worldview that, in its basic structure, (3) is essential to all "Judaisms" and therefore (4) can be linked into a single (if complex) history. Ultimately, Neusner relies on the kind of structuralist model set forth by Geertz, in which a religion can primarily be seen as a "system of meaning" (1973: 87–125).

This structuralist model has been heavily critiqued. Talal Asad (1993: 27–54) has argued that by focusing on overarching cognitive meanings, Geertz's structuralist model ignores issues of power, practice, discourse, and discipline. Religions, Asad argues, are "products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces" (1993: 54); they cannot be conceived or understood outside of social and historical contexts. By conceiving religion as a "system of meaning," Geertz pigeonholes it into one specific and itself historically contingent understanding of "religion." Other scholars have preferred understanding religions as cultural repertoires that agents use "in complex, varying ways on various occasions, shifting the cultural framing of a problem in mid-discourse" (Campany 2003: 318; cf. Swidler 2001). In all cases, however, the same critiques can be leveled at Neusner's emphasis of Judaism's "worldview."

Moreover, despite rejecting the essentialism inherent in almost all first-order definitions of Judaism, Neusner adopts his own essentialism (3). Essentialism is not an a priori reason to reject Neusner's definition.

Indeed, as I will argue below, most communities that identify themselves as Jewish do share a discourse rather than an ethos, whose parameters can be traced back to the Torah (cf. Lincoln 2005).

Finally, Neusner never quite works out to my satisfaction how either the diverse Judaisms or their "paramount status of one Judaism" can have a history. Contrary to Neusner's formulation, human communities have histories whereas abstract, second-order conceptions do not—except, at times, as histories of ideas. Although "Jewish history" remains a problematic category, the history of large communities of Jews can be told with more intellectual justification and integrity than can a history of "Judaism," however non-linear that history might be. More specifically, for Neusner the link between the four different stages of Judaism is the formation, definition, ascendancy, and weakening of the status of the rabbinic tradition. This privileging of the rabbinic tradition in this history sits uneasily with his fuller conceptual model; he is really attempting to tell the history of Rabbinic Judaism, without fully explaining what this is and how it relates to "Judaism." Here again I think that Neusner is correct to identify the rabbinic tradition as an important component for understanding Judaism, but he has not succeeded in fitting it into his broader model.

In contrast to Neusner's loose essentialist model, Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested a more open, "polythetic" one (1982: 1–18). Using terminology derived from biological classificatory schemes, Smith understands a "monothetic" classificatory model for religion to be equivalent to the essentialism most frequently used by scholars to classify religion. Throughout his essay, Smith complains that scholars remain locked into the monothetic classificatory schemes bequeathed to them from the first-order definitions. Instead of locating essences, he argues, scholars should be developing maps of characteristics that may or may not be shared by the members of a group. Two specific members of a group might share several of these characteristics, some overlapping set, or even none at all. This "polythetic" model accounts for a wide diversity of actual religious manifestations while at the same time requiring the development of the basic map of characteristics that underlie a single "religion." "We need to map the variety of Judaisms, each of which appears as a shifting cluster of characteristics which vary over time" (Smith 1982:18).

In the more than two decades since this essay appeared, there has been little serious attempt to follow through on Smith's suggestion. Perhaps this should not be surprising, for a polythetic classification of Judaism is easier said than done, and while Smith provides some microexamples of how he might start such a project, the project itself is

daunting. How, in actuality, might a polythetic map of any particular Judaism appear, and how is it to be related to maps of other "Judaisms"?

In the remainder of this essay, I will argue that Smith and Neusner help us re-form our notion of "Judaism" and indirectly other "religions." If Smith usefully and convincingly advocates for a polythetic classification, it is Neusner who helps to lend specificity to which maps we might draw. The potential payoff for this new polythetic definition of "Judaism" is an analytical model that helps to account for a diverse group of religious communities that each sees itself as constituting a single Israel. A polythetic description of Judaism, I suggest, comprises of three maps that for heuristic purposes I would label, Israel, discursive tradition, and practice.

Before expanding on what I mean by these three maps, I should state at the outset my overarching model. A community's "Judaism" is not made by a collection of texts or norms but by historically and socially situated human beings who engage, filter, and activate their traditions according to their local understandings. Here I depart from Neusner: "Judaism" as such has no history. Jewish communities, of course, do have histories, but their diverse religious understandings cannot be linked into a coherent narrative of a second-order abstraction.[2] Each of the three "maps" is, first and foremost, an investigation or charting of ways in which specific, historical Jewish communities choose, highlight, and discard parts of their received tradition (both textual and behavioral) to build their religious understandings. This model understands diversity not as deviance from a norm but as the inevitable result of real historical communities making sense, in their own settings, of disembodied tradition.

This model, then, calls first for careful study of individual, self-identified Jewish communities with special attention paid to the questions generated by my three maps. In what sense, and with what discourses, do communities and the individuals within them understand themselves to be part of "Israel"? How do they accept or reject their received texts and their discourses, and how do they use (or not) this tradition to authorize and inform their beliefs and values? What are their religious practices, and how do they justify and explain them? All of these questions must be addressed with sensitivity not only to the larger historical contexts of these Jewish communities but also to the fundamental issues of power and gender. Only from a large collection of nuanced synchronic studies

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[2] As Shaul Magid has helpfully indicated to me, this position should lead to a rethinking of Gershom Scholem's understanding of the historical development of mysticism (1941: 7–10).

framed along these lines can we move to the more conceptual issues of the maps themselves.

The synchronic (or "lived religion," or even historical) and conceptual approaches complement each other. Focused studies of individual Jewish communities can create only a myopic picture of the enormous variety encompassed by the term "Judaism," whereas the more conceptual mapping that I am suggesting necessarily loses historical nuance. My discussion below of these three maps remains confined to general conceptual and theoretical issues (illustrated with an occasional historical example); I can make no attempt here to actually create these maps and am fully aware that they must be complemented with more fine-grained, local analyses (cf. Satlow 2006). At the same time, though, I will argue below that this model has broad implications for the study of religion.

Israel

The starting point of any nonnormative and nonessentialist understanding of religion is self-identification. Religious communities expend a great deal of energy policing their borders, creating standards against which one can measure authenticity and allow (or disallow) membership. Such normative activity, of course, falls outside of the academic study of religion. "Israel," then, first and foremost indicates a mode of determining the scope of the data: for the academic student of religion, any Jewish community or individual that self-identifies as "Jewish," or part of Israel, "counts" to the same degree as any other.

The mapping occurs on the level of the discursive strategies used by these communities to establish their religious identity. "Israel," to use Benedict Anderson's felicitous phrase, is an imagined community (1991).[3] Jewish communities have tended to shape their identity along a spectrum delineated by ethnicity and religion (or faith). In so doing, they, like many other communities, have employed myths of a common historical origin; ideas of kinship; and belief in a common destiny, as a people covenanted to God. These discursive strategies are found in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Hendel 2005) and have continued, in various combinations and with different emphases—all shaped by the particular historical context of each later community of readers—well into the present day (cf. Neusner 1989).

The evolution of the Reform movement's stance on identity illustrates this complex negotiation. From its origins in Germany, the Reform

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[3] Anderson's theory of nationalism has not gone unchallenged. Cf. Smith (1998: 131–42). My thanks to Maud Mandel for this reference.

movement was split between those who saw "Judaism" purely as a "religion," denuded of any ethnic component, and the majority, who were generally sympathetic to seeing Judaism as a religion that was compatible with other ethnic identities but who nevertheless were uncomfortable abandoning completely the myth of common descent. According to the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state." The Columbus Platform (1937), though, softens this language: "Israel has been held together by the ties of a common history, and above all, by the heritage of faith." History is further emphasized in the new Pittsburgh Platform of 1999: "We are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witnesses to God's presence." The movement's decision in 1983 to recognize the children of mixed marriages as part of the community of Israel, assuming that they establish this identity through "appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people," in fact decisively embraces the notion that kinship is an important component of their definition of "Israel."[4] This evolution is undoubtedly to be attributed to the changing understanding of religion, ethnicity, and race in the United States. Many Jews (exemplified by Kaplan) naturalized the evolving American understanding of them as an ethnicity and thus moved away from the understanding of Judaism as a voluntary faith community.

Issues of gender lie at the intersection of the conceptual understandings of Israel and the normative, or *halakhic*, requirements of any given Jewish community. On the one hand, according to traditional Jewish law, a (nonproselyte) Jew is defined as one born of a Jewish mother. Yet on the other hand, Jewish women lack the ability to undergo circumcision. This might seem a minor technical issue, except for the fact that different Jewish communities have understood circumcision in very different ways, from being a "sign" of God's covenant with Israel to actually constituting it. The latter position, of course, leads to the paradox that women can never be full members of the covenanted community although they are essential for the continuity of the Jewish people (Cohen 2005). No Jewish community known to me has gone so far as to declare women outside of "Israel" simply because they are women, but the structural ambiguity of the role of women within this community contributes

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[4] Copies of the platforms can be found, among other places, at http://www.rj.org/policies.shtml.

to a wide variety of issues that relate to a Jewish community's evaluation of the proper religious roles for women. Moreover, one consequence of the Reform movement's recognition of children of "patrilineal" descent as Jews is to shift this delicate balance by making Jewish women extraneous for the biological reproduction of Israel.

"Being Jewish" extends far beyond the technical issues of Jewish law (*halakhah*). Communities become "Jewish" first and foremost because they say they are; they buy into some model or story that links them to past and present Jews. The *National Jewish Population Survey of 2000–2001* reports that 44% of American Jews are unaffiliated with any Jewish institution and 60% are unaffiliated with a synagogue, but an astonishing 72% (of "the more Jewishly engaged population" of 4.3 million American Jews of 5.2 total American Jews) think that "US and Israeli Jews share a common destiny." Curiously, although the figure for this latter question is similar among Israeli Jews, 70% of Israeli Jews "reported that Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora were two different peoples" (Goldscheider 2004: 130), pointing to different issues of Jewish religious identity within the modern state of Israel. Jews may or may not accept other communities as "Jewish" based on their own criteria of identity, but the power of these modes of self-identification for linking one community to others can hardly be understated.

Discursive Tradition

Although first-order descriptions of identity (e.g., "I am a Jew," "My religion is Judaism") constitute a necessary starting point, they have little analytical or explanatory value. What, if anything, holds these self-identified individuals and communities into something more coherent? Is being "Israel" simply a matter of subscribing to a fictive kinship or faith group or is there some unique "content" to Judaism? Both practitioners and scholars of Judaism have long identified this distinctive Jewish content as located either in Jewish "core" values and beliefs (e.g., ethos) or observance of the *mitzvot*, a set of biblical and rabbinic norms packaged as divine "commandments." Before considering in the next section the role that the *mitzvot* play in defining Judaism, I suggest that the focus on Jewish values is off-target.

The empirical problem is that one would be hard pressed to locate unique, relatively specific beliefs and values shared by self-identifying Jewish communities, and all the more so individuals. "Jews believe in one God," for example, works as a general statement only if one does not interrogate too closely what is meant by "Jews," "one," and "God." Lists of essential Jewish beliefs, a legacy of Judaism's genealogy, are almost always normative and both descriptively and analytically unhelpful.

Rather than sharing specific beliefs, most (but not all) Jewish communities share a *tradition*, by which I mean not a monolithic set of beliefs or texts but a discourse. Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of tradition, in this respect, is useful: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (1984: 222).[5] Asad has similarly referred to a "discursive tradition": "A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (1986: 14). In this sense, a "tradition" is an ongoing, evolving conversation that rests upon a set of shared, if changing, assumptions articulated primarily in texts that communities find "authoritative," however they define that term.

Many, but certainly not all, Jewish communities have located their tradition in a largely stable (but nevertheless evolving) textual canon. These communities have taken a wide stance on the degree of authority to which they give these texts, but they nevertheless have tended to return to them to authorize their practices and beliefs. The texts, that is, emerge from and reinforce a distinctive discourse. Local Jewish communities have drawn selectively from this discourse those elements that best "fit" into their contemporary sensibilities. Focusing on the discursive options provided by the texts rather than on specific content brings into relief the ways in which Jewish communities throughout history have understood themselves to be "authentically" Jewish while at the same time exhibiting values and ideas that differ widely from other "authentically" Jewish communities.

The Jewish, and more specifically rabbinic, textual tradition comprises a distinctive discursive tradition. All Jewish texts that have entered the "canon," even the Hebrew Bible, in some way engage earlier texts, authorize them, and derive their authority from them; the Torah, for example, does a far better job at defining the parameters of a conversation than it does at articulating norms (Fishbane 1985; Sommer 1999). This dependence on earlier texts sets parameters, however broad, on the discourse (Halbertal 1997). Even the Zohar and other kabbalistic works, which to some degree break with traditional myths and ideologies, still draw upon these earlier texts for their authority (Scholem 1941: 23).

Textual tradition, like a conversation, is not a linear process. It is a circle rather than a line, containing many points of entry. Although later

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[5] Although as Stout (2004: 135–9) points out, MacIntyre is inconsistent in his understanding of "tradition."

texts comment on earlier ones, there is no natural or predictable movement from one to the other. Within any given community, many Jews will attempt to enter the textual conversation yet few of these writings will become the bases of future discussions. And there is usually nothing inherently "better" about those that do succeed. *Ben Sira* (*Ecclesiasticus*) is arguably a far more pious book than Ecclesiastes, even being cited as Scripture by some Talmudic rabbis, but only Ecclesiastes found its way into the canon of the Hebrew Bible (Wright 1999). The process by which a community—and eventually a wide range of communities—accepts a text as "authoritative" (in some sense) and builds upon it (thus solidifying the authority of the layers of text underneath it) is historically contingent.

For a text to be an "authoritative" part of the tradition does not necessarily mean to be normative. Moshe Halbertal helpfully differentiates between three kinds of canons: normative, formative, and exemplary. Law codes are examples of normative canons. Canonical texts, though, can also "provide a society or a profession with a shared vocabulary," thus helping to form them into a group (Halbertal 1997: 3). Exemplary canons serve as paradigms, highlighting something for emulation. Jewish canonical texts come in all three types, although their formative function tends to eclipse the other two.

The entrance of a text into "the" Jewish canon thus has less to do with the normative authority thenceforth ascribed to that text than with the ways in which Jews might read that text. Words such as "conversation" and "discursive tradition," with their secularist baggage, can obscure the deep and meaningful ways in which members of a religious community engage a text. Paul Griffiths calls this kind of engagement "religious reading" (1999: 22–76). Indeed, one need not agree with Griffiths's polemic against modern academic techniques of reading to grasp his central point that religious readers of religious texts read those texts differently from other texts; canonical texts are marked for a distinctive kind of reading. "Conversation" in this sense is not casual; it is the kind of engagement for which Jews and others have sacrificed their lives.

If these texts do exhibit an astonishing multivocality, there is one voice that remains absent from the discursive tradition, that of women. As many scholars have noted, this is a discursive tradition fundamentally shaped by men (Baskin 2002; Peskowitz and Levitt 1997; cf. Plaskow 1990). The ramifications of the androcentric nature of the tradition are by no means obvious. Although clearly these texts authorize, and have been used to authorize, practices that we would find discriminatory and even misogynistic, Jewish communities (understood in its most general sense as shifting and overlapping groups and subgroups of Jews) have

always highlighted those elements of the tradition that suit them. Even Rabbi Joel Sirkes (Cracow, d. 1640) found the halakhic system flexible enough to allow him to rule in opposite ways on two similar cases of adultery (Fram 2002).

Because Jewish religious communities draw on these conceptual maps differently, this approach thus replaces notions of "Jewish values" with those of texts (and their accompanying oral cultures) as the transmitters of conceptual maps. The translation of these texts into values, beliefs, and norms is neither constant nor predetermined. But this emphasis on the historically contingent nature of these values, beliefs, and norms should also not obscure their underlying dependence on and participation in the same ongoing conversation defined by a bounded (even if shifting and evolving) textual tradition.

Practice

In *Women as Ritual Experts*, Susan Sered tells the story of a group of older, illiterate Kurdistani women who in the weeks before Passover fastidiously sorted through the rice that they would use for the holiday (1992: 80–85). Just as they ignored the rabbis urging them to wash their hands before eating bread, so too they ignored rabbinic insistence that this sorting was unnecessary. For these women, the behavior itself, passed down from their mothers, was more important than any textually based norm.

The latest *National Jewish Population survey* (2000–2001) tells a similar story. A large percentage of those who identify themselves as Jews attend a seder on Passover and light the menorah (as they most frequently refer to the *hannukiyah*) on Hannukah. They frequently do this with little knowledge of Jewish textual traditions; they are often mystified by "traditional" interpretations and norms of the ritual. In these examples, the rituals seem to float independently of text.

According to Haym Soloveitchik, the independent force of ritual should not be surprising (1994). The authority of normative texts within Jewish communities has been steadily increasing throughout modernity, exploding in contemporary America (especially within the Orthodox and Conservative communities). But this has not always been the case, nor is it even the case in all Jewish communities. In many Jewish communities, religious practice has had an uneasy relationship with the texts that supposedly authorize them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the "Myth and Ritual School" argued that ritual was before myth; myth was created to explain persistent rituals (cf. Ackerman 1991). Although highly criticized as a general theory, this approach can help to sensitize us to the importance

of ritual as an independent source of tradition. Many Jewish practices have survived their first attested explanations; they have persisted (in differing forms, to be sure) even while the meanings assigned to them have changed.

I would go further with this observation: the very reason that many religious practices have persisted is precisely because they are underdetermined. That they have no inherent meanings is actually a strength; they exist in a dynamic intertextual world in which Jews are able link them to other practices, symbols, and texts to create transient and historically contingent meanings. Those practices that are less able to bear different meanings have a higher potential for failure. For example, many Jewish holidays that commemorate specific historical events (e.g., creation of the Septuagint; cf. Philo 1935, *Life of Moses* 2: 41–43) failed to persist, as did those rituals too tightly connected to specific and changing social assumptions (e.g., the geonic blessing over the bloodied sheet after a marriage; cf. Langer 1995).

This understanding of some Jewish practices as an *independent* carrier of tradition makes more complex the relationship between them and the rabbinic texts that transmit these rituals as detailed norms. On the one hand, Jewish communities typically exhibit a wide range of religious behaviors that they regard as "Jewish" but which for contemporary rabbis are not normative. On the other hand, though, such behaviors, when not incorporated into traditional texts, rarely persist for long. Those that do persist are typically naturalized by the rabbis. The Mishnah, for example, codified as "oral law" civil legal practices that happened to be common among second-and third-century Galilean Jews (Lapin 1995), and according to Ivan Marcus, Jews in the Middle Ages adapted rites of child initiation from their Christian neighbors, with rabbis eventually coopting and authorizing these rites from their own texts (1996).

IMPLICATIONS

This article has attempted to develop an interpretive framework for a nonessentialist understanding of and approach to "Judaism." Although scholars have long recognized and subscribed to many of the components of this framework, their combination into a "theory" of Judaism, I believe, highlights their implications. Few scholars of religion today would accept, as a premise of their scholarship, that Judaism (or any other religion) has an essential core, yet scholars have been slower to recognize what that implies for their discussions of religious traditions.

To describe a community's Judaism, then, involves a thick description of that community's beliefs and practices within its specific historical

context. This framework suggests a focus on three clusters of questions or "maps": Identity (in what ways does the community identify itself as "Jewish" and why); a discourse transmitted by texts (which texts does the community accept as authoritative, what level of authority does it ascribe to them, and how does it read them); and practice (what does the community do and how does the community ritualize and understand what it is doing). Each map needs to be charted with sensitivity to how a community or individual creates a Judaism from the various resources available to it, him, or her.

The model developed here, I suggest, is generalizable. The core issue with which I struggle throughout this essay is the tension inherent in understanding "a religion" as a unified tradition in light of the diversity in the thought and practice of actual lived religious communities. This tension is just as present in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the score of other "religions" that we study as it is in Judaism. The academic study of Christianity continues, in subtle ways, to be plagued by an implicit essentialism, and scholars have clashed over how to present both Islam (Asad 1986; Geertz 1968) and Hinduism (Flood 1996) as unified "traditions" in light of their manifest diversity. Although other scholars are certainly in a better position than I to gauge the degree to which the model developed here is helpful for understanding "religions" other than Judaism, it does seem to me that these basic heuristic categories and analytical strategies can be profitably applied.

Although the precise contours of the concept maps that I have suggested for Judaism might not apply directly to other religions, they may at least point toward models more useful for them. Many religions wrestle with the problem of identity, on both rhetorical and legal levels; not a few who have called themselves Christians, for example, have killed others who have called themselves Christians over precisely this question. The subtle blending of religion and ethnicity that complicates the case of Judaism and Jewish identity, often flagged as odd when seen against a modern western notion of religion that separates these categories, is hardly unique. Muslim and Hindu identity is equally complex, and Robert Ford Campany has fruitfully applied notions of an "imagined community" to the followers of the "Way of Buddha" (2003: 316–17). Fine-grained, historically contextualized analyses of religious communities that are sensitive to the discourses and practices that bind them leave implicit normative judgments to the religious communities themselves.

Finally, if nothing else, this model reinforces our continued need for critical self-reflection. As a scholar of Judaism, it remains uncomfortably easy for me to fall back on terms such as "the tradition," "Judaism says," "Jews do," and "Jewish values are." Yet the cost of such terms now strikes

me as too high, and although constantly rephrasing and qualifying them is frequently awkward and difficult, I hope that the effort will help to take the academic study of religion another small step away from its essentialist origins.

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