Part Three

Religion and
American Diversity
Hansen, Herberg, and American Religion

The expression Hansen’s law enjoys nothing like the popularity of terms such as melting pot, pluralism, or more recently, diversity, but it is quite familiar to students of immigration and ethnicity. It commemorates Marcus Lee Hansen, a great pioneering figure in the study of immigration to the United States, who encapsulated what he called “the principle of third generation interest” in these memorable words: “What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” This striking formulation has been known as Hansen’s law since Will Herberg called it that in his influential study of the postwar revival of religion, Protestant-Catholic-Jew (1955).

Hansen’s law was first enunciated in a lecture given before the Augustana Historical Society in 1937, and the fiftieth anniversary of that event was marked by a scholarly conference on Hansen’s work held at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. My being invited to participate in that gathering provided the stimulus to look more closely into the way Hansen’s ideas have been employed by students of American ethnic and religious history. The results, which first appeared in American Immigrants and Their Generations (1990), edited by Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, both surprised me and confirmed what I suspected.

I was surprised to discover, for example, that Hansen did not really discuss or offer evidence for the principle of third-generation interest—he simply assumed it as a given and used it as a springboard to get into the main body of his lecture. I was even more surprised to discover that the published version of the lecture attracted no notice whatsoever between 1938, when it first appeared, and 1952, when it was reprinted as a “classic essay.” On the other hand, my suspicion that students of American religion were primarily responsible for giving visibility to Hansen’s law was confirmed. Even there, however, it was a surprise to learn that the recovery and early popularization of Hansen’s ideas were exclusively the work of Jewish scholars. This finding furnishes the occasion for some speculations toward the end of the essay on the relationship...
between Jewish religion and Jewish ethnicity and on the role of World War II in highlighting the former as opposed to the latter. All in all, the project confirmed my belief that tracing the usage of terms and concepts is a rewarding approach to the history of intergroup relations, ethnicity, and religion.

Now universally regarded by scholars in the field as a classic, Hansen’s celebrated essay, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant,” attracted no notice whatsoever until fourteen years after its original publication. It was brought to the attention of *Commentary*’s readers in November 1952 as being especially pertinent to the contemporary situation of American Jews. Three years later, Will Herberg popularized “Hansen’s law”—a term he introduced—by arguing in his widely read *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* that the statement “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember” was one of the main conceptual keys to understanding the postwar “revival of religion.” Thus the applicability of Hansen’s third-generation thesis to religious phenomena was what put his 1938 essay into general circulation. It was, indeed, in precisely this context that the essay first came to be regarded as a classic, despite the oblivion into which it had fallen after its original publication. These facts seem to me sufficiently intriguing to justify a closer look at the relationship between Hansen’s essay and religion. My aim is simply to open the subject; if my observations seem at times speculative, I would claim as warrant the venturesome example Hansen set in his original discussion.

The original lecture being the obvious place to begin, we note first that it was delivered under the auspices of a church-related organization—the Augustana Historical Society—to an audience whose historical identity was inseparable from the religion around which their life as a social collectivity was structured. Hansen was quite conscious of the aegis under which he spoke. Indeed, he felt some concern that the religious context might lead his audience to put an unduly narrow construction on the message he wanted to get across. This uneasiness played no small part in shaping his treatment of “the problem of the third generation immigrant,” as a brief review of his lecture will show. Those whose expectations were formed by Herberg and other recent commentators may feel surprise, if not bewilderment, on looking into the original lecture; the “problem,” as Hansen himself explains it, is not what they have been led to expect. The problem is not to determine
whether such a thing as "the principle of third generation interest" actually exists, or to account for its origins, or to establish how extensively its influence is felt. All these matters are, for Hansen, quite unproblematic. He simply asserts the principle as one of "the laws of history... applicable in all fields of historical study" and asserts further that it derives from an "almost universal phenomenon" of human psychology ("what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember"). Although he calls the third-generation principle a "theory," he makes no effort to verify it in a rigorous way. Rather, he "illustrates" its operation by more or less offhand references to the contemporary interest in the history of the South—not disdaining to instance the case of Gone With the Wind, "written by a granddaughter of the Confederacy"—and to the emergence of immigrant historical societies. Only after having dealt with what posterity regards as the heart of the matter in a series of generalizations so impressionistic that they might be said to fall into the "armchair" category does Hansen get around to the "problem."

What then was the problem? Simply this: How was the third generation's interest in its group heritage—assumed as a given—to be "organized and directed" in such a way as to produce the most fruitful historiographical results? Because the Augustana Historical Society was one of the organizations exemplifying third-generation historical interest, the "problem" had immediate application to Hansen's audience. And it was in suggesting how they ought to deal with it that he betrayed the uneasiness alluded to above.

Two general principles, according to Hansen, ought to guide the third generation's historical work: it should avoid "self-laudation" and hew to "broad impartial lines," and it should aim to "make a permanent contribution to the meaning of American history at large." To elucidate the former, Hansen admonished his audience on five points that related directly to the religious matrix from which the Augustana Historical Society sprang. They must look beyond the church in telling the story of their past; they should study first the context in which the church was planted and grew; they ought to give particular attention to groups "that broke with the faith of the old country"; they were not to overlook the political influence of the Augustana Synod; finally, they must also pay attention to groups that were the church's "competitors in the matter of interest, affection and usefulness."

Hansen's remarks on the second general principle, although of considerable intrinsic interest, do not bear directly on the religious dimension. His guidelines on avoiding group "self-laudation" reveal very clearly, however, that he was sensitive to the religious aspect of the immigrant's
historical heritage and group consciousness. They indicate with equal clarity that he regarded it as something that could easily distort a group's historical self-understanding. It would be rash to conclude, on this evidence alone, that Hansen had little historical interest in matters religious. What the lecture does establish beyond peradventure is that he did not find in the third-generation principle the special significance for religious development that later commentators emphasized.

Although it is proverbially difficult to prove a negative, a strong case can be made to show that "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant" was unknown to the intellectual world in general until 1952. First, the form in which it was published—as a pamphlet by a local historical society—gave it far less visibility than it would have had as a journal article. Hansen quite possibly never saw it in print himself, for he died in May of the year it was published [1938]. Thus he never had a chance to call it to the attention of colleagues or to develop more systematically the principle of third-generation interest. He did refer to the principle in speaking to an audience of social workers a few weeks after the Augustana lecture, but that talk attracted little attention at the time and was not made known to scholars until 1979. It seems reasonable to conclude that Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., did not know about the Augustana lecture, for he did not include it, or make any reference to it, in the volume of Hansen's essays that he edited as The Immigrant in American History. Neither did C. Frederick Hansen say anything about "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant" in a biographical memoir of his brother, entitled "Marcus Lee Hansen—Historian of Immigration," which was published in 1942.

It is true that Margaret Mead's And Keep Your Powder Dry (1942), a widely read analysis of the American character, makes interpretive use of a third-generation concept. But despite the fact that the two are sometimes mentioned together, there is no reason to believe that Mead was acquainted with Hansen's essay. She does not refer to Hansen—or any other historian, for that matter—in text or notes; where he perceived a third-generation interest in ethnic roots, Mead stresses the third generation's being completely cut off from their immigrant heritage and wishing to identify not with their grandfathers but with the "founding fathers." In contrast to the second-generation problem, which was a sociological commonplace, not much had yet been written about the situation of the third generation when Keep Your Powder Dry appeared. But Mead's interpretation was consistent with the prevailing assumption that the third generation was the most "fully assimilated," and we can
safely assume that Hansen had nothing to do with forming her ideas on the subject. It would be tedious to list all the relevant works of the period that do not mention Hansen’s third-generation essay. But because something more ought to be said to establish the presumption that it was unknown, let us look at two particularly revealing cases. The first of these works in which we could surely expect to find a reference to the Augustana lecture, if it were known, is the compendium of articles on immigration and ethnicity edited by Brown and Roucek. The first edition, *Our Racial and National Minorities*, appeared in 1937, the year before Hansen’s lecture was published; hence its nonappearance there signifies nothing. There were, however, two later editions of the book, in 1946 and 1952, both of which had the main title *One America*. Each of the later editions included a contribution by Samuel Koenig on “Second- and Third-Generation Americans.” Although he cited a wide range of literature—more than fifty footnotes in a fifteen-page article—Koenig made no reference to Hansen’s essay in either 1946 or 1952. Nor was that essay included in the lengthy bibliographies that accompanied each edition, although an obscure Hansen monograph of 1931 turned up in all three (among the readings listed for Portuguese Americans), and the latter two also included *The Atlantic Migration* and *The Immigrant in American History*.

The second particularly revealing bit of negative evidence involves the writings of Edward N. Saveth. We know that he was much impressed by “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” because he included it in his book of readings, *Understanding the American Past*. That volume, however, appeared two years after Hansen’s essay was republished in *Commentary*. Although Saveth cited the 1938 Augustana Historical Society publication as his source, it seems clear that his attention was called to the essay by seeing it in *Commentary*. We might draw that inference simply because he was at the time an employee of the American Jewish Committee and could therefore be expected to be familiar with the contents of the magazine it published. There is, however, more conclusive evidence, namely, Saveth’s failure to allude to the third-generation essay in his earlier discussions of Hansen as an immigration historian. Although he praised Hansen’s work in a 1946 *Commentary* article and in his standard monograph, *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875–1925*, in neither case did he give evidence of acquaintance with the essay he later reprinted.

If we can take it as at least provisionally established that Hansen’s essay was unknown to the world at large until 1952, what were the
circumstances of its immediate acceptance then as a classic? Nathan Glazer, a young scholar already deeply interested in ethnicity, came across Hansen’s essay among the materials he was researching at the New York Public Library. Much struck by it, Glazer, an associate editor of Commentary, called the essay to the attention of his colleagues, who agreed that it would be of interest to readers of the magazine. It appeared in the November 1952 issue with a slightly altered title (“The Third Generation in America”), and with the subtitle or caption: “A Classic Essay in Immigrant History.” Oscar Handlin, a frequent contributor whose recently published book The Uprooted made him the preeminent academic authority on immigration, added an introductory note.12

Although his remarks dealt mainly with Hansen’s career, what Handlin had to say about the essay itself is of particular interest. After noting Hansen’s message about how an immigrant group should write its own history, Handlin called attention to “the applicability to Jewish immigrants of Hansen’s striking theses.” Among these he mentioned the latter’s “views on the second and third generation,” but the point he stressed “above all perhaps” was Hansen’s “prediction as to the limited survival span in America . . . of the effective distinctive life of the group itself.” Jewish readers, Handlin thought, would be surprised to discover the parallels between their own group experience and that of others, seemingly unlike them. They might also reflect, he concluded somberly, on the distinctiveness of Jewish group life and on “whether, to what degree, and how American Jews . . . can hope to escape the complete amalgamation which Hansen seems to predict.”13 From the viewpoint of group survival, this was a distinctly pessimistic reading that stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis Will Herberg was soon to lay on the law of third-generation return.

After its republication, Saveth and Glazer were the first to take note of Hansen’s essay. Saveth, as we saw, reprinted it in 1954, but his introductory comments were brief and noncommittal. Although he observed that it dealt with “the relationship of groupings in the American population to ancestral cultures,” he did not draw attention to the principle of third-generation interest or speculate on its implications.14 Glazer, who rediscovered Hansen, was also the first to stress this aspect of the essay. His treatment, unlike Saveth’s, was strongly theoretical. In “Ethnic Groups in America: From National Culture to Ideology” (1954), he hailed Hansen for perceiving that the third generation tends, in some sense, “to return to the first,” and he linked that perception to his own bold interpretation of the overall pattern of American ethnic development as moving from identification with relatively concrete cultural attributes
(e.g., language) to a more abstract "ideological" phase. An earlier version of Glazer's discussion included a paragraph arguing that religion functioned for some immigrant groups as a transmuted form of spiritual commitment to the old country. In thus including religion among the aspects of Old World culture transformed in the New World and "returned to" by third-generation immigrants, Glazer anticipated certain aspects of the interpretation Will Herberg was soon to advance in Protestant-Catholic-Jew.

Herberg's book was published in the fall of 1955, but Commentary readers had been given a preview of two chapters in the August and September issues. The book attracted much attention because of the brilliant way it explained how a "revival of religion" could be taking place in a society that seemed simultaneously to be growing more and more secularized. The explanation, Herberg suggested, was to be found in the social psychology of an immigrant-derived people. The Augustana lecture provided one of the principal keys to understanding the situation, for it was in accordance with Hansen's law that members of the third generation were "returning" to the churches and synagogues as a means of reestablishing contact with their ancestral heritages. The religious dimension of an ethnic heritage was, in Herberg's view, best suited for third-generation "remembering" for several reasons. In the first place, it had persisted more successfully than language and customs, which had been eroded by assimilation. At the same time, immigrant religious traditions had been sufficiently Americanized to suit the mentality of the third generation. Moreover, religion helped the members of the third generation to locate themselves in the "lonely crowd" by providing an answer to the "aching question" of social identity, Who am I? Finally, religion was much prized in American society, whereas foreign "nationality" was regarded as narrow, ethnocentric, even divisive.

Herberg thus portrayed the religious revival as deriving in large part from religion's function as a kind of residuary legatee of ethnic feeling. But why was religion itself so widely regarded as a good thing? Why did public figures such as President Eisenhower insist so strongly that religion was indispensable to national well-being? The reason, Herberg said in an answer that anticipated the civil religion discussion of the late 1960s and early 1970s, was that the American ideology was a profoundly spiritual construct embodying such values as freedom and individual dignity, as well as more mundane elements associated with material prosperity. As such, it had always been closely linked to religion. In the early days, the linkage was to Protestantism exclusively; with the coming of the immigrants and the adjustment of their religious traditions to the
new environment, Catholicism and Judaism took their places alongside Protestantism as “the three great faiths of democracy.” Hence, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism were socially praiseworthy because they constituted three equally acceptable ways for the individual to manifest his or her commitment to the “spiritual values” underlying the “American Way of Life”—which was, in Herberg’s view, the real religion of Americans.

Hansen’s law and the process of spiritual amalgamation just described presumably accounted for the modulation of ethnic identity into religious identity which Herberg dealt with under the rubric of “the triple melting pot.” Although this expression seemed to imply greater diversity (three melting pots instead of one), the phenomenon to which it referred was the gradual assimilation of a large number of different nationality groups into three major religious denominations: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. The evidence for the sociological reality of the triple melting pot was thin—Herberg relied principally on an early 1940s study of intermarriage trends in New Haven—but a number of other observers agreed that, as immigrant “nationalities” faded away, the “residual group differences . . . [were] racial and religious.”

In fact, the assumption that Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Negroes (not yet called Blacks) constituted the principal social groupings in the American population is still to be found in Glazer and Moynihan’s Beyond the Melting Pot (1963) and in Milton M. Gordon’s Assimilation in American Life (1964). Although largely forgotten in the racial turmoil and reassertion of ethnicity that ensued shortly after the publication of these works, the belief was widely held in the 1950s that religion was becoming a more important sociological category for understanding contemporary American society. Herberg’s book, which was the most influential single work in establishing this view, thus simultaneously popularized Hansen’s law and linked it firmly to an interpretation of the relationship of ethnicity, religion, and American culture very broadly considered.

Although Herberg treated Hansen’s law as applicable to the American religious scene generally, he was, of course, best acquainted with the Jewish situation, and the evidence clearly indicates that Jews were particularly sensitive to the role of generational transition in the contemporary revival of Judaism as a religion. The very prominence of Jewish scholars in the recovery and elaboration of Hansen’s essay constitutes one bit of evidence because it testifies to a special alertness to the issue on their part. The essay was reprinted in a Jewish publication, and every
one of the commentators mentioned so far—Handlin, Saveth, Glazer, and Herberg—was also Jewish.

The appearance of Herberg’s book brought Hansen to the attention of a wider audience. But even then, Jewish writers seemed more preoccupied by the Hansen thesis than Protestant or Catholic commentators. Thus Glazer featured it in his review of Herberg, and in an independent analysis of “The Jewish Revival in America.” While reviewing Herberg favorably, Marshall Sklare cautioned against making too much of Hansen and the triple melting pot idea; and in developing the generational component of his analysis of “symbolic Jewishness” (which anticipated “symbolic ethnicity” by twenty years), Herbert Gans explained how his interpretation differed from “the well-known thesis of Marcus Hansen.” C. B. Sherman maintained, a few years later, that Jews were the only group whose experience “supplied proof of Hansen’s thesis.”

Protestant and Catholic reviewers of course took note of the generational angle, but they tended to lay greater stress on the more distinctively religious aspects of Herberg’s discussion. The Christian Century, for example, featured the work of David Riesman and Will Herberg in an editorial entitled “The Lonely Crowd at Prayer.” Although it summarized the generational interpretation (without mentioning Hansen), its main purpose was to criticize the “pallid . . . religion” that threatened to “let us all disappear into the gray-flannel uniformity of the conforming culture.”

Herberg’s earlier work had attracted favorable attention from Catholics, and they greeted Protestant-Catholic-Jew with enthusiasm. Immediately upon its publication, the influential Jesuit weekly, America, devoted a feature article to the book. Here Gustave Weigel, S. J., who was the leading American Catholic theologian involved in ecumenical activities, pronounced the sociological interpretation (including Hansen’s law) “fascinating and enlightening.” But he added immediately, “Dr. Herberg draws something profound, however, from the facts he reports and organizes.” That more profound point had to do with Herberg’s assertion that religion was considered “a good thing” because it buttressed the “American Way of Life.”

Weigel’s reaction was typical in the sense that Catholics tended to value Herberg’s work primarily for the critique it offered of the nature of American religiosity. They were impressed, to be sure, by the sociological analysis—including what one reviewer called “the interesting law of the assimilation of immigrants”—but no Catholic observer seriously suggested that anything like a “third generation return” played a significant role in making American Catholicism what it was in the 1950s. Although Catholic faith and piety were flourishing, there was no “revival”
in the sense of a recovery from an earlier slump. On the contrary, the Catholic community had been growing vigorously over the past generation in numbers, institutional strength, and spiritual vitality. The Catholic dimension of the post—World War II “revival of religion” was, in other words, a straight-line continuation and intensification of developments that had been evident for a long time. Catholics of Italian background were thought to be becoming more regular in their churchgoing, but that, too, was a straight-line progression rather than a reversion to an earlier pattern.

Catholic reformers of the 1950s did, to be sure, talk a great deal about the immigrant heritage of the American church. But the talk was overwhelmingly negative in its assessment of that heritage as far as it still made itself felt in the mid twentieth century. What else but their memories of nativist hostility made Catholics so suspicious and standoffish? Why were they burdened with a siege mentality? Whence came their antiintellectualism? Why had they exerted so slight an influence on the cultural life of the nation? It was clearly time, according to Catholic reformers, for the church in America to come out of its “immigrant ghetto” and plunge into “the mainstream of American life.” The hope, in other words, was not that the grandchildren of the immigrants would return to the ancestral religion, which they had never left in massive numbers; it was, rather, that they would more effectively leave behind them the psychological and cultural encumbrances that were their inheritance from immigrant days.

If the Hansen thesis didn’t really apply to the religious situation of American Catholics, it seemed even less appropriate as a general explanation of the religious upswing among Protestants. Their situation was illuminated by other features of Herberg’s analysis—for example, the melding of religion and Americanism—but the “new immigrants” included too few Protestants for the Hansen effect to be regarded as a major factor in their situation in the 1950s. Hansen himself, as we have seen, gave no indication of thinking that the third generation would be more fervent churchgoers. What his discussion revealed was an anxiety that the continuing religious attachments of his audience might unduly restrict their study of the immigrant past. And it seems unlikely that any considerable number of later Protestant observers were persuaded that a third-generation return had much to do with the postwar revival of religion so far as it affected their own denominations.

The situation among Jews was strikingly different. Although the most widely heralded, Will Herberg was only one among a cluster of Jewish observers to point out that the generational issue was crucial to
an understanding of the religious situation of American Jews and to make the further point that the heightened participation of the third generation in religious activities was to be understood in functional terms—that is, as a means of giving young Jews a sense of who they were and thereby maintaining group identity and boundaries. In addition to earlier works cited by Herberg as consistent with his interpretation (for instance, Sklare’s *Conservative Judaism*), two studies (by Glazer and Gans) arriving at very similar conclusions were published so soon after he wrote that we can safely assume the authors were thinking along the same lines before they read Herberg. A few years later, Erich Rosenthal gave the impression he was merely summing up what knowledgeable observers already knew when he wrote, “It appears, then, that the basic function of Jewish education is to implant Jewish self-consciousness rather than Judaism, to ‘inoculate’ the next generation with that minimum of religious practice and belief that is considered necessary to keep alive a level of Jewish self-consciousness that will hold the line against assimilation.”

The preceding establishes that Hansen’s thesis really applied much more to Jews than to Protestants or Catholics; but Herberg’s exaggeration in this matter by no means vitiates his whole interpretation; nor does it dim the brilliance of his contribution to our understanding of the religious situation at midcentury. If our concern were primarily with Herberg’s analysis, we should have to look further into how his exaggeration affected the overall argument of his book. But because our interest here is in Hansen’s thesis as it relates to religious developments, the more pertinent line of inquiry is why the law of third-generation interest fits the case of Jews more closely than that of Protestants or Catholics. Because of the nature of the inquiry, the discussion that follows has a more speculative quality than that preceding it.

First, Jews might be expected to find almost any third-generation thesis particularly relevant to their situation because the American Jewish population was entering a third-generation phase in the 1950s. More than four out of five American Jews derived from the great East European migration that entered the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first fifteen years of the twentieth. This was a much higher proportion than “new immigrant” stock comprised among Catholics, to say nothing of Protestants. This meant that the fortunes of the Jewish group as a whole were linked to what happened to the grandchildren of the immigrants in a way that was not true for either of the other two major religious bodies. Little had been written about the third
generation by midcentury; hence it is understandable that Hansen’s essay—easily the boldest and most original discussion of the subject in existence—seemed particularly apt to Jews when it was rediscovered by a Jewish researcher, republished in a Jewish magazine, and elaborated upon by other Jewish commentators.

But there was more to it than where Jews as a group stood in terms of generational stages. Hansen’s discussion of immigrant psychology involved religion more directly in the case of Jews because religion and ethnicity stood in a different relationship for them than for Catholics or Protestants. This is not the place for an elaborate discussion of the nature of Judaism or of the relation of Judaism as a religion to Jewishness as a nationality or a species of ethnicity. It is, nevertheless, clear that Judaism is an “ethnic religion” in a way quite different from the manner in which Catholicism was an ethnic religion for Irish, or Polish, or Italian immigrants (to confine the discussion to Catholic groups whose religion is considered to be closely related to their ethnicity, and whose situation I know better than that of American Protestants).

From the viewpoint of Judaism as a religion, God’s covenant with Abraham made his descendants a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people set apart. God took them for His own in a special way: setting forth the law they were to follow, chastising their lapses, guiding them through the desert, overcoming their foes, and bringing them at length to the land He had promised would be theirs. In this sense, Judaism is a highly particularistic religion—one that involves a quite definite historical people, in real and identifiable times and places, under the care of a God who, although He is the creator and ruler of all, revealed Himself only to them, and promised to be with them until the end of days. Judaism, on this account, is not a missionary religion; it is something that belongs uniquely to Jews and can hardly, without changing its nature, be spread abroad to others who do not share the original inheritance. Jewishness and Judaism are thus interlinked theoretically as well as practically in a way that, for example, Irishness and Catholicism could never be, for however close the historic connection between religion and nationality, the theoretical distinction between being Catholic and being Irish—or Polish, or Italian, or whatever—could always be clearly drawn.

The intimate linkage between religion and group identity meant that when Jewish immigrants, and their children of the second generation, fell away from adherence to and the practice of Judaism as a religion—which they did in massive numbers—it left a kind of vacuum at the center of their group identity. As with all immigrants, the problematic nature of group identity was very much heightened when Jews reached
the third-generation stage because, unlike their parents and grandparents, these young people did not have living memories of the beliefs and customs that had been abandoned. Moreover, upward mobility had dispersed the packed ghettos, resulting in more frequent contacts with gentiles and magnifying the danger of assimilation for a generation of Jewish youngsters who had difficulty explaining to themselves why they were different from anyone else. In these circumstances, second-generation parents, who were conscious of being Jews even though they might not be believers, turned to the practice of Judaism as a religion and insisted on a modicum of Jewish religious education for their children in order, as Rosenthal put it, to “inoculate” the next generation against assimilation. The religious dimension, historically at the core of being Jewish, was thus optionally cultivated, not from strictly religious motives but as a means of giving concrete content to a group identity that could not be so easily specified in any other way.\(^{27}\)

Herberg took note of the uniqueness of the Jewish situation with respect to Hansen’s law, but he interpreted it differently from the interpretation offered here. In the case of Italian or Polish immigrants, he said, there was nothing left for the third generation to “remember” but the religion, so that Hansen’s law resulted in “the disappearance of the ‘Italianness’ or the ‘Polishness’ of the group, or rather its dissolution into the religious community.” Catholicism for these third generations, thus, replaced ethnicity. In the case of the Jews, however, third-generation remembering of religion resulted in a reinforcement of ethnicity because, among the Jews alone, the “religious community bore the same name as the old ethnic group and was virtually coterminous with it.”\(^{28}\)

It is, perhaps, a fine point, but this seems to me almost to suggest that the difference arose from a peculiarity of labeling—“Jewishness” signifying both religion and ethnicity—rather being rooted in a more intimate substantive linkage between Judaism and Jewishness than existed between Catholicity and Italianness or Polishness. In addition, Herberg speaks as though Hansen’s law operated in conventional fashion with these Catholic groups but in an anomalous way with Jews. I would maintain, rather, that Herberg offered no real evidence for its operation in any way among Catholic immigrants and that the Jews were actually the paradigmatic case of its operation, which led him to assume its application to other groups as well. The more basic difference this implies might be summarized as follows: Herberg seems to take for granted that the religion of Catholic immigrant nationalities was abandoned in the second generation and returned to by the third, in accordance with Hansen’s law. I would argue, however, that the religion of these ethnic groups
did not have to be "returned to" because it had persisted through all three generations—although not, to be sure, without differences in understanding and practice in which generational shifts were involved as well as other factors.

Herberg was certainly correct, however, in suggesting that American circumstances encouraged the tendency to stress the religious aspect of Jewishness at midcentury. Freedom of religion is one of the cornerstones of the American system, and the courts have often defended minority religious positions even when they affect public policy areas such as education and conscientious objection to military service; moreover, the need to cultivate feelings of tolerance, brotherhood, and interfaith understanding was preached with increasing insistence in the era of World War II. American Jews strongly supported the interfaith work of the National Conference of Christians and Jews; indeed, Nicholas Montalto has shown that this organization, formed in 1926, received most of its funding from Jewish sources during the first fifteen years of its existence.

Montalto links this support to the policy pursued by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) of stressing the religious rather than the ethnic dimension of Jewishness. Writing as a convinced proponent of the new ethnicity, Montalto laments what we might call the AJC's "religious strategy" and even implies that it, rather than Hansen's law, accounted for the existence of Herberg's triple melting pot. The latter point strikes me as overdrawn, but Montalto has undoubtedly called attention to matters Herberg overlooked that are highly relevant to the emergence of Judaism as one of the "three great faiths of democracy." Montalto's discussion, however, is not without significant omissions of its own.

According to Montalto, the AJC adopted the religious strategy primarily because its leadership was dominated by third- and fourth-generation German Jews, strongly assimilationist in orientation, who shared the prevailing American antipathy for "organizations smacking of ethnic separatism." On this account, he argues, they promoted a "sectarian view of Judaism" that was misguided in the long run because it involved Judaism's "denying part of itself—the ethnic part." Although one can understand how an ethnic enthusiast of the 1970s might reach such a conclusion, it leaves out far too much of the background of the 1930s to be a satisfactory explanation for the heavy stress placed on the religious character of Jewishness. More specifically, it fails to give anything like adequate weight to the influence of Nazi anti-Semitism and to the overall effect of the wartime crisis in enhancing the intellectual respectability
and public importance of religion. Matters, incidentally, which Herberg likewise failed to underline.

Nazi anti-Semitism must surely be regarded as the greatest single force affecting American Jewish life in the 1930s. It not only stimulated anti-Semitism in this country, but it also shaped the thinking and reactions of Jews and other persons concerned about intergroup relations. And what was the nature of Nazi anti-Semitism? It was racial—Jewish blood, even in the smallest proportion, made anyone in whom it coursed an abomination, a defiler of the Aryan purity of the Germanic Volk. But Nazi anti-Semitism was not only the paradigmatic exemplar of racism; it was part and parcel of an insanely elaborated form of nationalistic ethnocentrism, the dangers of which had been a staple of liberal commentary since the 1920s.

In view of the frightening growth of racial anti-Semitism, it was virtually unthinkable that American Jews would want to insist on the ethnic quality of their group cohesiveness and identity. To do so would seem to confirm what the Nazis were saying—the Jews were unassimilable, an ineradicable alien racial element wherever they dwelt. For Jews even more than others, Nazism utterly discredited racism and, in doing so, also discredited related forms of collective consciousness, including what came to be called ethnicity in the 1960s. We must remember that the term and concept *ethnicity* had not yet been introduced in the 1930s. People spoke much more inclusively in those days of "racial groups" and "race feeling," or of immigrant "nationalities." The kind of group consciousness later benignly characterized as "ethnic" was then associated with "ethnocentrism" and was regarded as an unalloyed social evil. In these circumstances, "ethnicity" as a way of defining Jewish group identity was simply not an option. Jews could perhaps have insisted on calling themselves a nationality rather than a religion, but that would have created problems of its own. To stress the religious quality of Judaism was a far more appealing policy because it entailed none of the "loyalty" problems implicit in the terminology of nationality, and at the same time it made the struggle against anti-Semitism part of America's historic commitment to religious toleration.

Besides discrediting all forms of descent-based group feeling, Nazism was part of broader phenomena—totalitarianism and world war—that lent new intellectual respectability to traditional religious beliefs about the reality of evil, suffering, and the demonic potentialities inherent in projects to remake the world. Although dismissed by secular Jews such as Sidney Hook as a "new failure of nerve," the intellectual revival
RELIGION AND AMERICAN DIVERSITY

of religion was a reality sufficiently consequential to require from liberals a vigorous counterattack on the "authoritarianism" of the "absolutists." Louis Finkelstein, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was the leading promoter of its most important institutional expression, the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life. This body, organized shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939, sponsored annual symposia for two decades; its religious orientation was so pronounced at first that a group of prominent secular thinkers, including John Dewey, seceded in protest.

We might plausibly assume that this kind of intellectual revitalization would make the "religious strategy" all the more appealing to American Jews. Another factor that enters the picture in this connection is the introduction of the term Judeo-Christian tradition, which was popularized in the wartime crisis by those who wished to emphasize that the values threatened by totalitarianism were deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of the West. Although later commentators tend to treat the term ironically, consideration of the wartime circumstances suggests a more generous interpretation of the outlook and thinking of those who put it into circulation. In any case, popularization of the expression clearly reinforced the tendency to emphasize the religious dimension of Jewishness.

These war-related factors, along with the reasons mentioned by Montalto and Herberg, operated to bring out and to underline the religious element in Jewishness—which surely helped to make the Jewish "return" to religion seem the natural, almost inevitable, way of reaffirming and maintaining the identity and coherence of the group. In the postwar era, observers such as Oscar Handlin began to insist that Jews were better understood as an ethnic group than as a religious body. But Handlin also made the same point as Glazer, Gans, and Herberg: Jewish ethnicity was increasingly coming to expression in the form of more active participation in Judaism as a religion. It was this complex relationship between religion and ethnicity among American Jews as the group entered its third-generation stage that made the rediscovery of Hansen's essay so opportune. The intensity with which Jewish students of ethnicity developed his ideas testifies to the fecundity of Hansen's insight and makes the rediscovery of the Augustana lecture an important landmark in the historiography of American religion.

NOTES

Source: Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, eds., American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years (Ur-


3. Ibid., 18–21.

4. Ibid., 21–23.

5. This talk, “Who Shall Inherit America?” was not included in the printed proceedings of the 1937 meeting of the National Conference of Social Work, but it appeared in single-space typescript format Interpreter Releases. 14, no. 34 (July 6, 1937), 226–33. Moses Rischin first called attention to it in his “Marcus Lee Hansen: America’s First Transethnic Historian,” in Richard L. Bushman et al., eds., Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin (Boston, 1979), 319–47.


8. William Carlson Smith, Americans in the Making: The Natural History of the Assimilation of Immigrants (New York, 1939), which devotes almost half its space to the second generation, has only one index reference to the third generation. There Smith observes, “Even if members of the third generation may be found using more of the parental practices than some of the second generation they may be much further along in the assimilative process, since these traits have been selected on the basis of deliberation” (350).


11. Edward N. Saveth, “The Immigrant in American History,” Commentary, 2 (August 1946), 180–85; Saveth, American Historians and European Immigrants,
RELIGION AND AMERICAN DIVERSITY

1875–1925 (New York, 1948), 217ff. For Saveth’s connection with the American Jewish Committee, see Commentary, 14 (September 1952), 296.


22. Fitzpatrick, review, 596.


30. Montalto, “Forgotten Dream,” 199n., 188, where the subheading for the discussion is “Cementing America’s Religious Triangle”: The AJC and the National Conference of Christians and Jews.”


35. This group has not been studied; for a brief description and citation of relevant documents, see chap. 7.
