The Americanization of the Jews

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Published by NYU Press

Cohen, Norman S. and Robert Seltzer.
The Americanization of the Jews.
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CHAPTER 7

Will Herberg's Path from Marxism to Judaism: A Case Study in the Transformation of Jewish Belief

David G. Dalin

The sociologist and theologian Will Herberg was an exemplary instance of the shift in Jewish ideological attitudes between the 1920s and 1940s: the waning fervor of Jewish socialism and a concomitant growth in political realism, a sharpened sense of the limitations of radical change, a heightened desire to return to traditional spiritual moorings. In his writings Herberg popularized the sociological "law" that what the second generation (of an immigrant group) wants to forget, the third generation wants to recover; the children search for the ethnic and religious heritage that had been hastily discarded in their parents' Americanization. Herberg himself was a bridge between those two generations of Jews of East European origin. He was also an early, outstanding, and influential illustration of the impact on American Jewish thought of a Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy that combined a liberal political stance with a forthright return, albeit in a modern, sophisticated form, to theological concepts shunted aside by religious modernists. Herberg was thus a harbinger of a shift in Jewish religious thought toward greater traditionalism and a concern with existential authenticity rather than with rendering Judaism as compatible as possible with modern science. In his own way, therefore, Herberg symbolizes the process by which the American environment came to reshape Jewish politi-
cal and cultural attitudes by the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Will Herberg was born in the Russian village of Liachovitzi in 1901. His father, Hyman Louis Herberg, who had been born in the same shtetl, moved his family to the United States in 1904. When they arrived in America, his parents, whom he would later describe as "passionate atheists," were already committed to the faith that socialism would bring salvation to humankind and liberation from restraints that had bound Western society for centuries. His father died when Herberg was ten. His mother shared her husband's contempt for the American public school system; although Will attended Public School 72 and Boys High School in Brooklyn, his real education took place at the kitchen table of an apartment on Georgia Avenue in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Brooklyn. A precocious and versatile student from his early youth, Herberg had learned Greek, Latin, French, German, and Russian by the time he was in his teens. Graduated from Boys High School in 1918, Herberg later attended City College and Columbia University, where he studied philosophy and history apparently without ever completing the coursework for an academic degree.

Herberg inherited his parents' "passionate atheism" and equally passionate commitment to the socialist faith. Entering the Communist movement while still a teenager, Herberg brought to radical politics an erudition that considerably elevated the intellectual level of American Marxism. Less prolific than writer Max Eastman or novelist John Dos Passos, Herberg was perhaps the broadest-ranging of Marxist polemicists during the 1920s and early 1930s. A regular contributor to Communist journals such as the Working Monthly, he was also a familiar ideologue in the Modern Quarterly, one of the chief theoretical journals of the Old Left.

Herberg wrote scores of articles and editorials on topics ranging from critiques of Edmund Wilson's views of proletarian literature to debates with Sidney Hook over Marx's ambivalent views on religion to the relationship between Freudian psychoanalysis and Communist thought. His attachment to communism reflected intellectual conviction as well as moral ardor. Perhaps his boldest contribution to the radical thought of the period was his effort to reconcile
Marxism to the cosmology of Einstein, the "second scientific revolution" that had gone virtually unnoticed among radical writers in America. While most Communists still condemned Einstein for rejecting "scientific materialism," Herberg insisted that both Marxism and the theory of relativity were scientifically correct. As a radical Jew, moreover, Herberg hailed Freud, as he did Marx and Einstein, as a modern prophet. "The world of socialism—to which nothing human is alien and which cherishes every genuine manifestation of the human spirit," he wrote during the 1930s, "lays a wreath of homage on the grave of Sigmund Freud."

First signs of Herberg's eventual disenchantment with orthodox Marxism came already in 1920, when he, Bertram Wolfe, and other young intellectuals and labor organizers joined a group, headed by Jay Lovestone, that split off from the main Communist party within the American party leadership. Lovestone, an American supporter of the Soviet theoretician Nicolai Bukharin, had, like Bukharin, advocated more autonomy for national Communist parties from control by the Communist party of the USSR. In 1929, Stalin struck back by demoting Bukharin and ousting Lovestone and his followers from leadership of the American movement. After breaking with the official party in 1929, Herberg became a staff member and then editor of the Lovestonite opposition paper, Workers Age, many of whose contributors would later become bitter anti-Stalinists.

As the 1930s proceeded, Herberg became disenchanted with his Marxist faith. The grotesque Stalinist purges, the Communist betrayal of the Popular Front on the battlefields of Spain during the Spanish Civil War, the Russian invasion of Finland, and the Stalin-Hitler Nonaggression Pact of 1939 all contributed to his growing disillusionment. The Moscow trials, Herberg maintained, indicated the barbarous measures to which Stalin would resort to suppress all resistance to his bureaucratic rule within Russia. For Herberg, as for so many ex-Marxists of his generation, the cynical, opportunistic Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement of 1939 dispelled any remaining belief that "only a socialist government can defeat totalitarianism." His final break with orthodox Marxism, which came in 1939, involved no mere change in political loyalties or repudiation of the political radicalism of his youth. As he would confess in recounting his journey from Marxism to Judaism on the pages of Commentary
in 1947, Marxism had been, to him and to others like him, "a
religion, an ethic and a theology; a vast all-embracing doctrine of
man and the universe, a passionate faith endowing life with
meaning."¹

Put to the test, this Marxist faith had failed because, as Herberg
would later express it, "reality could not be forever withstood." He
had begun to recognize by the late 1930s that the all-encompassing
system of Marxist thought could not sustain the values that had
first attracted him to revolutionary activity. "Not that I felt myself
any the less firmly committed to the great ideals of freedom and
social justice," he reflected in 1947:

My discovery was that I could no longer find basis and support for
these ideals in the materialistic religion of Marxism. . . . This reli-
gion itself, it now became clear to me, was in part illusion, and in
part idolatry; in part a delusive utopianism promising heaven on
earth in our time, and in part a totalitarian worship of collective
man; in part a naive faith in the finality of economics, material
production; in part a sentimental optimism as to the goodness of
human nature, and in part a hard-boiled amoral cult of power at any
price. There could be no question to my mind that as religion, Marx-
ism had proved itself bankrupt.²

Perceiving Marxism as a "god that failed" rather than as a "mere
strategy of political action," Herberg was left with an inner spiri-
tual void, "deprived of the commitment and understanding that
alone made life liveable."

As the god of Marxism was failing him in the late 1930s, Herberg
chanced to read Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral So-
ociety*. He later wrote,

Humanly speaking, it converted me, for in some manner I cannot
describe, I felt my whole being, and not merely my thinking, shifted
to a new center. . . . What impressed me more profoundly was the
paradoxical combination of realism and radicalism that Niebuhr's
"prophetic" faith made possible. . . . Here was a faith that warned
against all premature securities, yet called to responsible action.
Here, in short, was a "social idealism" without illusions, in compar-
sion with which even the most "advanced" Marxism appeared con-
fused, inconsistent, and hopelessly illusion-ridden.³

More than any other American thinker of the 1930s and 1940s,
Niebuhr related theology to politics through a realistic assessment
of human nature that seemed inescapably relevant in a time of the breakdown of the Marxist (and liberal) faith in progress and enlightenment.

Some of Herberg's acquaintances would later liken his rejection of communism, and return to Judaism, to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. The comparison may have pleased him, for Herberg always felt that his return to Judaism was the product of events equally unanticipated and dramatic. His memorable road to teshuvah, inspired by his first encounter with Niebuhr, was unique in the annals of American Jewish intellectuals of that generation. In an autobiographical passage, Herberg said that even before he met Niebuhr personally, his encounter with Niebuhr's thought in 1939 was the "turning point."

Like Franz Rosenzweig, whose writings he began to read during the early 1940s, Herberg went through a wrenching inner struggle over whether to become a Christian. After several soul-searching meetings with Niebuhr, who was then teaching at Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, Herberg declared his intention to embrace Christianity. Niebuhr counseled him, instead, to explore his Jewish religious tradition first and directed him across the street to the Jewish Theological Seminary. The professors and students at the Seminary undertook to instruct Herberg in Hebrew and Jewish thought.

Throughout much of the 1940s, while he was earning a living as the educational director and research analyst of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Herberg devoted much time and energy to the study of Jewish sources. Not having received a traditional Jewish education in his youth, Herberg was introduced to the classical sources of Judaism through the writings of Solomon Schechter and George Foot Moore and through the instruction of Judaic scholars who became his friends, such as Professors Gerson D. Cohen and Seymour Siegel and Rabbi Milton Steinberg. As Seymour Siegel has reminisced, Herberg was "extraordinarily moved" by the realistic appraisal of human nature in rabbinic literature, especially as expounded by Schechter. He was impressed, also, by the writings of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig who, together with Niebuhr, would shape his evolving views on religious existentialism and biblical faith.
Herberg found in Judaism, after years of searching, a faith that encouraged social action without falling into the trap of utopianism. Throughout the 1940s, he developed and explicated his emerging theology for journals such as *Commentary* and the *Jewish Frontier*. In demand as a speaker, he lectured on religious faith and the social philosophy of Judaism at synagogues and on college campuses, gaining the reputation of being "the Reinhold Niebuhr of Judaism." He met regularly at his home with JTS rabbinical students and others to discuss his theological ideas. "In those early days," one of these students remembered, "when the naturalistic theology so brilliantly expounded by Professor Mordecai Kaplan was the main intellectual influence in Jewish religious circles, we were fascinated by Herberg's espousal of the orthodox ideas of a supernatural God, messiah, and Torah, expounded with fervor and yet interpreted in a new way."5

Out of these intellectual encounters and out of several essays published in *Commentary* and elsewhere in the late 1940s came Herberg's book *Judaism and Modern Man*, which appeared in 1951. Acclaimed as a carefully reasoned and intensely written interpretation of Judaism in the light of an existentialist approach still new to America, *Judaism and Modern Man* was highly praised by Jewish scholars; Niebuhr himself said that the book "may well become a milestone in the religious thought of America."

Herberg's central concern, as he describes it in *Judaism and Modern Man*, is the spiritual frustration and despair of twentieth-century humanity. Herberg examines one by one the "substitute faiths" in which people have placed their hopes and aspirations—Marxism, liberalism, rationalism, science, and psychoanalysis, among others—and finds that each is a way of evading ultimate theological issues. "Man must worship something," Herberg wrote. "If he does not worship God, he will worship an idol made of wood, or of gold, or of ideas."6 Moreover, intellectual affirmation is not enough. Essential to one's being is a "leap of faith": return and absolute commitment to the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.7

In presenting his view of God and Judaism, Herberg criticized theologians of the 1930s and 1940s who espoused a rationalist ap-
proach and, in so doing, reduced God to an idea. For a religious existentialist such as Herberg, deeply influenced by the dialogical I-Thou philosophy of Buber and Rosenzweig, God is important only if there is a personal relationship to him. Thus, for Herberg, Jewish faith cannot be predicated upon an abstract idea of God such as, for example, Kaplan's notion of "a power that makes for salvation." Rather, the God of Judaism and Modern Man is a God to whom we can pray with an expectation of a response, a God with whom we can enter into a genuine dialogue.

As Seymour Siegel has noted, Herberg's theology was rather traditional, focusing on such beliefs as revelation, the covenant between God and the Jewish people, resurrection of the dead, and the coming of the messiah. He also affirmed unequivocally a traditional conception of the chosen people: Jewish existence, argued Herberg, "is intrinsically religious and God-oriented. Jews may be led to deny, repudiate, and reject their 'chosenness' and its responsibilities, but their own Jewishness rises to confront them as refutation and condemnation."

While believing in revelation, Herberg did not accept "the fundamentalist conception of revelation as the supernatural communication of information through a body of writings which are immune from error because they are quite literally the writings of God. . . . The Bible is obviously not simply a transcript from His dictation." Rather, Herberg regarded revelation as "the self-disclosure of God in His dealings with the world" through active intervention in history, and the Torah as a "humanly mediated record of revelation." In this and in other respects, his theology was at variance with Orthodoxy.

Above all, Herberg argued that a Jewish theology relevant to the postwar period would have to be predicated upon a less optimistic image of man, upon a sober recognition of human sinfulness and human limitations. The barbarities of Stalinism and especially the Nazi Holocaust seemed to Herberg to have destroyed the very foundations of the prevailing liberal faith in the natural goodness of man, shared by Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. Liberal Jewish theology, he maintained, failed to answer the critical question of how evil regimes and institutions could have arisen if human beings are essentially good. The answer could be found in "Nie-
buhr's rediscovery of the classical doctrine of 'original sin,' which religious liberalism and secular idealism combined to deride and obscure." Sin, Herberg wrote, "is one of the great facts of human life. It lies at the root of man's existentialist plight." Without an understanding of the nature of sin, he concluded, "there is no understanding of human life... or man's relation to God."14

The approach of Judaism and Modern Man reflected the prevailing trend toward existentialism in American religious thought of the 1940s and 1950s. The post-World War II period saw an Americanization of Jewish theology in the United States as the religious thought of Rosenzweig and Buber, scarcely known in America prior to 1945, was translated for an English-reading American Jewish public.15 In the late 1940s and 1950s, Herberg wrote a much-discussed interpretive essay on Rosenzweig for Commentary and edited a collection of Buber's essays.16 In helping to popularize and reinterpret these men for the American Jewish laity, Herberg helped to lay the foundation for the creation and development of a new phase of Jewish thought on American soil. With its publication in 1951, Judaism and Modern Man became the first book-length English work of this new, postwar Jewish theology. The publication of Judaism and Modern Man was greeted with praise by several respected Jewish reviewers, such as Milton Konvitz and Milton Steinberg. Indeed, in a prepublication statement, Steinberg went so far as to say that Herberg "had written the book of the generation on the Jewish religion."

Herberg was one of the most American of Jewish religious thinkers. Much of his understanding of Jewish religious tradition derived from scholarship written in English and produced on American soil. Thus, his understanding of rabbinic thought was shaped almost completely by his reading of George Foot Moore and Solomon Schechter, rather than by the great works of traditional European rabbinic scholarship, medieval or modern.17 As noted earlier, Herberg's encounter with the religious thought and personal example of Reinhold Niebuhr had been the decisive point in his spiritual journey.18 Herberg carefully studied all of Niebuhr's writings, underlined them heavily, and "added little in the margins" by way of critical comment.19 "Every work of Niebuhr's," he reflected in
1956, "almost every article he wrote, enlarged my understanding, deepened my insight, perhaps even confirmed my faith." In Niebuhr's writings—especially Moral Man and Immoral Society, Faith and History, and The Nature and Destiny of Man—Herberg found a compelling theological realism from which to derive and affirm his post-Marxist faith. During the early 1940s, Herberg "had approached his understanding of Marxism from a Niebuhrian point of view"; his subsequent theological evolution proceeded from a conscious continuation of that perspective.21

As discussed above, the influence of Niebuhr's thinking is especially evident in Herberg's pessimism about human nature and in his understanding of the concept of sin.22 Neither Herberg nor even Niebuhr posited man's "complete sinfulness." Nonetheless, Herberg's appropriation of the doctrine of original sin, a theological category neither inherent nor central to Jewish thought outside of America, has lent credence to the criticism that Herberg's theology was more Christian than Jewish.23

Niebuhr's influence on Herberg's thought can also be observed in Herberg's theological understanding of the nature of love and the self, including his approach to the problem of the human tendency toward self-deification.24 Like Niebuhr, Herberg had rejected Marxism on the ground that it had overlooked the sinful nature of man and was utopian in perspective.25 While the Marxist view of the state presupposed "the innate goodness of man," American constitutional democracy "acknowledged the sinfulness of man as well as his grandeur." Herberg wrote, "If it is man's capacity for justice and cooperation that makes society and the state possible, it is man's proneness to conflict and injustice that makes democracy necessary."26 Reflected in Herberg's concern with the "biblical-realist" view of American constitutional democracy was the viewpoint that Arnold M. Eisen has persuasively attributed to several American rabbis and theologians of the 1930s and 1940s—that they argued for "the compatibility of Judaism with democracy, . . . the identity of American ideals with their own, . . . [and] that the nation's political system was based upon the Hebrew Bible."27

The American aspect of Herberg's thought is also expressed in his views on religion and the state, especially his critique of the long-standing liberal Jewish commitment to the principle of church-
state separation. 28 As Franklin H. Littell has noted, the evolving "American pattern of 'separation' had its origin in the adjustments to the interaction of religion and politics that were unique to America." 29 The separationist principle was an American invention, as was the Jeffersonian metaphor of a "wall" between church and state, around which so much recent constitutional and Jewish public debate has revolved. The position Herberg espoused was predicated on the argument that the authors of the Constitution never intended to erect an impenetrable "wall of separation." Although the Founding Fathers did not want to favor any single religion, they were not against helping all religions, or all religion, equally. "Neither in the minds of the Founding Fathers nor in the thinking of the American people through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century," he wrote, "did the doctrine of the First Amendment ever imply an ironclad ban forbidding the government to take account of religion or to support its various activities." In the last years, this argument has been advanced with greater confidence than it was earlier; outside the legal community, Herberg was one of the first American intellectuals to articulate it.

Before most American Jewish intellectuals, Herberg called for a reassessment of the prevailing liberal Jewish consensus concerning the sharply delimited role that religion should play in American public life. In several articles published during the 1950s and 1960s, Herberg urged the Jewish establishment to reassess this position. "By and large," he wrote in 1952, those who speak for the American Jewish community seem to share the basic secularist presupposition that religion is a "private matter." . . . The American Jew must have sufficient confidence in the capacity of democracy to preserve its pluralistic . . . character without any absolute wall of separation between religion and public life. . . . The fear felt by Jewish leaders of the possible consequences of a restoration of religion to a vital place in public life is what throws them into an alliance with the secularists and helps make their own thinking so thoroughly secular. 30

A decade or so later, frustrated by Jewish support for the 1963 Supreme Court decisions banning the Lord's Prayer and Bible reading in the public schools, he entered a plea for a restoration of religion to a place of honor in American life:
With the meaning of our political tradition and political practice, the promotion [of religion] has been, and continues to be, a part of the very legitimate "secular" purpose of the state. Whatever the "neutrality" of the state in matters of religion may be, it cannot be a neutrality between religion and no-religion, any more than . . . it could be neutrality between morality and non-morality, [both of which] are necessary to "good government" and "national prosperity."  

"The traditional symbols of the divine in our public life," he warned, "ought not to be tampered with."  

In developing a Jewish critique of the prevailing liberal American Jewish separationist position, Herberg articulated an American Jewish conservative perspective on the relationship between religion and the state and the growing secularization of American society. The liberal Jewish stance that religious freedom is least secure where government and religion are intertwined developed on American soil and was unique to the thought (and perspective) of American Jews. So, too, the Jewish conservative critique of the "strict separationist" position, as espoused by Herberg during the 1950s and 1960s, was a position unique to American Jewish public thought, for which there was no precedent in the writings of European Jewish thinkers. 

Herberg also was the first twentieth-century American Jewish theologian to write about judicial decisions in the area of religion and state, a subject that had not been systematically addressed by Jewish religious thinkers outside of Israel or America. His detailed analysis and critique of United States Supreme Court decisions on prayer in the schools and government aid to parochial education, relating Jewish religious values to American public policy, were distinctively American elements in his Jewish theology and mature political philosophy. 

When Will Herberg died in March 1977, American Judaism lost one of its most provocative thinkers. Having received no religious education or training in his youth, Herberg turned to the study of Judaism only after his romance with Marxism ended. A prolific and influential sociologist of religion, his spiritual journey from Marxism to Judaism was unique in the American Jewish intellec-
tual history of this century. The only Jewish ex-Marxist to embrace Jewish theology and the study of religion as a vocation, Will Herberg had become the quintessential baal teshuvah of the post–World War II era.

Notes

2. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid.
12. Herberg, Judaism and Modern Man, 244–45.
13. Ibid., 246.
17. He cites Moore nineteen times in Judaism and Modern Man.
18. Most recently, Niebuhr’s influence on Herberg and other post–World War II American Jewish theologians has been discussed in Robert G. Goldy, The Emergence of Jewish Theology in America, ch. 4.


22. It is also evident in his understanding of the concept of salvation and its relationship to that of sin: "Salvation," wrote Herberg, "is salvation from sin because it is sin . . . which alienates us from God, disrupts society, and brings chaos to the world. . . . Salvation is by faith and grace alone. . . . From the pit of sin we can be saved only by God's grace" (Herberg, "The Theological Problems of the Hour," 424-25).


26. Ibid., 169.


30. Will Herberg, "The Sectarian Conflict over Church and State: A Divi-
sive Threat to our Democracy?” Commentary (November 1952): 459.