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RECONSTRUCTIONIST THEOLOGY

A Critical Evaluation

I. THE THEOLOGY OF RECONSTRUCTIONISM

There can be little doubt that wide sections of modern Jewry are engulfed by a deep spiritual crisis which is due to the conflict between traditional Judaism and the secular civilization of the age. On the American Jewish scene Reconstructionism represents the school of thought whose chief preoccupation has been the interpretation of the meaning of this conflict and that has devoted its intellectual energies almost exclusively to its resolution. The movement, led vigorously by its founder, Mordecai M. Kaplan,* has now achieved sufficient self-assurance to claim to offer "the only alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism."¹

Is this claim justified? Does Reconstructionism indeed offer a

* Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan's works, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* and *Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, are referred to as *M. of G.* and *J. W. Sn.* respectively. Quotes from *M. of G.* are from the 1947 ed.; from *J. W. Sn.*, from the 1958 ed.

¹ Cf. subtitle of *J.W.Sn.*

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way out of the present predicament of our destiny? This study has been undertaken for the sole purpose of finding the answer to this question. We shall have to consider the main teachings of Reconstructionist religious philosophy and then inquire into their objective validity.

Rejection of Supernaturalism — Transnaturalism

Reconstructionism links the cause of the spiritual crisis of our time to the supernatural element in traditional religion. The modern mind is unable to accept supernaturalism. As long as religion is associated with the supernatural, modern civilization will remain secular. According to Reconstructionist thought, supernaturalism is "gone with the wind" never to return again. If religion is to be saved at all, it will have to be "wedded to naturalism."² Therein lies the solution to the problem. Reconstructionism undertakes the task of purifying Judaism from its admixture of supernaturalism.

Occasionally the attempt is made to use the term "supernaturalism" in a specific way: as the belief that God may at will suspend the laws of nature in order to reward those whom He loves and punish those who have earned His wrath.³ However, it is obvious that the inherent logic of Reconstructionism does not allow it to stop at the negation of the supernatural in this limited sense only. The stumbling block is not just the concept of "God as miracle worker" or "as a reservoir of magic power to be tapped whenever they (the believers) are aware of their physical limitations."⁴ The idea of the supernatural as such is objectionable. According to Dr. Kaplan, modern science has invalidated "the distinction between natural and supernatural."⁵ For the Reconstructionist the idea of God as a transcendental, omnipotent, all-kind and all-wise Supreme Being that confronts the world and man as their Creator has no meaning. Modern man, so he maintains, is able to conceive the godhead only as immanent in the world; modern man is incapable of entering into relationship with the supernatural.⁶ His concern

2. *J.W.Sn.*, p. 18.

3. *Ib.*, p. 16.

4. *J.W. Sn.*, p. 98 and *M. of G.*, P. 25.

5. *M. of G.*, p. 26.

6. *Ib.*, pp. 25-26.

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is with life on this earth exclusively; there is no other. His goal is self-fulfillment, which may also be called, salvation — not, of course, in its traditional other-worldly meaning, but as this-worldly self-transcendence through the realization of man's inherent potentialities. Religion must help man "to live and to get the most out of life." This it can do only if it teaches him "to identify as divine and holy whatever in human life or in the world about him enhances human life."⁷ The forces in us and around us which make "for health, happiness and progress"⁸ are the manifestations of the divine. The God idea may be seen as the sum total of the process which in man and in nature contribute to human salvation. Reconstructionism asserts that this new concept may rightly be considered a re-interpretation of the traditional one, for it "can function in our day exactly as the belief in God has always functioned; it can function as an affirmation that life has value."⁹

At this point, however, the question might be asked: since the supernatural is rejected, what need is there for religion at all? In view of the fact that man's purpose in life is this-worldly self-fulfillment, could he not strive for it without having to identify as divine those forces which assist him in his endeavor? Why should we not be satisfied with a purely secular form of self-realization? In answer to such and similar questions the concept of man's striving for salvation is elaborated. Man is inspired to transcend the inheritance of his evolutionary origin from the brute by certain ideals and values which are of the spirit. Even though they are not part of the world of objective facts, they are no less real than the world of the senses. However, naturalistic science cannot account for values and meanings. It is for this reason that "secularism is not enough."¹⁰ Human salvation depends on the realization of man's ethical aspirations. As man yearns to transcend his "sub-human tendencies," he is really raising himself above the dominion of the natural laws of the scientist. On account of that he is in need of "a transnatural religion." Transnaturalism is then the "alternative" that Reconstructionism submits as the union between religion and scientific naturalism.

7. *Ib.*

8. *Ib.*, p. 294.

9. *Ib.*, p. 29.

10. *J.W. Sn.*, pp. 10, 111.

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Transnaturalism is defined as "that extension of naturalism which takes into account much that mechanistic or positivistic science is incapable of dealing with. Transnaturalism reaches out into the dominion where mind, personality, purpose, ideals, values and meanings dwell. It treats of the good and the true."¹¹ The distinction between fact and value is, of course, a very old and valid one. Our question, however, has still not been answered. If one so pleases, one may call the reaching out into the realm of meanings and values by the term "transnaturalism." But why transnaturalist *religion*? What is gained by it? May this recognition of a realm of ends and purposes as an aspect of reality not be adequately expressed within the scope of some secular humanism or ethical culture movement? However, Reconstructionism avers that "a godless humanism"¹² is an inadequate interpretation of life, because "it fails to express and to foster the feeling that man's ethical aspirations are part of a cosmic urge, by obeying which man makes himself at home in the universe."¹³ Man needs the awareness that something in the very nature of the universe answers to his desire for self-fulfillment. This applies not only to man's individual happiness, but also to his endeavor for "maximum social cooperation," which is inseparable from salvation. It is maintained that "a religionless humanism fails to provide... a motive for 'dedication to mankind.' That motive can come only from seeing in mankind potentialities which are in rapport with the creative principle in the cosmos — with God."¹⁴ Without being able to see that his efforts at self-realization are indeed in keeping with the inherent nature of reality, man could not maintain himself in defiance of the endless temptations, failures, and disappointments which forever beset his path.

Godhood as a Cosmic Process

Reconstructionism does not find it difficult to show how "the inner drives of man" are a manifestation of cosmic reality. As is well known, man is not a self-sufficient being, independent of the

11. *Ib.*, p. 10.

12. *M. of G.*, p. 325.

13. *Ib.*, p. 244-5.

14. *J.W. Sn.*, p. 120.

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rest of the world. "Human nature is part of the larger world of nature."¹⁵ Whatever constitutes his being reflects powers outside him in the universe, the source whence he derives his existence. His very will for self-fulfillment is part of the cosmic will to live and is characteristic of all living things. Ethical inclinations and purposeful aspirations reveal aspects of reality because human nature itself has its place in the universal scheme. We have to learn to view the drives and urges of man for self-transcendence "as no less an integral part of the cosmic structure of reality than the life-drive and the sex-drive..."¹⁶ In the very choice of goals, as we strive for salvation, we are impelled by the cosmic powers that have formed us and that sustain us. These powers we identify as divine, because they alone make life meaningful and valuable. The divine reveals itself in us in our own urge for self-realization. The very purpose of speaking of God as "the Power that makes for salvation" is "to identify the particular human experiences which enable us to feel the impact of that process in the environment and in ourselves which impels us to grow physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. That process is godhood. It reveals itself in those particular experiences."¹⁷

Needless to say that if godhood is the cosmic process that impels man to grow, the "cosmic urges that are manifest in him also represent the will and the law of God for him. A deity that is immanent in nature and in man cannot communicate his will or law in a specific act of personal revelation." The law of God is revealed to man in man's "own best vision of his capacity for rendering service to the cause of humanity."¹⁸ It follows from the Reconstructionist premise that "we cannot see the will of God in any one specific code of laws. Only in the spiritual life of man as a whole, only in the complex of forces which impel man to think in terms of ideals and seek to implement their ideals through laws as well as through social institutions can we discover the will of God."¹⁹ This is a new interpretation of the old adage, *vox populi vox dei*. From the Reconstructionist point of view one might say that while the Torah

15. *Ib.*, p. 119.

16. *Ib.*, p. 101-2.

17. *Ib.*, p. 110.

18. *M. of G.*, p. 118.

19. *Ib.*, p. 160-1.

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is of course not *min ha-shamayim*, as tradition understands the term, all law that aims at cooperation represents a form of divine self-revelation, brought about through the instrumentality of man's "best vision." By relating man's higher aspirations to cosmic nature and bestowing the name of God on "the totality of all those forces in life that render human life worthwhile" religion becomes the source of values and meanings, whereas science "describes objective reality."²⁰

It would of course matter little by what name we called the cosmic forces whose self-revelation we discern in man's idealistic impulses. Name-calling is often a mere game of semantics. The religious significance of identifying those forces as the process of godhood lies in the fact that by doing so we affirm our confidence in the validity of the meanings and purposes for which they are responsible. By recognizing godhood in everything that impels man "to grow," we express our confidence that indeed he will grow. The "process of godhood" assures the Reconstructionist of the possibility of the realization of man's yearning for salvation. He calls this process "God" because he defines the term as the Power, inherent in the universe, that — by the very fact of its activity in the human soul — "endorses what we believe ought to be and that endorses that it will be."²¹ The word "God" is for Reconstructionism a symbol that expresses "the highest ideals for which men strive and, at the same time, points to the objective fact that the world is so constituted as to make for the realization of those ideals."²² This may be called the faith of Reconstructionism. To argue from man's position as part of nature for the recognition of the cosmic roots of his strivings is one thing; to conclude that, because of their being rooted in cosmic forces, they are bound to find fulfillment is quite another. It implies an act of faith in the cosmos.

The Faith of Reconstructionism

Let us see what must be assumed in such an act of faith. Not only does the Reconstructionist believer reason from man, placed

20. *J.W. Sn.*, pp. 48, 52.

21. *M. of G.*, p. 323.

22. *Ib.*, p. 295.

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in the context of "a larger nature," to his relatedness to universal life, but he assumes — on account of this relatedness — a kind of "pre-established harmony" between his impulses and the cosmic urge. He must further assume some form of built-in harmony between the order of nature, as described by science, and the powers that are responsible for the human drives that manifest values and purposes. Unless the realm of nature and that of the spirit are coordinated, there can be little hope that the material conditions in the universe will ever allow the realization of man's aspirations. Reconstructionism is aware of what is implied in its belief in the possibilities of human salvation. It interprets faith in the sovereignty of God as "faith that in mankind there is manifest a power which, in full harmony with the nature of the physical universe, operates for the regeneration of human society."²³ Underlying this assumption is the concept of unity among all the cosmic forces. Unless they are purposefully interrelated, no purpose can prosper in the universe. The cosmic drives, active in man and society, in nature as well as in the realm of the spirit, must be related to each other in an all-embracing universal harmony; otherwise the fulfillment of man's striving for self-realization is left to mere chance. Only on the basis of a concept of universal oneness does it make sense to affirm that the world is so constituted that what the human mind recognizes as valuable will indeed come to be for the sole reason that it ought to be. Reconstructionism perceives God "as the apotheosis of the interrelated unity of all reality; for it is only such unity that is compatible with life's worthwhileness."²⁴ Only by virtue of its purposefulness can life have meaning.

No doubt, man does have some experience of life's unity. Personality itself may be looked upon as the result of a unifying process in the world. Man's own creative urge as well as his appreciation of value are manifestations of life's general trend towards unity. Meaning achieved in an act of creativity is always a deed of unification. However, such experiences testify mainly to a *tendency* toward unity, to an effort in life "to achieve and express unity, harmony and integrity."²⁵ There is, however, a long way from such tendencies to the affirmation of actual harmony between man

23. *Ib.*, p. 110.

24. *Ib.*, p. 226.

25. *Ib.*, p. 167.

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and the universe, and among all the cosmic powers themselves. How is such affirmation justified? The father of Reconstructionism assures us repeatedly that the concept of "the interrelated unity of all reality," which alone "spells God" for him, is based on an intuition — on the intuition "that human life is supremely worthwhile and significant."²⁶ The belief in God, accordingly, means to subscribe to "the certain assumption" that the nature of cosmic reality endorses and guarantees "the realization in man of that which is of greatest value to him." "It is an assumption that is not susceptible to proof," says Dr. Kaplan, but if we believe in it, we believe in God.²⁷ Thus, the basic Reconstructionist concept of life's worthwhileness, which to affirm is "the function" of the idea of God, becomes a matter of intuitive assumption. This implies also that it cannot be "demonstrated" that self-fulfillment, the goal of Reconstructionist religion, will ever be attained. What alone may be said concerning it is that "faith must assume it as the objective of human behavior, if we are not to succumb to the cynical acceptance of evil, which is the only other alternative."²⁸ One should, however, not be misled by this quotation into believing that the faith that is meant here is only the result of a tragic choice between itself and the despair of cynicism. Such a faith would indeed be nothing but a mere opiate. In one of the finest passages of Reconstructionist literature, part of which has already been quoted in connection with Dr. Kaplan's rejection of secular humanism, one reads: "Without the emotional intuition of an inner harmony between human nature and universal nature, without the conviction, born of the heart rather than of the mind, that the world contains all that is necessary for human salvation, the assumptions necessary for ethical living remain cold hypothesis lacking all dynamic power. . . . It is only this emotional reaction to life that can make humanity itself mean more to us than 'the disease of the agglutinated dust.'"²⁹ Notwithstanding the recurring echo of the alternative of despair, there is no doubt that the intuition of Reconstructionist faith is presented as an actual experience of deep emotional intensity.

26. *Ib.*, p. 27.

27. *Ib.*, p. 29.

28. *Ib.*, p. 54.

29. *Ib.*, p. 245.

Chaos and Cosmos

Having followed thus far the analysis of the Reconstructionist thesis, the question may no longer be put off: What is the status and the meaning of evil in the Reconstructionist world view? Since the emergence of values and purposes in man and society are attributed to the interrelated complex of helping cosmic powers which we identify as divine, shall we be justified in identifying evil in the world as the self-revelation of some diabolical cosmic forces that "unmake" man's striving for salvation and unity? In view of human experience with nature as well as in history, it would not seem to be an unwarranted conclusion. Shall we then assume a Manichean "universe" in which the two principles of good and evil are locked in struggle with each other? Reconstructionist thinking does not countenance such a solution. It does not agree to the spelling of the word evil as Evil. According to it, evil must not be granted status side by side with "the goodness of life which is its godliness." Evil does not exist in a positive way, so Reconstructionism avers. Evil is a mere negation, a chance, an accident. It is "inevitable only in the logical and passive sense that darkness is the inevitable concomitant of light." Evil is mere unshaped and unformed *Tohu va-Vohu*, that phase of the universe which has not yet been invaded by the creative energy, not yet conquered by will and intelligence, not yet completely penetrated by godhood. The creative energy, which is the element of godhood in the universe, is all the time at work, in man and in nature, forming cosmos out of chaos.³⁰

Such an interpretation of evil must be paralleled by an appropriate interpretation of life's worthwhileness. Life is worthwhile in spite of all that mars it. It is worthwhile not so much because of the actually realized good in it, but mainly owing "to the infinite potentialities that are still latent and that will in time come to fruition."³¹ Latent potentialities can, of course, never be demonstrated. It is again a matter of intuitive faith, a knowledge of the heart rather than of the mind.

Whatever the value of this interpretation of evil may be, it is obvious that the Reconstructionist credo has been badly jolted. Even if one is not prepared to grant evil positive status, the mere

30. *Ib.*, pp. 64, 73, 76.

31. *Ib.*, p. 272.

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existence of chaos beside the process of godhood necessitates a new definition of the concept of the deity. A god that, "like an artist" struggling with the passive resistance of a block of marble, step by step forms cosmos out of the meaninglessness of chaos is obviously lacking the attributes of infinity or perfection. As long as there is evil, there is chaos; and chaos exists because godhood has "not yet penetrated it." But a deity that needs time to do his job is of necessity limited in his capacity. This, indeed, is recognized to be one of the consequences of the Reconstructionist position. The Reconstructionist interpretation of evil involves "a radical change in the traditional concept of God. It conflicts with that conception of God as infinite and perfect in His omniscience and omnipotence."³² However, we are assured that there is really no need for such an idea of the godhead. A concept which symbolizes "the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos" is quite sufficient. It is such a concept that the Reconstructionist has in mind when he speaks of "God as the creative life of the universe."³³

This, of course, gives us an entirely new idea of the deity. As our awareness of the divine aspect of reality is derived from the meaningful and purposeful contents of the universe, divinity must manifest itself in the cosmos. The cosmos, however, is continually growing. As the cosmos expands so does develop with it its divine quality. We ought, therefore, to conclude: the more cosmos, the richer the potency of the creative life of the universe that is identified as God. We have actually netted a god that is neither perfect nor infinite; one that, though finite in his effectiveness, is infinite in possibilities of further development; one that grows more and more perfect as it forces cosmos upon the face of chaos.

Enthusiasm For Living

The extremely original idea of the Reconstructionist godhead illustrates dramatically how much the Reconstructionist intuition must accomplish in order to establish the worthwhileness of life. We see now that the belief in the unity of all reality, which alone could guarantee the realization of man's nobler aspirations, in-

32. *Ib.*, p. 76.

33. *Ib.*

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volves belief in cosmic powers that are finite in potency as well as in wisdom. No one is, of course, in a position to evaluate the vastness of universal chaos as compared with the finite amount of creative life which at any moment may be immanent in the cosmos. Whether the potency of a finite godhead may not be after all exhausted in its struggle with the passive resistance of the "Tohu and Bohu"; or whether the process of cosmic godhead may not occasionally lead to a blunder of universal magnitude and thus allow chaos to regain its lost terrain — such questions receive no adequate attention. Apparently, it is felt that the emotional reaction of faith in life is convincing enough to silence such problems. One of the strongest statements of Reconstructionist faith seems to be directed against such and similar carpings of the intellect. Toward the end of one of Dr. Kaplan's major works on Reconstructionist theology once again the question is asked: "Whence do we derive this faith in a Power that endorses what ought to be?" And the answer is given in the following words: "Not from that aspect of the mind which has to do only with mathematically and logically demonstrated knowledge. Such faith stems from that aspect of the mind which finds expression in the enthusiasm for living, in the passion to surmount limitation. . . . The fact that many lack this enthusiasm does not invalidate the truth (of the faith), any more than the fact that it took the genius of an Einstein to discover the principle of relativity should lead us to cast a doubt upon its truth. This enthusiasm is man's will to live the maximum life. Just as the will to live testifies — in an intuitive not, a logical sense — to the reality of life, the will to live the maximum life testifies to the realizable character of such life."³⁴ We must confess that we are not quite able to see how "the enthusiasm for living" may be considered an "expression" of an "aspect of the mind," since this enthusiasm is also equated with "man's will to live the maximum life." Be that as it may, the passage quoted indicates that "the enthusiasm for living" is the cornerstone of the Reconstructionist philosophy of religion. Without it there can be no faith in the power that endorses what ought to be and guarantees that it is also realizable. This enthusiasm must therefore be the source of the conviction, "born of the heart and not of the mind," of the harmony between individual strivings and cosmic urges, and finally, the origin of the intuition

34. *Ib.*, p. 327.

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of the unity of all reality. As one realizes that the entire scheme of Reconstructionist salvation depends on "the enthusiasm for living," one can hardly suppress the thought that the far-reaching cosmic conclusions of the Reconstructionist heart represent no less a bold "leap of faith" than the boldest ever performed by Karl Barth and his disciples.

At this point, one is induced to recall the way the founder and leader of Reconstructionism pokes fun at an author who has stated that a sense of sureness, "a sense of overmastering certainty which grips the spirit," is the characteristic mark of supernatural revelation. After the summary dismissal of the illogicality of such notions, one was entitled to look forward to something more tangible than "emotional reaction," "intuitive affirmation," and "enthusiasm for living" to form the foundation of Reconstructionist religious faith. Should one, perhaps, use Dr. Kaplan's own words with which he contemptuously rejects the sense of sureness and overmastering certainty of supernatural revelation and say regarding the intuitive convictions of Reconstructionism that "one takes exception, as a modernist must, to the folly of making sureness a criterion of truth, since stupidity is almost invariably sure of its own wisdom?"³⁵ We shall not follow Dr. Kaplan's example. We believe that a sense of sureness need not always be wrong, only because at times even fools seem to possess it; just as we hold quite confidently that the value of the most enthusiastic enthusiasm will not be proved by the argument that it took the genius of an Einstein to conceive the theory of relativity. Suffice it unto us to have traced the place of intuition and enthusiasm in the structure of Reconstructionist thought.

* * *

In bringing to a conclusion this presentation of Reconstructionist theology, we may point out that its characteristic feature is a mood of optimism, of "trust in life and in man." The optimism is intuitively derived from "the quality of universal being," which is called divine and is identified with godhood. One may say that Reconstructionist thought is a variation on the religious theme of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it is a form of Natural Religion. The very title of Dr. Kaplan's latest work, *Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, reminds one of that classic of eighteenth century

35. *Ib.*, pp. 12-13.

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deism, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, authored by John Toland and published in 1696. The "natural light" by which the deists were guided was, of course, reason, which possessed the dignity of logical necessity and universal validity. Reconstructionism, however, is familiar with the intellectual climate of the twentieth century. Its "natural light" is provided by the insights of experimental science and psychology. Reconstructionism is, therefore, guided by human experience, by aspirations, urges, yearnings, drives. Universality is acquired by granting these manifestations of human nature cosmic status as the expressions of a cosmic vitality. In such an atmosphere reliance on intuition and on an enthusiasm for living is, perhaps, understandable. At the same time, one is also reminded of certain specific forms of Natural Religion which were in the vogue in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, one is induced to recall the English philosopher, Shaftesbury, who in his writings, published in 1711, placed at the center of his thought the principle of enthusiasm for life and living. He too derived the meaning and worthwhileness of life from a universal harmony. Not unlike Reconstructionism, Shaftesbury too saw the meaning of religion in the enhancement of personality, which may be achieved because man knows himself at one with the interrelated unity of all reality. For Shaftesbury too the interrelated unity of reality is the divine aspect of reality. It follows logically from such a position that, like Dr. Kaplan, the Englishman too is compelled to deny the reality of evil. If evil existed positively and actively, and on the world-wide scale in which it does seem to exist from the point of view of common sense observation, what would become of the enthusiasm for living?!

It should also be noted that in Reconstructionism we are confronted with a form of pantheism. By identifying certain processes in man and the world as divine, we identify the divinity with the world and, indeed, with man. In a striking passage it is stated: ". . . .we must not identify the sovereignty of God with the expression of the will of a superhuman, immortal and infallible individual personality, but with that Power on which we rely for regeneration of society and which operates through individual human beings and social institutions."³⁶ In untold other passages we are assured that God is a cosmic vitality, the creative urge in the universe; that

36. *Ib.*, p. 110.

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man is in God and God is in man. Godhead is immanent in nature and in humanity; its sovereignty is exercised through man and society.³⁷

We should then say that Transnaturalism, the religion of Reconstructionism, is a pantheistic faith of optimism, conceived in a twentieth-century setting, in the traditions of eighteenth century Natural Religion. According to its own testimony, its reasoning is not conclusive; but it feels very strongly that its tenets are securely anchored in convictions "born of the heart rather than of the mind," in a number of intuitions, and — ultimately — in an enthusiasm for living.

II. CRITICISM

One should, perhaps, not attempt to reason with intuitions and enthusiasms. In themselves they are matters of purely personal concern and those who say that they have them may well be trusted to speak the truth. However, transnaturalism is presented to us as a re-interpretation of Judaism and we are asked to accept it as "the only alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism." For one who is not a Reconstructionist the way to take the Reconstructionist solution of our spiritual dilemma seriously is to investigate its philosophical and theological validity. In this attempt we shall at first turn our attention to the self-consistency of Reconstructionist religious philosophy. We shall do this under three headings: the problem of evil, the problem of freedom, and the problem of unity.

The Problem Of Evil

The interpretation of evil as chaos and of good as the purposive urge that forms cosmos from chaos is a thought for which one is not prepared by the premises of Reconstructionism. Among these premises we find the idea that modern science, in revising our picture of the universe, has abolished the distinction between the natural and supernatural as well as the dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical.¹ This would seem to be one of the main reasons why Reconstructionism is so impatient with the super-

37. Cf. *Ib.*, pp. 26, 113, 120, 161, 245, etc. etc.

1. *M. of G.*, pp. 26, 88.

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natural in religion, which is —usually— so strongly supported by metaphysical speculations. Having thrown out the supernatural, Reconstructionism is forced to establish a new distinction, that between cosmos and chaos or, as one might also say, between nature and sub-nature. The relationship between the two is not altogether unlike that which —according to Reconstructionist interpretation— existed in traditional religions between the natural and supernatural: cosmos forces its will and its intentions on chaos. There is, of course, a difference. Chaos is mere resistance, absence of meaning. Its only weapon of self-defense against being penetrated by the cosmic urge is its inertia. Chaos can be overcome and conquered, but not so nature. Nature has laws and order; it has positive existence. But why should it not be mastered by a more powerful supernature? The answer is, of course, that supernature does not exist. No one has ever seen it. We know for a certainty that science has “invalidated the distinction between natural and supernatural.” But does science approve of the distinction between natural and sub-natural? Has anyone ever encountered the “Tohu and Bohu” of Dr. Kaplan, the neutral, negative inertia of the unformed “resistant?” What people know from actual experience, the only witness admitted in the Reconstructionist court, is evil and wickedness, sorrow and suffering, failure and sin, prevalent in history and nature on a far more impressive scale than the goodness of life that, according to Reconstructionism, is godliness. It is possible to interpret evil as mere chaos, the mere absence of goodness; but to do so is good, old-fashioned metaphysics. The Reconstructionist distinction between chaos and cosmos, or —as we may say— between sub-nature and nature, is no less a metaphysical supposition than that between natural and supernatural. He who rejects the one cannot cling to the other.

The idea itself that evil is a mere absence of goodness “as darkness is the inevitable concomitant of light” has, of course, a long and glorious history. It originated in neo-Platonism in the third century and ever since it has been made use of in numberless philosophical systems. (In the history of Jewish philosophy Saadia Gaon, in the tenth century, was its most distinguished spokesman.) But neo-Platonism is purest metaphysics. It denies the very existence of nature, in the sense in which Reconstructionism uses the term. According to Plotinus, there is only the One and everything else

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is emanation of its substance. In this context evil represents a logical inconsistency. How can it exist, if everything is an emanation of the divine substance of the Infinite? And so its existence is denied. It is only in this way that the idea of evil as the mere absence of the good may be used and has been used. It is always the logical requirement of an originally purely metaphysical interpretation of reality. Only the power of metaphysical thought has ever dared to deny the reality of evil in defiance of overwhelming human experience. Such defiance, however, makes little sense, if one starts out with naturalism, as Reconstructionism does, and acknowledges experience, within the framework of nature, as the only arbiter of truth. In actual life we find some goodness and a great deal of disgustingly positive and sickeningly real evil. This is the material the Reconstructionist has with which to work and with it he has to justify his intuitive affirmation of the worthwhileness of life and his enthusiasm for living. He dare not deny experience, since his entire *raison d'être* is derived from experience.

When ideas are made to serve in contexts for which they were originally not intended, they often take revenge on their despoilers by involving them in the most absurd illogicalities. The consequences of the denial of the positive nature of evil are an interesting example in case. It is not easy to define exactly the area of the Reconstructionist "chaos." Fortunately, there are a few passages in the classical Reconstructionist writings which are quite explicit. We read, for instance, that earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, devastating storms and floods, famines and plagues, noxious plants and animals "are simply that phase of the universe which has not yet been completely penetrated by godhood."² In another context again we are told that the divine quality of life is not to be seen in tempests, conflagrations and earthquakes, but "in 'the still small voice' in which the patiently creative and constructive forces of life find expression."³ These statements make it quite clear that if evil was denied positive status, it meant that the destructive powers in the universe were neutral towards concepts of value; they were mere resistance to, and not active opponents of, meaning. However, the intention was not to deny its status as nature. No doubt, Reconstructionism cannot be blind to the fact that tempests and earth-

2. *Ib.*, p 76.

3. *Ib.*, p. 137.

quakes, obnoxious plants and animals, belong to the dominion of nature and are subject to its laws and orderliness no less than its more pleasing and constructive manifestations. From the scientific point of view, the existence of toadstools, cobras, and man-eating tigers is no less natural than that of strawberries, kittens, and babies. We now realize that the distinction between chaos and cosmos is not between sub-nature and nature, but between two manifestations of nature itself: nature that makes for human survival and salvation — we call it cosmos because it is penetrated by the purpose of the constructive life forces; and nature, as exemplified in tornadoes, cobras, and man-eating tigers, not so conducive to human survival and salvation — we call it “Tohu and Bohu” because it has not yet been “conquered by will and intelligence.”

This is meant to be taken seriously. Not only do the two forms of nature follow logically from the Reconstructionist concepts of chaos and cosmos; we find the idea so stated explicitly. Reconstructionism identifies “as divine the forces in the physical environment that make for physical survival and well being.”⁴ This is clear enough. Forces in the physical environment that do not make for man’s survival and well-being are not divine; they are not yet invaded by purpose; they are not of the cosmos, but of chaos. It is also emphasized that “the creative powers in the physical world” alone are the manifestations of godhood. Needless to say there are others too which are not creative and, therefore, not divine. But that which is not divine is not purposive, not directed toward a goal which is worthwhile — it is chaotic. Chaos too is nature, no less than cosmos. Chaos is the merciless order of casual connections, utterly indifferent to the outcome of its own processes; whereas cosmos is the condition of the natural order, after having been compelled to admit purpose and meaning. The one is blind, the other, guided nature. It is, of course, unlikely that naturalism could consider such a distinction anything but mere foolishness. To us it would seem to be the most bizarre product of an extremely fertile metaphysical imagination or — shall we perhaps say? — intuition.

The Problem Of Freedom

The most serious objection to the distinction between chaos and

4. *Ib.*, p. 269.

