Discourses of Doubt: The Place of Atheism, Scepticism and Infidelity in Nineteenth-Century North American Reform Jewish Thought

DOI:
10.15650/hebruniocollannu.88.2017.0203

Document Version
Final published version

Discourses of Doubt: The Place of Atheism, Skepticism, and Infidelity in Nineteenth-century North American Reform Jewish Thought

Daniel R. Langton
University of Manchester

The absence of scholarship that takes seriously the progressive Jewish response to atheism and skepticism is not easy to explain. Historical accounts tend to follow the view that Reform Judaism was a "response to modernity" in the sense that it was an attempt to integrate secular learning into Jewish life in general and/or to emulate the newly encountered Christian response, both in thought and practice, which was viewed as a model in this regard. Much of the scholarship on this period has focused on the political ambitions of assimilationist lay Jews and, with respect to secular learning, has tended to concentrate on biblical criticism, which certainly had a defining impact in Germany, and also in the United States and United Kingdom even if not initially. There has also been considerable interest in the theological concerns of the religious leaders and intellectual pioneers of Reform, but these concerns have tended to focus on inward-orientated debates about the status of the Law or on the weight of traditional rabbinic authority. Insofar as historians have noted engagement with atheism or skepticism, the Reformers' interest in disbelief has been conflated with a more general concern with the dangers of assimilation. That is, the significance of engagement with atheistic or skeptical philosophies has been understood to lie in this engagement's strategic utility in countering the threat to religious Jewish continuity. This article will consider the case of US Reform Judaism and its engagement with the prominent infidels and unbelievers Robert Ingersoll and Felix Adler. In doing so, it will also offer an overview of changing attitudes toward scientific naturalism and philosophical materialism within the US Reform movement more broadly, drawn from sermons and writings of such prominent nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century religious leaders as Isaac Mayer Wise, Kaufmann Kohler, Emil G. Hirsch, Joseph Krauskopf, Aaron Hahn, and J. Leonard Levy. Together, these individuals' discussions represent a rich discourse of doubt important for understanding the history of Reform Judaism. Among other things, this discourse helps explain a unique cluster of US Reform interests, including a tendency toward panentheism and a pronounced interest in modernist justifications of immortality.

Introduction

As a response to modernity, Reform Judaism in late nineteenth-century North America found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, there was enormous appetite for the kind of critical thought and rationalism that Reformers believed would free Judaism from the chains of irrelevant, irrational tradition. This was a tendency that was optimistic in nature and characterized by a profound faith in Progress. On the other hand, skeptical and materialistic currents in popular culture threatened to undermine religion in general and Judaism in particular. This was a tendency that generated some concern about the destructiveness and negativity of critical and skeptical approaches. Some of the leading intellectual lights of the Reform movement in the United States from the 1870s until the early 1920s addressed this concern in large part through their writings on the anti-religious claims of popular polemists and freethinkers such as Robert Ingersoll and Felix Adler, who were writing and orating from the late 1870s until around the turn of the century. Generally speaking, scholarship on the history of US Reform Judaism tends to brush over the subject of doubt, which is puzzling, since engagement with atheism and skepticism actually features quite frequently in the writings and sermons of Reform rabbis, both before and after the classical reforms of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885.[1] This article will survey the views of rabbis including Isaac Mayer Wise,[2] the founder of the Reform training college Hebrew Union Col-

1 The standard work on the history of Reform Judaism, Michael A. Meyer's *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Studies in Jewish History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), is typical of the literature in that its index includes only three references to "atheism" and one to "philosophical materialism," despite the fact that such terms were used frequently within the contemporary debates. Two articles that touch on the issues, at least in relation to evolutionary science, include Naomi W. Cohen, "The Challenges of Darwinism and Biblical Criticism to American Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 4, no. 2 (1984): 121–57, and Marc Swetlitz, "Responses of American Reform Rabbis to Evolutionary Theory, 1864–1888," in *The Interaction of Scientific and Jewish Cultures in Modern Times*, ed. Yakov M. Rabkin and Ira Robinson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 103–25.

2 Wise (1819–1900) was born in Bohemia and received a traditional education in Prague. He immigrated to the United States in 1846, where he became a congregational rabbi, eventually settling down in Cincinnati. Wise has been described as the father of Reform Judaism in the United States, and it is certainly the case that he was in the vanguard of synagogue reform, introducing, among other things, mixed seating, choral singing, and confirmation. In 1854 he founded and became editor of *The Israelite*, which became the leading organ for Reform Judaism; in 1857 he compiled the standard Reform prayer book, *Minhag America*; and, in 1875, he succeeded in his efforts to establish the Reform Jewish rabbinical training college, Hebrew Union College, in Cincinnati. Despite his enormous influence, Wise was very much a moderate Reformer, refusing to countenance the findings of biblical criticism and seeking always to reconcile the more radical and conservative wings of the emerging movement. Probably his most original

lege and of *The American Israelite*, Kaufmann Kohler,[3] the second president of HUC and the denomination's leading intellectual, Emil G. Hirsch, a professor of rabbinics at The University of Chicago and editor of *The Reform Advocate*,[4]

work was *The Cosmic God: A Fundamental Philosophy in Popular Lectures* (Cincinnati: Office American Israelite and Deborah, 1876), a theological approach to the alleged conflict between religion and science.

3 Kohler (1843–1926) was born in Bavaria and brought up in an Orthodox home, becoming a protégé of the champion of neo-Orthodoxy, Samson Raphael Hirsch. University studies at Munich and Berlin under the Jewish philologist and philosopher Hermann Steinthal and the Protestant biblical scholars and orientalists Hermann Strack and Franz Delitzsch, among others, ignited in Kohler an interest in historical approaches to Judaism, which he came to see as lacking in orthodoxy, until, despite himself, he was drawn to the leading light in German Reform Judaism, Abraham Geiger, who, like Hirsch, was based in Frankfurt. Because Kohler's biblical-critical doctoral thesis at Erlangen – which espoused an evolutionary conception of Judaism – was too liberal to allow him to lead a congregation in Germany, Geiger encouraged him to pursue an academic career (he went on to Leipzig to study Arabic and Persian), before assisting him in finding, in 1869, a position as a Reform rabbi in Detroit. In 1871 Kohler moved to Chicago, and then, in 1879, finally settled in New York. A frequent contributor to the Jewish press, he is credited with being the first US rabbi to publicly accept evolutionary theory. He married Johanna, daughter of the radical reformer David Einhorn. In 1903 he followed Isaac Mayer Wise as president of Hebrew Union College. Kohler's lifelong academic focus was Hellenistic Judaism and the history of the harmonization of ostensibly non-Jewish thought with Judaism. As the leading progressive Jewish theologian of his day, albeit one who preferred to stress historical continuity rather than rupture vis-à-vis Orthodoxy, Kohler believed that Judaism's survival depended upon full acceptance of modern historical and scientific knowledge, including evolutionary theory. His most significant publication was undoubtedly *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918 (German edition 1910), which included discussions of the relevance of science to religion; he also contributed many entries to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906).

4 Hirsch (1851–1923) was one of the most influential proponents of radical Reform Judaism in the States from the 1880s until the 1920s; in fact, he preferred the term "Reformed Judaism" as a way of signaling a complete break with the past. Born in Luxemburg, he was the son of a prominent Reform rabbi, and married the radical reformer David Einhorn's daughter Mathilda, becoming brother-in-law to Kohler in the process. Hirsch received a broad education at the University of Pennsylvania, at Leipzig, and at the Hochschule in Berlin, where he came into contact with Geiger, Lazarus, and Steinthal, and was a classmate of Felix Adler. In addition to his role as a congregational rabbi in Chicago, where he eventually settled, he established *The Reform Advocate* in 1891, which he edited until his death, and was Professor of Rabbinic Literature and Philosophy at the University of Chicago from 1892. Hirsch's liberal religious perspective was characterized by an optimism concerning social progress and the perfectibility of humankind, and by a lifelong interest in comparative religion. In Kantian fashion he regarded ethics rather than theology as primary to religion and was highly sympathetic to the contemporary Social Gospel movement that regarded religion as a tool to combat societal inequality. His theology was eclectic to the extent that it might be described as inconsistent; as one commentator observed, at different times Hirsch espoused radical humanism, personalistic theism, and pantheism. One of his most original publications was *Darwin and Darwinism* (Chicago: Occident, 1883), but he also wrote

Joseph Krauskopf, who led the largest Jewish congregation in the United States and who co-founded the Jewish Publication Society,[5] Aaron Hahn, who was closely aligned with the moderate views of his teacher Wise until he left the rabbinate and became more radical,[6] and the peace activist Joseph Leonard Levy, who was allegedly the highest paid "clergyman" of his day.[7] It represents

works such as *Some Modern Problems and Their Bearing on Judaism,* Reform Advocate Library (Chicago: Bloch & Newman, 1903), and contributed many entries to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906).

5 Krauskopf (1858–1923), who was born in Ostrowo, Prussian Posen, and immigrated to the United States in 1872, was a graduate of the first class of candidates for the rabbinate at Hebrew Union College in 1883, and was ordained by Isaac Mayer Wise. He received a doctoral degree, also from Hebrew Union College, in 1885. He became one of the most influential congregational rabbis of his day, co-founding in 1888 the inter-denominational Jewish Publication Society, serving two terms as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and eventually being offered the presidency of HUC, which he declined due to his commitments to labor and environmental issues and related work for the United States Department of Agriculture. Krauskopf was very much a radical; even among Reform Jews at that time he was, for example, unusually explicit about his hope for a reconciliation of Jews and Christians in a shared religion of the future. He was vice-president and chairman of the committee behind the radical Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and, as rabbi of Temple Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia (from 1887), he almost immediately initiated the Platform's reforms, including Sunday services. Throughout his life, Krauskopf was interested in the implications of modern science for religious thought. His key publication was *Evolution and Judaism*, The Layman's Series (Kansas City, MO: Berkowitz, 1887).

6 Hahn (1846–1932) received a yeshivah education in his native Bohemia and studied Hebraic and Oriental studies in Germany before establishing himself as a rabbi in the United States. He took up his first position in 1869 at the Orthodox Rodef Sholom synagogue in New York and moved to the Reform Tifereth Israel in Cleveland in 1874, where he gained a reputation as a radical and as an exciting speaker on both religious and secular/scientific matters. He completed a doctorate under Isaac Mayer Wise's supervision at HUC, and attended the reforming Pittsburgh conference in 1885. Later he went on to introduce a number of innovations: the reading of prayers in English and German as well as Hebrew, organ music, and, in 1888, Sunday morning lectures to supplement Saturday services. Hahn resigned, in 1892, in the face of his congregation's hostility to his uncompromising, heavy-handed style. Some local admirers set up the Sunday Lecture Society of Cleveland that year as an alternative public forum, which espoused an ethical culture ethos, but it was a short-lived affair and Hahn went on to have a successful career as a lawyer. His main publications included *Die Gottesbegriffe des Talmud und Sühar sowie der vorzüglichsten theosophischen Systeme* (The conception of God in the Talmud and *Zohar* and in the principles of theosophical systems) (Leipzig: W.F. Draper, 1869), *The Rational Judaism in Queries and Answers* (Cleveland, Ohio: Kultchar and Hartley, 1876), and *History of the Arguments for the Existence of God: Primary Source Edition* (Cincinnati: Bloch, 1885).

7 Levy (1865–1917), ordained in 1885, was a London-born graduate of the Orthodox Jews' College and of the universities of London and Bristol. After leading several congregations in Britain, he moved to the United States in 1889 to lead Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia (1883–1901) and Rodeph Shalom in Pittsburgh (1901–1917), and became a trustee of Hebrew Union College. He was a high-profile and dynamic congregational leader; for example, he arranged for President Taft to speak at Rodeph Shalom, where membership trebled under his rabbinate and where

an attempt to examine the tension surrounding skepticism that lies at the heart of the Reform Jewish project in the States, and to map out the different ways that its proponents sought to justify Jewish religion against popular voices of doubt and derision. There were at least four distinct causes of doubt that the Reformers identified and with which they engaged in their sermons, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and books. These included (1) the hypocrisy and moral failings of religious authorities and institutions, (2) the impact of biblical criticism, (3) the challenge of the scientific worldview, and (4) the problem of suffering.[8] Each of these featured in the very public anti-religious diatribes of Ingersoll and Adler, and the suggestion made here is that together they facilitated or led to the development of ideas and emphases that are uniquely characteristic of US Reform Judaism in this period and for which there is little or no evidence of Reform Jewish interest elsewhere or before; these ideas included a panentheistic theology that viewed nature as one aspect of the divine reality, and a modernist justification of the hope of immortality.

The leading unbeliever of the day was the lawyer and politician Col. Robert G. Ingersoll (1833–1899), whose anti-religious rhetoric packed town halls across the country and earned him the nickname "The Great Agnostic."[9] Collections of his popular speeches, closely followed and reported in the national press, show him to be eloquent, witty, irreverent, and fiercely condemnatory of religion and the damage it had caused humanity. Most of the Reform rabbis included in this survey dealt directly with this firebrand orator. Ingersoll's critiques of religion focused most heavily upon Christianity and dogmatic teachings of the Church,

much was made of the fact that he was one of the highest paid clergymen in the world. He was well-regarded as an orator, and his sermons, often preached on Sundays, were widely published. Levy had an internationalist, interfaith outlook (for example, he was prominent in the international peace movement) and an interest in science and eugenics. For example, he was a Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society and his sermons included titles such as "Reliance on Science" (1893), "Nature as Teacher" (1899), "Science in the Nineteenth Century" (1901), and "Race Improvement" (1914). He obtained a doctorate from Western University in 1902. His published books include *The Children's Service for Use in Religious Schools* (Pittsburg, PA: Dick Press, 1904), and *Nineteenth-Century Prophets* (Allegheny, PA: Callomon, 1905), as well as sixteen volumes of sermons.

8 Another cause, identified by Hahn but not discussed at any length by the other Reformers, is a personal inclination to wickedness. Aaron Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism." *Progress: Sunday Lectures before the Sunday Lecture Society* 4:4 (1894), 6.

9 For an overview of Ingersoll's career and his place within the secular tradition of American cultural life, see Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). For some discussion of his controversial role in North American (Christian) religious culture, especially with regard to biblical criticism and anti-supernaturalism, see David Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10, 28–31.

as well as upon inconsistencies in the Bible. For example, he tried to show, in "Heretics and Heresies" (1874), how inconsistent Christian dogma was, and how much it had changed over time as cultural attitudes shifted.[10] His paean of praise to one of the great infidels, the "Oration on Thomas Paine" (1876), was an attempt to demonstrate how indebted the country was for the progress brought about by this secular saint.[11] Also, his bestselling book, entitled *Some Mistakes of Moses* (1879), was a mercilessly sarcastic commentary on the pre-scientific claims of many Bible stories, as well as on clerical authority.[12]

In addition to "The Great Agnostic," Reform Jews also had to confront Felix Adler (1851–1933), a German Reform Jewish rabbi who, as professor of Hebrew at Cornell University and then professor of political and social ethics at Columbia, had repudiated his religious past and had, in 1876, instigated the Jewish Ethical Culture movement.[13] This new movement championed local societies, beginning in New York but spreading across the country, that sought to foster both practical and philosophical development of non-denominational, post-religious, ethical worldviews. It attracted young, disaffected Jews and "some of the worthiest members" of New York citizenry. Because of this influence Adler emerged as a highly public affront to the American rabbinate,[14] which led to a very public spat in the late 1870s with Kohler (among others), who worked hard to restrict Adler's influence upon his own congregation, and who publicly accused him of atheism and infidelity.[15] For present purposes, Adler's most relevant publications include "Atheism: A Lecture" (1879),[16] in which he formally broke with Judaism and sought to demonstrate the intellectual

10 Robert G. Ingersoll, "Heretics and Heresies" (New York: C.P. Farrell, 1874).

11 Ingersoll, "Oration on Thomas Paine" (New York: C.P. Farrell, 1876).

12 Ingersoll, *Some Mistakes of Moses* (Washington, DC: C.P. Farrell, 1879).

13 For a general overview of Adler's career and intellectual development, see Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979). Kraut notes that, by and large, Adler was "divorced" from American Jewish communal affairs from the 1890s onwards, although he was outspoken about antisemitism and Zionism – which did not end his longer-term influence (ibid., 185–86). For more recent assessments of his impact on North American Jewish religious life, see Tobias Brinkman, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 100–19, and Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 94, 98, 172–74.

14 Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism*, 174.

15 In various public letters Kohler took strong exception to the Sinai Literary Society's invitation to Adler to give a lecture at the Sinai temple in Chicago in March 1878, calling him an "infidel" and recommending the lecture to those "who have pledged allegiance to the banner of atheism." Brinkman, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago*, 107, 110.

16 Felix Adler, "Atheism: A Lecture" (New York: Cooperative Printers, 1879).

superiority of atheism over theism and pantheism, and "Creed and Deed" (1880),[17] in which he argued that religion too often focused upon dogma to the detriment of social action. In "The Need of a New Moral Movement in Religion" (1883),[18] he developed this idea with the suggestion that the biblical foundation for society's ethics had been fatally undermined by the findings of biblical criticism, so that new ethical societies, such as his own Ethical Culture Society, represented the only viable alternative. For Jews, Adler was even more of a threat than Ingersoll, since his critique of religion was, as often as not, a stinging critique specifically of Judaism, both Orthodox and Reform.

Undoubtedly, there was a very real concern among Reform Jewish thinkers about the corrosive effect of such popular, widespread attacks upon religion in general (Ingersoll) and Judaism in particular (Adler) in the United States.[19] An agnostic or atheistic worldview, in which science appeared as an alternative source of authority, was provoking considerable public interest and debate, illustrated by the enormous popularity of the lectures and writings of scientists and philosophers such as Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Jonathan Fiske. Of course, the situation was complicated by the fact that the Reformers themselves shared many of the views of these critics of religion, at least when it came to Orthodox practices and ways of reading traditional texts. So it is that we see them engaging fiercely in this discourse, attempting to make the case that the enemies of religion should not be allowed to lay claim to and monopolize modern critical thought or science, and to counter the impression that all religious denominations should be regarded as objects of derision or pity. Let us take the different causes of doubt and skepticism as they identified them, and the responses they offered, one by one.

1: Moral Failings of Religious Institutions

First, we will investigate the idea that the hypocrisy and moral failings of religious authorities and institutions increased skepticism. This was Ingersoll's

17 Adler, *Creed and Deed: A Series of Lectures* (New York: Putnam, 1880).

18 Adler, "The Need of a New Moral Movement in Religion" (New York: Society of Ethical Culture for New York, 1883).

19 Eleff argues that such fear was entirely justified. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, "the contest for American Judaism" reached a resolution with separate religious and lay realms of authority. The "strong tides of anti-clericalism that had already washed over the Jewish communities in the United States" meant that Kohler and other rabbis no longer trusted laypeople who appeared too easily influenced by skeptical lay authorities like Adler. In no small part due to "Adler's anticlerical efforts," the Jewish community had ceased to believe that the rabbinate should be the sole proprietor of the Jewish legacy. Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism*, 198.

main charge against the Christian Church. In his *Some Mistakes of Moses* (1879) he presented a striking vision of the clash between freethought and religion – a Manichean struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Contemporary clergy did not emerge unscathed from this analysis. As Ingersoll saw it, the official representatives of religion were all too often irrationally hostile to science and committed to biblical literalism, and the teaching of their ignorant, authoritarian ways to the young could only be viewed as a form of abuse. According to Ingersoll,

> It is part of [the clergy's] business to malign and vilify the Voltaires, Humes, Paines… Darwins, [and] Spencers.… They are, for the most part, engaged in poisoning the minds of the young, prejudicing children against science, teaching the astronomy and geology of the Bible, and inducing all to desert the sublime standard of reason.[20]

More pointedly, Adler was critical of Reform Judaism's historical failure to offer a viable alternative to tradition and thereby address the failings of Jewish institutional religion. In assessments of the Reform movement, which he published in 1877 and again in 1885, he admitted that the Reformers had correctly recognized the evolutionary nature of Jewish religion down through history and had been right to discard the Law and its institutions,[21] but he was dismissive of what he regarded as its failure to replace doctrine with moral law, to shift from rabbinic learning to moral philosophy, to abandon unimportant theological differences with other liberal religious groups, and to repudiate the racially arrogant claim of Chosenness.[22] In essence, Adler's critique of Reform Judaism was that it was unable to cast off the final chains of its history and abandon the remaining institutional vestiges of the tribal religion of Judaism. Only if it did so could it then seek to establish a moral and institutional alternative, focused exclusively on a modern vision of social justice in the here and now. As he observed of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which defined for a generation the characteristics of Reform Judaism in the United States:

> I do not question the good work performed by the Reformed Jews. But I emphasise the fact that their work has been in a negative direction… If we contemplate the history of Reformed Judaism during the last 50 years, we perceive the process of disintegration like that in the Liberal Christian churches… Reformed Judaism has retained the idea, the abstract idea, the spirit, as they say of the Bible, the ghost, as one might be tempted to say,

20 Ingersoll, *Some Mistakes of Moses*, 22–23.

21 Felix Adler, "Reformed Judaism, Part 2," *The North American Review* 125 (1877): 345–46.

22 Adler, *Reformed Judaism* (New York: Lehmaier & Brother, 1885), 13.

> of the old religion, but it has not been able to give a new embodiment to the Jewish idea, to clothe it anew in flesh and blood… There are heard in the pulpits large phrases concerning progress and humanity, but they fail to bear visible fruit…[23]

As we shall see, while the Reformers initially expressed their annoyance at such charges with *ad hominem* attacks on their critics, there was a shift in response over time such that the failures of institutional religion as alleged by Ingersoll and Adler came to be regarded as the most serious of all the causes of unbelief.

Kaufmann Kohler, writing in 1874, was acutely aware of the widespread contemporary skepticism toward religion in general and, while he rejected the idea that liberal Judaism could be so criticized, he freely admitted that there was indeed a real danger facing "the darker, formal and dogmatic religion, the blind faith in the letter and authority,"[24] which had built "barricades against the progress of free investigation and which has declared war on science and culture."[25] Kohler denounced the tendency of conservative Christian authorities to assert:

> "You must take the Bible and all which the Church teaches, and has declared as the infallible word of God, or you are unbelievers." Thus all thinkers are driven out of the Church; out of the religious community. Thus it is that either faith or science becomes the shibboleth of mental life.[26]

He was similarly condemnatory of Orthodox Jewish authoritarianism.[27] But, while he was prepared to admit this criticism of traditional Judaism as a religious Jew himself, the same criticism made by a non-believer such as Adler was very hard to bear. Kohler gave a sermon explicitly directed at Adler entitled "The Fallacies of Agnosticism" (1888). As reported in the press, he acknowledged Adler's well-known social ethic programmes, but he was keen to demonstrate that such a practical moral worldview was actually derived from a Jewish worldview rather than an agnostic one, pointing out that Adler "attacks Judaism, calling it a religion of the pot and kettle" despite the fact that he came to his intellectual position as a Jew.[28] He went on,

---

23 Ibid., 10,12.

24 Kaufmann Kohler, "Science and Religion," *The Jewish Times*, February 20, 1874, 820–21.

25 Ibid., 821.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Kohler readily accepted that "He [Adler] gained admiration from Jew and Gentile for his philanthropic work. He has indisputable claim upon us for having solved some of the social problems." "The Fallacies of Agnosticism," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1888, 5.

> [N]ot only was he [Adler] raised in it [Judaism], not only did he draw his best teaching from it, not only did his venerable father preach it for a lifetime, but he himself, in his first lecture, delivered as a Jew, held out as a principle of Judaism the words which became the cornerstone of his society, "Deed, not Creed."[29]

According to Kohler, Adler called for his fellow human beings to help one another no longer for the sake of God, but for the sake of an ideal. But he failed to present an enduring ideal on which to base his call, for as every Reform Jew knew, "The agnostic ideals change, so do ours, and so does mankind change its ideals in every age."[30] Likewise, for Isaac Mayer Wise, the Church's unreasonable dogmatic teachings had certainly played an important role in inculcating widespread disbelief. As he explained in 1885,

> Infidelity is a reaction consequent upon imposing too much upon the people by teachers of religion. They want us to believe too much, and this leads many to believe nothing… The theology which demands us to believe too much, fails improving anything in its favor, and lands either in the *credo quia absurdum* or in agnosticism, or downright atheism, because it has *eo ipso* broken with reason and sound commonsense.[31]

But Wise was also irked by Adler's claim to the moral high ground, quipping that he promised no better solution than any other religious leader when he preached: "There is no God, and Felix Adler is His prophet."[32]

---

29 Ibid.

30 According to Kohler, Adler's agnosticism was not as modest and reasonable as it appeared ("If agnosticism were simply a humble admission of our limited knowledge we all should be agnostics"). Rather than admit the reality of "a Supreme Power behind all phenomena of life from which matter and mind proceed," Kohler wrote, it hid behind language such as "the unknowable" so as "to give every atheist and materialist, nay, every fool, standing room in its Academy" (ibid.).

31 Isaac Mayer Wise, "Lectures for Infidels No. 1," *The American Israelite*, October 30, 1885, 4–5, and "Lectures for Infidels No. 5: The God of Intelligent People (Part 2)," *The American Israelite*, December 4, 1885, 6–7. As far back as 1861 Wise had argued that "The doctrine of the trinity and incarnation of the Deity is the veritable mother of Atheism. The history of Israel shows no atheists, and the few we have now, if any we have, are merely fashionable atheists who learned it in Christian society, especially of priests. As long as philosophy was in its infancy and limited to but a few apostles, and the Church was almighty, people believed the immaculate conception of Jesus from the Holy Ghost, and submitted to the rest of inexplicable mysteries. But when the multitude began to think for itself – and to think means to solve mysteries – this doctrine begat atheism, not knowing another than the Trinitarian God in whom they could not believe, they naturally turned atheists." "Mark the Consequences," *The Israelite*, March 8, 1861, americanjewisharchives.org/wise/attachment/5443/sinaiToCincinnati_wilansky.pdf

32 Wise, "Some Mistakes about Moses. Final lecture 'Sources of Atheism,'" (1878), cited in Dena Wilansky, *Sinai to Cincinnati: Lay Views on the Writings of Isaac M. Wise* (New York: Renaissance Book Company, 1937), 139.

More generally, however, there was widespread acknowledgement that the charge of moral hypocrisy against religious institutions was all too often justified. For several of our thinkers, there was no embarrassment in aligning themselves explicitly with Adler and Ingersoll in this regard. Joseph Krauskopf suggested in 1887 that if religion was properly defined to mean "the seeking after the highest happiness by means of right living and right doing and right-thinking" then the term "infidel" would be "more sparingly applied" to those like Ingersoll and Adler who labelled themselves, or were labelled by others, as unbelievers.[33] In other words, Krauskopf argued that Ingersoll and Adler's criticisms of the abuses of religious authority and institutions demonstrated that they were not atheists, but rather, in a very real sense, that they were religious, since they were engaged in the proper business of authentic religion, that is, the propagation and maintenance of moral thought and practice of the highest standard. After all, while the evils and abuses of religious institutions were very real, the same could be said of many other institutions – legal, governmental, and educational, for example – and the sane response, he suggested, was not to advocate their abolition but rather to recognise abuses and reform them.[34]

Writing in 1894, Hahn certainly recognized that one cause of skepticism had been the hypocrisy of the Church. As he saw it,

> The great skeptics [including Voltaire and Thomas Paine] that antagonised the churches did not do it with the intention to undermine real religion, morality and virtue, but they did it because they hated fanaticism, intolerance, superstition and hypocrisy.[35]

In his view, Ingersoll was simply the latest in a long line of such critics of institutional religious abuse. While Hahn could not agree with all his teachings ("in his lectures one could find material enough for a lecture on the mistakes of Ingersoll, the same way as he found material in the Bible for a lecture on *Some Mistakes of Moses*"), nevertheless he offered effusive praise of Ingersoll's important role in speaking on behalf of all those who silently questioned the traditional authority and teachings of the Church.[36] At the same time, Hahn was likely thinking of Orthodox Judaism when he wrote:

> I gladly admit that there are very few men in this country, if any, who have done as much as he did for the progress of the intellectual liberty

33 Joseph Krauskopf, "Who Is the Infidel?" (Sunday Lecture, October 30, 1887), newspaper clipping (n.d., no source), MS 181.73, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

34 Ibid.

35 Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism," 5.

36 Ibid., 6.

> of the American people. Robert G. Ingersoll has a mission. The orthodox churches had never been open to arguments; and to argue with them is useless. Against such orthodox believers Ingersoll uses the most efficacious weapons: obloquy, wit, irony, and ridicule; and he disarms them so that they cannot help to laugh at their own follies. No man in America has cleared more successfully the backwoods of orthodoxy and narrow-mindedness and superstition than Ingersoll did; and, in order to accomplish that, he had, like a pioneer, to use the hatchet of radicalism. There are millions of people in the country who do not believe in the dogmas [of institutional religions] but they do not have the courage to express their doubts publicly; but Ingersoll had the courage, and he did it for them. Robert Ingersoll preaches the gospel of cheerfulness, of liberty, intelligence, of justice and of good living. Where is the sensible man who can find anything wrong in these five aims?[37]

Leonard Levy likewise held "The Great Agnostic" in high regard. As he commented in 1898,

> The inconsistency between life and belief has often been lamented in the pulpit. He [Ingersoll] has been bold enough to lay bare the hollowness [and hypocrisy] of God-worshippers… With wit and humor, with rare eloquence and brilliant rhetoric and biting satire, he has ridiculed the incongruity of the creeds and dogmas of the religions and the acts and deeds and lives of their followers… Because he has laid open the absurdities of the[se] practical atheist[s], he has been vilified as an atheist, denounced as an infidel, abused as an unbeliever, branded as a bad man… It is my opinion that skepticism or agnosticism or Ingersollism has not waged war on pure religion, but on its counterfeit. I, therefore, cheerfully admit that Ingersollism has done thus much good, and also that those who have been prescribed as heretics, agnostics, skeptics, have often been better men and women than those believers in religion…[38]

Although in 1897 Emil Hirsch had been entirely unimpressed by Ingersoll for inculcating anti-clericalism[39] and for propagating the old-fashioned idea

37 Ibid.

38 J. Leonard Levy, "What Good Has Ingersollism Done?" *Sunday Lectures: Eleventh Series*, ed. Joseph Krauskopf and J. Leonard Levy (Philadelphia: Oscar Klonower, 1898), 3–5.

39 For example, Hirsch wrote: "Kill, therefore the priests! Expose the craftiness of the preachers and humanity will be saved from a yoke more galling than which no despot ever superimposed. That was the cry of the malevolent, malicious rationalists 30 years ago. It is the cry of Mr. Ingersoll today. As for making money, I think Mr. Ingersoll succeeds much better in that art than even the pontiff situated on the throne of St Peter, and if one of the preachers should ever lose his job

that religion and science could not be reconciled,[40] he had also been prepared to identify with the kind of condemnation of religious obscurantism and abuse levied by both Adler and Ingersoll, which he presented as a kind of pious skepticism. In part this reflects his own well-documented programme of practical social justice, under which influence he approached atheism and agnosticism in ethical terms:

> No one is an agnostic and no one is an atheist, except he have neither pity for the weak nor charity for the erring; except you have no mercy for those who need its soothing balm.[41]

Hirsch came to agree with Adler about the need for sensitivity toward the doubt of those who suffer in the real world, in the face of insensitive assertions made by some proponents of religion. It has been suggested that Adler may even have influenced Hirsch's social justice concerns as expressed in the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885.[42] Certainly, preaching in 1901, he explicitly agreed with Adler's suspicion of the arrogance and the insensitive assertions of many religious people, commenting "They do not doubt whose religion is childish, they do not doubt whose religious is preliminary, they do not doubt who know not enough to understand what the social economy and the ethical import of religion be."[43] And, a few years later, he readily admitted the negative role played by the arrogant presumptions of the religious establishment, which encouraged agnosticism as a reaction, although he argued that a similar kind of dogmatism could also be found among atheistic materialists.[44]

---

and have to work for his bread and butter, if at all gifted with tongue and mind, he could double the largest salary that any Jewish or Christian congregation pays by imitating Mr. Ingersoll and repeating the stalest and the most untrue attacks against religion. . . . It is today not the priest or the preacher that may be charged justly with mercenary motives. It is the malevolent, malicious rationalist who knows how to make his nonsense fill his pocketbook." Emil G. Hirsch, "The Science of Comparative Religion, Part Two (1897)," in *The Jewish Preacher*, ed. Emil Hirsch (Naples, FL: Collage Books Inc, 2003), 172.

40 For example, Hirsch wrote: "Perhaps you are a little curious to know what that science is doing, for it seems that science and religion cannot be yoked together. You heard it, and perhaps 30 years ago, most of you, and if there be a few younger men here who were not able to hear 30 years ago of it, they have learned it yesterday from Mr. Ingersoll, and such men as he, that science excludes religion – that where knowledge appears, faith takes its flight. That there is absolutely no possibility of reconciling one with the other; that where they have been yoked together, science suffered and religion did not profit." "The Science of Comparative Religion, Part One (1897)," in *The Jewish Preacher*, ed. Emil Hirsch (Naples, FL: Collage Books Inc, 2003), 155.

41 "Old Age," *The Reform Advocate* (1893), 244.

42 Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*, 181.

43 Hirsch, "He Who Knows Most Doubts Most (1901)," in *The Jewish Preacher*, ed. Emil Hirsch (Naples, FL: Collage Books Inc, 2003), 52.

44 "[T]he agnostic position makes a reaction against the dogmatism of both the Church and of

It is not much of a surprise that these Reformers were quick to agree with Ingersoll and Adler's assessment of religion when they condemned the dogmatic or irrational teachings of Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, or literalist readings of Bible. It is interesting, however, that, over time, in these debates about the nature of unbelief, the responses of Reformers increasingly sought to present their own movement as the legitimate institutional expression of Jewish doubt. The basis for this was a belief, shared with Ingersoll and Adler, that skepticism was the engine of intellectual and moral progress. Throughout his long career, Ingersoll had argued passionately about the positive role that freethought had played in the history of progress within wider society. His writings were peppered with comments like "Without heresy there could have been no progress," and "The doubter, the investigator, the Infidel, have been the saviours of liberty."[45] This only made it all the more annoying for Ingersoll that

> we [unbelievers] are told by the Church that we have accomplished nothing; that we are simply destroyers; that we tear down without building again. Is it nothing to free the mind? Is it nothing to civilize mankind?[46]

Likewise, Adler was convinced that humankind should move beyond religion in order to progress and improve the world. Assuming a shared skepticism of religious dogma, he observed in 1883: "I am sure it is not too much to say that the fundamental doctrines of the old religion no longer receive the cordial assent of a very large number of the intellectual class."[47] His Ethical Culture movement was in principle agnostic and encouraged dogma-free ethics and children's education. In contrast to those who viewed atheism and agnosticism as requiring a radically pessimistic worldview, Adler argued that his non-religious movement promised genuine ethical progress and thus a hopeful, purposeful future.[48] Some Reformers, despite reservations they had about many of Ingersoll and Adler's charges, were perfectly aligned with this idea

---

atheistic materialism. Each presumed to possess ultimate knowledge. A protest against the arrogant gnosis of these, Agnosticism represents a wholesome phase of modern thought. It is expressive of the recognized need of modesty and a higher degree of reverence. The dogmatism of the Church was neither modest nor reverent; and these, its failings, marred also the attitude of its antipode, insistent materialism." *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isadore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901–1906), s.v. "Agnosticism."

45 Ingersoll, "Oration on Thomas Paine," 4, 26.

46 Ibid., 28.

47 Adler, "The Need of a New Moral Movement in Religion," 4. These fundamental doctrines were identified as: the infallible authority of the Scriptures; the personal immortality of the soul; the personal existence of Deity.

48 Adler wrote: "[T]he purpose of an ethical movement is that out of it may spring an ethical belief with regard to the world, a moral optimism. I believe that the universe is making for righteousness, that there is a good tendency in things. Such a belief we need" (ibid., 19).

of the non-believer driving forward important intellectual and social change. The claim that anti-religious thought, heresy, infidelity, and atheism were the direct causes of moral progress must, however, have startled many a member of their congregations.

Not long after he had stepped down from the rabbinate, Aaron Hahn published a number of pamphlets, such as "The Philosophy of Skepticism" and "The Mission of Skeptics," which discussed the benefits and pitfalls of the phenomenon.[49] In these, Hahn suggested that skepticism was necessary to challenge religious tradition more generally. Skepticism, despite misunderstandings to the contrary, was pragmatic. As he saw it,

> In every age there lived men who were denounced as skeptics, and who were treated as if they had been the enemies of everything that is good, noble, true and right; often they were treated as if they had been criminals.... The cause of their skepticism was their progressive tendency – the tendency to reform evils, to correct mistakes and to elevate the human race.[50]

Hahn argued that the modern world was defined by skepticism and that, despite the concerns of some religious observers, this was actually a very good thing. It arose whenever a society became corrupted or atrophied in its beliefs. He noted that

> It seems really as if skepticism were in the air. A great many people rejoice at it, and consider it a very good sign of the progress of the intellectual liberty of the human race; but others denounce it as an evil that leads [some] to uproot religion and to undermine society. Some people look upon skepticism as upon a sin, and whenever something like a skeptical thought occurs to their minds, they try by means of prayer to suppress it. Skepticism may be sometimes erroneous, but it can be no sin. Wherever it arises there is something wrong in the conditions of the creeds and society that requires a removal, a reform and the purification of the atmosphere... Let us not be afraid of skepticism, rather let us make wise use of it.[51]

---

49 For Hahn, skepticism arose in consequence of (1) the progress of philosophy and science. But it was also the result of (2) terrible episodes in society and shocking accidents in nature, and (3) of the hypocrisy and abuses of the churches. Nor should one forget that some forms of skepticism were the simply the accompaniment of the failure of morality, i.e., (4) wickedness, wrongs, and criminality. Hahn's analysis led him to suggest the need for tailored responses to address each of these factors and to defend Jewish religion. Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism."

50 Aaron Hahn, "The Mission of Skeptics." *Progress: Sunday Lectures before the Sunday Lecture Society* 4:10 (1894), 1.

51 Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism," 1, 7.

Furthermore, just as he would later seek to show that scientists did not teach atheism, so now Hahn sought to show that many so-called skeptics were not without faith and that they lived according to a profound optimism and belief in progress and reform.

> People were often told that skeptics have no faith. Let me say that skeptics usually have great and the strongest faith. They have faith in themselves that they are able to suffer and to fight for their convictions; they have faith in human nature that it is capable of great progress; they have faith in their ideas and principles that they will triumph over all hindrances and opposition; they have faith in the future that it will be more propitious to their work and undertaking than the present. Without faith of that kind skeptics would never have been able to accomplish what they did.[52]

Hahn, who had shifted from a moderate Reform stance to a much more radical position by this stage, went on to say that the future religion, inspired by the Bible and focused on humanity, would be dependent upon religion's ability to reform itself in relation to its beliefs and its impact on society – and that skepticism and heresy were vital to this process. He concluded: "Far from condemning these men, let us read and study their works; they prepare for that great day when the only religion will be that of humanity… and the only redeemers will be Justice, Love and Truth."[53]

This positive appreciation of the contribution of skeptics to religious progress was shared by others, including Hirsch, who viewed the label "atheist" as one of honor.[54] Levy was also prepared to say publicly that skepticism was a most effective engine of positive change, explaining that "doubters" featured as "the parents of most progressive movements" in science, in political history, in American history, and in religious history.[55] It is with Levy, in pamphlets

52 "The Mission of Skeptics," 1.

53 Ibid., 7.

54 By 1906, Hirsch was suggesting that "The word atheism has had a wonderfully instructive history. The term has always found lips ready to syllable it when the world was about to move onward… The best of the race has been branded as atheists, for an atheist is always deemed he who refuses to bend his knee before the fetish, be it made of stone or thought, at the altar at which thoughtless or selfish men prostrate and prostitute themselves. Hirsch, "A Message from Plato's Apology (May 1906)," in *The Jewish Preacher*, 71.

55 "Name a reformer and you will name a doubter! Name a progressive teacher and you will name a doubter! Name the leaders of men whose busts adorn the niches of the Temple of Genius and you will name doubters… We misunderstand the whole story of human progress if we imagine that doubt means a denial of facts. Doubters though we may be, it is not the facts of the universe that we question. We doubt their interpretation. All such doubt is full of faith.…" J. Leonard Levy, "The First Doubt" *Sunday Lectures: Twelfth Series*, ed. Joseph Krauskopf and J. Leonard Levy (Philadelphia: Oscar Klonower, 1898), 2–4.

such as "The First Doubt" (1898), "What Good Has Ingersoll Done?" (1898), and "Atheism and Anarchism" (1901), that we hear articulated most clearly and for the first time what was implicit in much of what had been said before: that doubt was the underlying principle of the Reform Jewish movement itself. As he put it,

> In this same spirit of intelligent and reverent doubt… did the Reform movement begin among the Jews of Germany. The same cause was its parent in America… It is customary to attribute the Reform movement to immature thought, the inexperience of youth, the want of well-considered information… Yet [the founding fathers of Reform] were reverent doubters… [and] were deniers of much that millions cherish as an integral part of our religion. The progressive spirit… is due, to a considerable extent, to reverent and intelligent doubt…[56]

The chief representatives of Reform thus not only tended to acknowledge Ingersoll's and Adler's criticisms of hypocritical, abusive, and irrelevant religious authority, but some, like Hahn, Hirsch, and Levy went so far as to suggest that it was precisely the hostile criticism of unbelievers that had historically brought about social and religious reform, and even that the establishment of Reform Judaism could be attributed to the same spirit of productive doubt, which continued to drive it forward. The skepticism toward religious authority in general was in this way transformed by the Reformers into an optimistic and progressive vision of the future. While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of such claims, there was also a certain strategic value in aligning Reform Judaism with a powerful and popular critical discourse about religion more generally, so as to repel charges of particular institutional failings of the Reform synagogue.

2: Biblical Criticism and Unreasonable Tradition

Second, biblical criticism also played a role in encouraging atheism. While Adler tended to be slightly more tactful in his observations about the shortcomings of Scripture and the Law, Ingersoll's condemnation of many ideas and stories in the Bible was damning. Illustrative of his tone is the following passage from *Some Mistakes of Moses* (1879), which sets out various implications of a biblical-critical approach to the Bible that assumes human authorship.

56 Levy went on to ask the rhetorical question as to whether Reformers doubted the existence of God, or the hereafter, or the Bible, or the value of worship, or the sense of justice in the world, in each instance maintaining that the answer was that Reformers did indeed believe in such conceptions, but they doubted traditional or primitive interpretations of such conceptions. (ibid., 4–6).

> If the Pentateuch is inspired, the civilisation of our day is a mistake and crime. Let us admit what we know to be true: that Moses was mistaken about a thousand things… That the story of creation is not true; that the Garden of Eden is a mess… That Lot's wife was not changed into chloride of sodium… That God did not go into partnership with Hornets… That if he objected to the dwarfs, people with flat noses and too many fingers, he ought not to have created such folks… That he never met Moses in a hotel and tried to kill him… That killing a dove over running water will not make its blood medicine; that God's demand of love knows nothing of the human heart… That one who destroys children on account of the sins of their fathers is a monster… That all the ignorant, infamous, heartless, hideous things recorded in the "inspired" Pentateuch are not the words of God, but simply "Some Mistakes of Moses."[57]

Ingersoll's influence here should not be underestimated. As the preeminent freethinker in America during the late 1870s and early 1880s he was, as one historian has put it, the individual "most responsible for popularizing the findings of biblical criticism in the United States," providing "support and encouragement to secular-minded religionists and unconventional Christians" alike.[58]

Historically speaking, there had long been an interest in critical approaches to the Bible among Reformers. The movement as it emerged in Germany and spread throughout Europe and the United States had embraced the prioritization of human reason and autonomy that had emerged with the eighteenth-century Haskalah, together with the historicist view of the Jewish past that characterized the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – including its discovery that the traditions and sacred texts of the Jewish religion were developments brought about by mundane historical-cultural forces. The Bible itself had come to be seen as encapsulating a variety of distinct, often contradictory, stages in Jewish history, thought, and ethics, rather than as the integrated, unified body of religious revelation that was the foundation of Orthodox thought. Even if inspired by God, the Reformers accepted that the Law had been mediated by flawed human agents. This was true even of the earlier generation of Reform leaders in the United States, such as Wise, Isador Kalisch (1816–1886),[59] and the younger Kohler, who regarded higher biblical

57 Ingersoll, *Some Mistakes of Moses*, 264–70.

58 Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 14, 30. Burns emphasizes that Ingersoll was "an autodidact" who was especially dependent upon the biblical-critical works of Ernst Renan, which were regarded as a landmark in the history of rational thought for helping to "destroy the fictions of faith" and "rescue man from the prison of superstition" wherein the human race had been confined since biblical times.

59 The Prussian-born Kalisch was educated in Berlin, Breslau, and Prague, and arrived in the

criticism as potentially dangerous to faith. For proponents of Classic Reform Judaism, following the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, biblical criticism was central to the justification of its institutional existence. Modern biblical scholarship with its concerns for the identification of multiple authors, contextual history, and linguistic mastery of the sources, was viewed as a tool through which one might uncover the ethical principles that represented the authentic understanding or essence of Judaism. One might have expected these early Reformers, therefore, when responding to contemporary skeptics' attacks upon the pre-scientific stories and assumptions of the Bible, to have focused upon its ethical teachings. And, to an extent, they did. But much more central to their responses was an attempt to move Reform Judaism out of the line of fire by distancing it from the sort of naïve readings of the Scriptures that the skeptics so delighted in ridiculing. And critical to all the thinkers considered here, whether committed to higher biblical criticism or not, was a programme of de-anthropomorphism.[60] As we shall see, this concern helps explain and prepare the ground for North American Reform Judaism's particular interest in and its tendency toward panentheism – the conception of the Divine as interpenetrating all of nature but also extending beyond it.

In 1879 Isaac Mayer Wise gave a series of lectures in response to Ingersoll's published lecture series on *Some Mistakes of Moses*, entitled "Some Mistakes *about* Moses," which was explicitly designed to counter "materialism, atheism, and other isms."[61] Later that year, in a published collection of responses from learned churchmen and scholars, he went on to accuse Ingersoll of philosophical ineptitude in complaining, for example, that he could not imagine the existence of God as described in the Bible: "The God of Moses is too great for Mr Ingersoll; he only deals in gods which can be imagined."[62] Wise claimed that he did not fear a detrimental effect upon synagogue or church pews as a result of Ingersoll's antics; rather, he dismissed him as an "eloquent humorist," saying that "there is no moral force in his burlesque" since "he lacks the

United States in 1849. He became a congregational rabbi in Cleveland, among other places, and joined the Reform movement, working closely with Wise on *Minhag America* (1855).

60 Kraut has suggested that, with the exception of Kohler and Hirsch, who alone could match his knowledge of modern scholarship, Reform rabbis refrained from repudiating Adler over intellectual challenges to Judaism, especially those grounded in biblical criticism. But a concern to defend against charges of anthropomorphism in the Bible, which Adler and Ingersoll derived from biblical-critical scholarship and which represented their primary charge against the scriptural tradition, is actually quite common among Reformers. Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*, 152.

61 As reported in Wilansky, *Sinai to Cincinnati: Lay Views on the Writings of Isaac M. Wise*, 139.

62 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Jewish Rabbi's Reply," in *Mistakes of Ingersoll*, ed. J.B. McClure (Chicago: Rhodes & McClure, 1879), 55.

research, the erudition, the systematical learning, and the moral backbone" of previous critics of the Scriptures such as Jefferson, Voltaire, or Feuerbach.[63] Furthermore, he argued that Ingersoll "ridicules Bible stories, but that concerns [biblical] literalists only, not us," and that the lawyer's unoriginal criticism of the Bible left the Mosaic Law and theology untouched, so that it was of little concern to liberal religion.[64] Some years later, in a series of sermons entitled "Lectures for Infidels," given in 1885–1886, Wise returned to the subject with a more thoughtful response, and suggested that a failure to recognize the dangers of childish or primitive conceptions of Deity could lead to atheism, precisely because such ideas were unacceptable to an enlightened mind. One problem was the multiplicity of, and discrepancies between, revelations, whether from the Bible or elsewhere. As he explained,

> The uncertainty in the different nations' various religions is evident, especially if we consider that the witnesses on which they depend, the documents which they possess, are open to criticism, and the lessons which they contain, although agreeing in many instances, are contradictory on many salient points. This is the main ground for infidelity, especially with persons who have been taught and trained to believe in this or that system of supposed revelation without any reason whatever except that the witnesses have said so-and-so. When those persons begin to doubt the reality or veracity of those witnesses, their religious faith is shaken to its foundation . . . and [they] roll down the inclined plane, down, down, to rank atheism and gross materialism. The reasoner has the power to stop where reason commands a pause; the believer on account of the witnesses, once on the downgrade, rolls to the very bottom with nothing to stop him. This appears to be the cause of the prevailing agnosticism, atheism, materialism . . . egotism and moral perversion.[65]

Another problem to confront was the historical multiplicity of gods, usually anthropomorphized and embodied, against which any sensible person would rebel. Over time, the Jewish God fared better than other gods, but arguments against the other gods' existence, however warranted, had had a corrosive effect on belief:

> This [Jewish] idea of God is infinite, and hence indefinable; imagination cannot embody it; hence it cannot be represented to or through the senses

63 Ibid., 56.

64 Ibid., 56–57.

65 "Lectures for Infidels No.8: Revelation and the Right of Reason Controlling It," *The American Israelite*, December, 25, 1885, 4. This was from a series that ran from October 16, 1885 until April 16, 1886.

> by any image or similitude. Still, man attempted sensual representation of super sensual being [in the form of idols representing aspects of nature] … And so the one God was divided in many, and each of the latter became *a* God, [and] was easily overcome and demonstrated out of existence. This is the main cause of atheism.[66]

The solution, Wise insisted, was a liberal Jewish religion wherein reason held sway over revelational accounts of the Divine, which were so often presented in an anthropomorphic way.[67] In fact, he went further still to suggest that the authentic Jewish position led to a pantheistic position with regard to God's nature, an idea to which we will return.[68]

Among the US Reformers, probably the most radical proponent of biblical criticism was Joseph Krauskopf. His book-length collection of sermons entitled *Evolution and Judaism* (1887) had been written to counter "some of that skepticism which is engendered by poorly understood science," but he had been just as concerned to correct problematic religious convictions that were the result of overly-simplistic readings of the Bible.[69] In chapters on "The Bible and Evolution" and "Creation and the Bible" he discussed the views of such agnostics as Huxley and Spencer, and set out the need to recognize that "The Bible is not an inspired volume, nor a revealed book, nay, it is not even an original book; its opening narratives are the narratives of other and older Bibles…"[70] For him, any conflict between the Bible and modern science was to be resolved in favor of science, partly because his reverence for the Bible's moral instruction meant that he was not prepared for it to become the subject of ridicule. It was therefore essential to acknowledge that "We [moderns] differ from [the views of the Bible] in some of its scientific theories, because morals, not science, is its legitimate sphere… The latter can not stand the test of the modern scientific criterion of truth."[71] This view had important implications for Jewish theology. Against the criticisms of the skeptics, Krauskopf argued that

66 "Lectures for Infidels No.4: The God of Intelligent People (Part 1)," *The American Israelite*, November 20, 1885, 4.

67 "Lectures for Infidels No.8: Revelation and the Right of Reason Controlling It," 4–5.

68 Wise claimed that "Jewish theology is identical with pantheism. Jewish theology excludes from the Deity every idea of body and corporeality, and yet maintains that he is PAN, the "all," which certainly includes the bodies. Jewish theology maintains that God, who is the "All," or "all in all," is all-conscious, omniscient, the life, wisdom and goodness of the universe… Jewish theology maintains not that spirit is nothing, hence it maintains that spirit, and so also God, is substantially something, and yet it is not the bodily or corporeal matter." "Lectures for Infidels No. 20: Closing Lecture," *The American Israelite*, April 16, 1886, 5.

69 Joseph Krauskopf, *Evolution and Judaism*, preface.

70 Ibid., 7.

71 Ibid., 16–17.

a scientifically-informed Jew must be "opposed to the anthropomorphic God" and admit "deficiencies and inaccuracies in the Bible."[72] In response to those traditionalists who labelled him an enemy of Judaism and a pronounced atheist for "poisoning the minds of youth" by acknowledging scientific inaccuracies in the Bible, he argued that in fact *they* were the true atheists. After all, they were the ones who denied God by imposing "so degrading a caricature of God upon religion" with their "deeply unsound mass of traditions and imaginations."[73]

Aaron Hahn, in his *Arguments for the Existence of God* (1885), had pointed out that few Jews had ever read the Bible literally and that most had understood it "poetically" and "prophetically." In their reading of biblical anthropomorphisms, Jewish philosophers had offered metaphysical interpretations and Jewish mystics had allowed for many possible meanings, including allegories.[74] The tendency toward anthropomorphizing remained, however, and he seemed pleased that in modern times "the natural sciences have co-operated in ridding mankind of narrow anthropomorphistic [*sic*] notions of God" that came from misreading the Bible.[75] Later, he expanded upon this observation to note that one unfortunate consequence of the development of modern knowledge had been the contemporary growth of skepticism built upon modern science's refutations of much alleged biblical teaching. But, like Wise, he insisted that a loss of belief was inevitable only if one were a biblical literalist and failed to acknowledge the obvious limitations of the pre-scientific biblical worldview. To his mind, such discoveries as heliocentricism, gravity's effect upon the heavenly bodies, geological refutations of the biblical theory of six days of creation, and the priority of universal law over miracles, had provoked a welcome revolution in human thought, even as they had fuelled skepticism.[76]

It has been suggested that the public controversy between Kaufmann Kohler and Adler in 1878, during which Kohler sought to minimize the growing influence of Adler in Chicago, was in part premised on the atheistic implications that Adler drew from biblical criticism.[77] Regardless, well before he himself became a proponent of biblical criticism, Kohler was concerned to address such challenges to modern Jewish faith as biblical anthropomorphism. As early as 1874, Kohler had asked "What is it that has brought religion into decay and disrepute in our day?,"[78] pointing to some ideas of the Bible that were so cred-

72 Ibid., 323–24.

73 Ibid., 321–22, 24.

74 Aaron Hahn, *History of the Arguments for the Existence of God*, 161–64.

75 Ibid., 6.

76 Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism," 5.

77 Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*, 153–61. See also Brinkman, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago*, 108.

78 Kohler, "Science and Religion," 821.

ulous and unsophisticated that "some laugh at us, and some pity us."[79] He had argued, however, that Reform Jews "do not deify the Bible" and that, historically speaking, most Jewish thinkers had not read the Bible in a literalistic or naïve way, noting that "the Jewish philosophers of Alexandria, Arabia and Spain, did not believe that the snake or an ass could talk" and "[t]hey believed in no supernatural wonders."[80] Following that logic, it seemed perfectly reasonable for contemporary Jews to acknowledge the difficulties in reconciling simplistic readings of the texts with modern scientific knowledge. He concluded,

> So the fossil animals and plants found in the bosom of the earth, the petrified relics of olden and perished worlds, can hardly be brought into accord with the Biblical system of creation, or with the assumption of a complete covering of the earth by a deluge.[81]

In developing his systematic *Jewish Theology* (German 1910, English 1918), Kohler showed that Judaism had gone through many stages of development, including polytheism and idolatry, before reaching the concept of "a transcendent and spiritual God," that is, the recognition of God as "a purely spiritual Being, lacking all qualities perceptible to the senses."[82] The process was "rendered still more difficult by the Scriptural references to God," which necessitated centuries of effort by ancient translators (to paraphrase) and philosophers (to allegorize) so as to "remove all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic notions of God."[83] For Kohler, whose scholarly expertise lay in Judeo-Greco history and thought, the Jewish tendency toward doubt and de-anthropomorphism appeared to have been first brought about as a result of the influence of Greek skepticism and atheism during the Hellenistic period.[84]

---

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered*, 74.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 66. In his entry on "Skeptics" in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* in the early 1900s Kohler observed that Jewish tradition and the Bible itself actually valued doubt, so that "skeptics, in the sense of men wrestling with doubt, have found a certain recognition and a place of honor in Biblical literature." In this context, the doubt related to questions of moral ambiguity as much as contested facts. Those who had difficulty reconciling the unfairness of the world with the Scripture's assurances of justice included Jeremiah, Moses, Job, Qohelet, and the Psalmist. Among the examples Kohler adduced from Jewish history were the ninth-century Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, whose criticism of Scripture undermined belief in revelation, the sixteenth-century Uriel Acosta, who denied both revelation and the immortality of the soul, and Acosta's contemporary, Leon of Modena, whom Kohler described as offering a liberal interpretation of traditional Judaism, and who complained that "the thinker is tortured by doubt" when studying the texts while "the blind believer enjoys peace of mind and bliss in the world to come." *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v.

In discussing agnosticism at around the same time, Emil Hirsch agreed that the most serious problem that the Bible held for Judaism was the attribution of human characteristics to God. He readily acknowledged that "The early Biblical writings are naively anthropomorphic and anthropopathic," but argued that Jewish thinkers down through the centuries had resisted this tendency and had emphasized instead the unknowableness of God, citing Philo, Joseph Albo, Saʿadia Gaon, and Maimonides.[85] These had argued, in effect, that to attribute qualities to God would amount to limiting him, and thus would degrade his Being. Modern Judaism, too, Hirsch insisted, similarly regarded "all attempts at descriptive connotations of the Godhead as anthropomorphic makeshifts to find words for a thought which in reality is beyond the power of human tongue adequately to convey."[86] Anthropomorphism was "the fear … and the obsession of Agnosticism" and, in this regard, Hirsch was quick to show that progressive Judaism shared this concern with agnostics and were similarly alert to its dangers.[87] As he saw it, the modern Jew and the so-called atheist who denied human representations of God shared a common cause.

> [T]he so-called atheist dared voice the conviction that the gods, worshipped by the masses and the mob, are but counterfeit deities. He who destroys the idols will always be stigmatized atheist by them who have an interest – egotistical, narrow – in maintaining in splendor the sanctuaries of old, but wretchedly inadequate, representations of what is beyond all form.[88]

The Reform Jewish leaders discussed here were aware of the potential and actual damage to the authority of religion that could be generated by unbelievers' ridicule of the Scriptures and their pre-modern ideas. They realized that they needed to engage with individuals, such as Ingersoll and Adler, who expressed their contempt for religion most eloquently and persuasively. To deal with skepticism, then, a half-hearted attempt was made to suggest that the Bible's authority lay in its teachings on morality rather than on scientific accuracy. But the fact that, with the exception of Wise, the Reformers agreed with the findings of biblical criticism put them in an awkward position. They readily admitted that the multitude of revelations down through the millennia, the many anthropomorphic, primitive conceptions of God, and the credulous

"skeptic." See also chapter 11, "The Existence of God," in *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered*.

85 Hirsch, "Agnosticism," 238.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Hirsch, "A Message from Plato's Apology (May 1906)," 71.

belief in miracles, had left traditional religion looking very foolish to modern eyes. In defence, they stressed that, historically, Jewish thinkers had not fallen into the trap of biblical literalism, and also that most modern Reform Jews accepted the idea of human authorship and recognized the influence of other ancient peoples' myths upon their own, and therefore did not deify the Scriptures as did the Orthodox. Central to this defence was a concern to present the Jewish God as a being without or beyond human characteristics. In itself, this tendency to de-anthropomorphize and disembody God was entirely unremarkable among liberal religious thinkers. But in the specific context of engaging with skepticism, it prepared the ground for the panentheistic notions of God and nature that would find expression in the Reform rabbis' engagement with scientific materialism.

3: Scientific Materialism

Third, there was a need to confront Reform's failure to respond to the challenge of the scientific worldview, which led to the growth of unbelief. From its early nineteenth-century origins, a defining characteristic of the Reform project had always been the aim to reconcile Judaism with the best scientific and philosophic knowledge of the day. Proponents saw themselves as the rightful heirs of the Haskalah and embraced the positivist scientific worldview of the Enlightenment. Progressive Jews stressed the rationality of Judaism in contrast to the allegedly irrational teachings of Christianity, such as the incarnation and the trinity, and denigrated what they saw as outmoded legalism that had ghettoized Jews, socially and intellectually. German Reformers such as Geiger, it is true, had expressed some concerns about certain scientific claims, especially regarding evolutionary theory,[89] and Anglo-Jewish Reform had had little to say on the issue, preoccupied as it was with other matters, but by and large, the North Americans had no such reservations.[90] The Pittsburgh Platform, issued in 1885 to set out the beliefs of the Reform collective in the United States, declared:

89 Geiger rejected not only Darwin's theory of natural selection but even the phenomenon of the transmutation of species itself. Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History*, trans. Maurice Mayer (London: Trübner & Co, 1866), 8–9. (German original: *Das Judenthum und seine Geschichte* [Breslau: Schletter, 1864].)

90 Established in 1840, Anglo-Reform was dominated by its founder, David Woolf-Marks (1811–1909), whose concern to defend Judaism against the Evangelical Protestant charge of abandoning Scripture extended to a kind of neo-Karaitism and who had next to nothing to say about science. While later Reform rabbis such as Morris Joseph (1848–1930) did discuss religion and science on occasion, a clear commitment to scientific knowledge wherever it led was left to Anglo-Liberal Judaism, and in particular to its spiritual and intellectual leader, Claude Montefiore (1858–1938). Cantor's survey of Anglo-Jewish responses includes only a few references to progressives such

> We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.[91]

Thus, the story in the United States was very much one of a positive "response to modernity," as the title of Michael Meyer's seminal history of the Reform movement has it.[92] Along with the adoption of biblical- and historical-critical sciences, with all the implications that this had for a demythologized presentation of the history and nature of Judaism, North American Reform Jews were at pains to stress their acceptance of the findings of contemporary scientific thought, and especially evolutionary theory, to an extent not seen outside the States. Was there anything about the environment in the United States that helps explains this particular enthusiasm for science?

The claim of the critics of religion was that knowledge based on materialistic science profoundly undermined religious authority, rendering religious teachings largely irrelevant. Ingersoll frequently condemned the Church for questioning the priceless discoveries of science and thereby standing in the way of "the onward march of the human race."[93] Adler observed that "the fundamental doctrines of the old religion no longer receive the cordial assent of a very large number of the intellectual class" as a result of the inroads of modern science, and could therefore no longer function as a foundation for modern life and morality.[94] The unscientific dogma of the Church, for Ingersoll, and the ignorance and tyranny of the Law, for Adler, left religion looking redundant. One might have expected the Reformers to have pointed to the possibly unappealing consequences of such a position. For example, if divine moral authority was to be dispensed with, the likely outcome would be the loss of the familiar ethical foundations of social life – with nothing to take their place. Likewise, the rejection of the Bible as grounds for an ultimate purpose or meaning to life could lead to a profoundly pessimistic worldview. But, again, while we do find Reformers making such arguments, they were more concerned in this context to find a way to reconcile the findings of science with the authentic teachings

---

as Montefiore. Geoffrey N. Cantor, "Anglo-Jewish Responses to Evolution," in *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, ed. Geoffrey N. Cantor and Marc Swetlitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 38.

91 For the text of the Platform, see *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect*, ed. Walter Jacob (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Congregation, 1985).

92 Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*.

93 Ingersoll, "Heretics and Heresies," 13.

94 Adler, "The Need of a New Moral Movement in Religion," 4.

of religion so that the choice between one or the other, as presented by the materialists, could be shown to be an unnecessary one. Arguably, it was these particular circumstances that led to the Reformers' intense engagement with science, and especially biological science, to the point that this engagement became a particular characteristic of US Reform at this time. As we shall see, this embracing of science also helps explain one of nineteenth-century Reform's most distinctive traits, namely, the tendency toward panentheism – the idea that all is *in* God even if God is greater than all.[95]

Many Reformers recognized that the advances of science appeared to undermine religious authority, at least in the eyes of the public. In a sermon entitled "Science and Religion," delivered in German and translated for *The Jewish Times* in 1874, Kaufmann Kohler lamented that the philosophical materialism premised on the ascendency of the scientific worldview was essentially a negative, pessimistic, defeatist position, whether one was speaking about cultured elites or the poorer, uneducated classes. He asked,

> Is it not strange and significant that since this development of natural science a gloomy melancholy trait of resignation, of "world-sorrow," has passed through the cultivated circles of society? Pessimism… [and] gloomy contemplation of the world… find a deep accord and response in the mind of man. [And t]he opposite of this philosophic nihilism is

95 "Panentheism" can also be defined as the idea that God's immanent presence in nature does not delimit the reality of God. It can be contrasted with "pantheism," which is the idea that all *is* God and God *is* all, that is, that God is to be identified with the totality of nature. Accounts of the nineteenth-century emergence of panentheism in Christian thought have tended to emphasize the influence of philosophical currents such as German idealism, leading to a *via media* between supernaturalism (epitomized by Leibniz) and pantheism (as formulated by Spinoza). According to Gregersen, this was the goal of the German idealist philosopher Karl Krause (1781–1832), who is usually credited with having originated the term "panentheism." Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Three Varieties of Pantheism," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 28. Others have viewed panentheism as the logical theological response to science and the Enlightenment, that is, to the necessity of finding a non-interventionist conception of God's activity in the world vis-à-vis natural scientists' refusal to invoke non-natural causes. Michael W. Brierley, "Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Pantheistic Turn in Modern Theology," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, 1–19. For some examples of Jewish thinkers who demonstrated a panentheistic tendency as they engaged with evolutionary theory, see Daniel R. Langton, "Jewish Religious Thought, the Holocaust, and Darwinism: A Comparison of Hans Jonas and Mordecai Kaplan," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 13, no. 2 (2013): 311–48, and "Elijah Benamozegh and Evolutionary Theory: A Nineteenth-Century Italian Kabbalist's Panentheistic Response to Darwin," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016): 223–45.

> found in the lower grades of society – in the lower materialism which says, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" … Atheism has no hope.[96]

The moral implications of a widespread loss of faith were as clear as the reasons for the loss of faith in the first place. As Kohler observed in 1887,

> People have broken away from the old landmarks of belief, because they found them to be in conflict with reason and science, and the old hell-fire to have lost its terror. The dread prevails today among believers that the decay of religion may lead to a decline, if not collapse, of morals.[97]

There were various ways to address these related problems, and Kohler discussed most of them during his long career. First, he argued that such atheistic worldviews and the kind of skepticism that denied the possibility of knowing anything with certainty were not characteristic of Judaism; this was the central premise of his 1906 entry on skepticism in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* ("This kind of skeptic can scarcely be found in Judaism").[98] As such, the Jewish worldview offered a viable and optimistic alternative to the profoundly pessimistic worldview of the skeptics, atheists, agnostics, and unbelievers. Second, he pointed out the continuing need for religion, especially in relation to moral development. A progressive Jew such as Kohler could readily agree with the materialist that God had not literally dictated the moral laws to Moses from a mountain several millennia before. But that did not mean that the religious conception of the origins of morality could be dispensed with. Crucially for Kohler, the Reform Jewish view acknowledged the possibility that moral progress had evolved and could continue to evolve. As he saw it,

> [M]orality and religion are the expressions of a higher harmony of life. And if they have not come down from heaven perfect and complete, but have developed themselves from crude forms, yet they are revelations of divine powers which slumbered in man, and which point him to a power which hovers before him as the highest type of life, eternally near and eternally distant.[99]

Kohler stressed that this mysterious foundation of an evolving morality could not be accounted for by atheistic theory. As he explained a few years later, only a religious framework for morality made sense.

---

96 Kohler, "Science and Religion," 820–21.

97 Kohler, "Evolution and Morality," *Temple Beth-El Lectures*, December 4, 1887 (New York: Press of Stettiner, Lambert & Co, 1887/88), 3.

98 Kohler, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "skeptic."

99 Kohler, "Science and Religion," 821.

> In vain has the atheist tried to divest morality of religion. The child's natural appreciation of the good and noble, and the criminal's abhorrence of his own distorted image of manhood, disprove the idea that morality is merely a social life insurance, and arbitrary creation of our own.[100]

Third, one could attempt to demonstrate that science was not an exclusively materialist endeavor and that the teachings of Reform Judaism were perfectly compatible with its findings. For Kohler, as for others, it was evolutionary science that offered the greatest challenge, but one that a liberal religion could readily meet. In "Science and Religion" he maintained that liberal religion's progressive worldview eschewed the supernatural claims of much of the Bible and readily admitted the natural laws of causation that science had discovered – that atheism was thus by no means the only viable modern mode of thought. He asked,

> And does this [Darwinism], accepted and constantly confirmed by almost all investigators of nature – astronomers, geologists, botanists, and zoologists – lead to atheism and a denial of God? All which Darwinism declares is, that creation is not to be explained through a miracle, but through the natural law of progressive development of life under favorable circumstances.... Do I deny God when I deny every immediate interference of God with the eternal order of the world, and question every miracle? Quite the opposite.[101]

Kohler was concerned to convince the reader that the apparent threat to religion posed by science was much exaggerated and that, in fact, science, and especially evolutionary theory, could be regarded as complementary to Judaism. As he saw it, "Religion and science must illumine one another, and must harmonize with one another."[102] He asserted that "Science and religion need not antagonize one another" since they are two complementary sides of the same coin of revelation, one working through the emotions "which feel The One in All," and one through reason "which, investigating, recognizes the unit in the

100 "Israel's New Departure," *The New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1879, 8. This was a report on Kohler's first sermon at Beth-El in New York, and included the tagline "Atheism Condemned."

101 Kohler, "Science and Religion," 821.

102 Ibid., 820. Later, Kohler would suggest that "[t]he whole conflict between science and religion, portrayed so vividly by two Americans, John W. Draper and Andrew D. White, has no place within Judaism, where reason and faith are called twin-sisters, both daughters of the Divine Wisdom." Furthermore, he cited with approval the German philosopher F.A. Lange's claim that Jewish monotheism "gave the world its scientific basis, the idea of the Empire of Law." "What Is Judaism?," *Temple Beth-El Lectures*, October 23, 1887 (New York: Press of Stettiner, Lambert & Co, 1887), 6.

whole."[103] Yet, Kohler went on, science could not do without religion since there was still much that it could not explain. In particular, he questioned whether the nineteenth-century scientist could "unriddle" how inanimate matter became living matter.[104] But, just as the "Judaism of old united and harmonized its new knowledge with its old faith,"[105] so Kohler could not see any danger to Judaism from modern science, the findings of which amounted to the declaration that

> the world was not made in one moment, but has developed itself, and that man was not created complete, but has developed himself: for this is essentially the new Darwinian doctrine, the foundation and capstone of the modern science of nature…[106]

And just as one did not deny God when one no longer claimed that He sent rain directly down through the gates of heaven, or that He daily led the sun out from its tabernacle, so one did not deny God when one was obliged, as instructed by science, to "deny every immediate interference of God with the eternal order of the world and question every miracle."[107] Kohler's conception of God was of a profoundly immanent divinity. In language that hinted at an equivalence between natural laws and divine will, he confessed that

> My idea of the wisdom of the Eternal is too great to allow me to believe that He is from time to time patching up and improving His own works. The eternal laws of nature are His eternal wisdom, His unchangeable will. Were He ever to change His will, He would not to me be the Eternal.[108]

The common refrain, in which others would follow Kohler, was that the harmonious order of the world testified to its divine foundations. As he wrote in 1879, "Natural science, by the unshaken faith in [natural] law, testifies to a divine law-giver."[109] In time, he would go even further by suggesting that the divine life was made manifest in matter and mind through evolutionary processes. In so doing, Kohler came as near as he ever would to articulating a panentheistic conception of God.

> Instead of alienating us from God, it [evolutionary science] brings us right face to face with God; for we see Him steadily at work fashioning worlds and lives without number here and ever carving out new destinies

103 Kohler, "Science and Religion," 820.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 821.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Kohler, "Israel's New Departure," 8.

> for all beings there. In fact, evolution, as I conceive it, is the unfolding of the divine life, the unbroken revelation of God first in endless varieties of *matter*, then in marvellous productions of conscious *mind.* And since both matter and mind emanate from the same God, why should the lines not merge? . . . The entire creation, from crystal and protoplasm to ape and horse, in their gradual rise towards beauty and emotion, foreshadows the coming of upward-striving man.[110]

The evolution of the universe and of life was, it seemed, the unfolding or evolution of God in His material and psychical emanations.

While Isaac Mayer Wise claimed not to take either Ingersoll or Adler seriously as individuals, he presented the kind of popular atheism-cum-agnosticism that claimed to be premised upon modern scientific thought as nothing less than an existential threat to Jewish religion. In his memoir, he recalled his own lifelong efforts to undermine what he described as the "violent attacks" and "the poisonous arrows of atheism" and to challenge the alleged link between science and atheism, which he regarded as the main foundation for modern doubt.[111] He explained that ignorance about scientific details did not prevent people

> from gaping and babbling, each repeating the other's words, dipping into atheism until they had convinced themselves that all intelligent men were atheists . . . This spirit of the times had to be opposed, but in our circles not a single voice was raised which seemed to accept the challenge . . . Without saying a word, as if dumb and blind, they walked past this dangerous, threatening cliff.[112]

Wise reported in his biography how, despite the ironical allegations of atheism that he suffered,[113] he had solved the problem with a series of evening lectures on evolutionary science and Judaism, presented in 1876 "before a large public, at least half of which consisted of persons with some atheistic leanings," which he published the same year as *The Cosmic God*.[114] The published collection of lectures "achieved its goal; from that time on we were no longer plagued by atheism. To the men of science it proved that the theistic world-

110 Kohler, "Evolution and Morality," 4.

111 As he saw it, in addition to missionary Christianity, "Judaism had to face another enemy, one which attacked it even more violently: that was atheism, which later rebaptized itself as agnosticism." Isaac Mayer Wise, *The World of My Books*, trans. Albert H. Friedlander (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1954), 32.

112 Ibid., 32–33.

113 Ibid., 33.

114 Ibid., 35.

view is justified."[115] An important theme in *The Cosmic God's* discussion of creation was the materialist's unproven assumption that accident best accounted for the existence of the world. In a series of sermons from 1885–1886 entitled "Lectures for Infidels," Wise returned to the topic of materialistic assumptions about science, arguing that

> The scientific atheist is a one-sided man who stopped short with his reasoning within nature's mechanical working, and takes for granted, without any proof, of course, whatever cannot be reached by those laws and categories, that it is not.[116]

The classic example of such blindness was apparent in the debate concerning materialism and idealism (or spirit, as Wise preferred to call it). He recalled that

> One of the skeptics in this city, some years ago, asked, in a debate with a theist, What is spirit? The theist could give negative definitions only, and the skeptics smiled triumphantly. Had I been there I would have, Yankee-like, answered the question with another question, What is matter? And the audience would have felt not a little surprised, if my opponent would have been bound to confess that we do not know. The nature of matter, like that of spirit, is unknown to man.[117]

This discussion of spirit and matter had lain at the heart of Wise's systematic attempt to confront materialism in science in *The Cosmic God*. There, he had offered a Jewish form of the vital force theory of evolution. According to his particular interpretation of idealism, Wise believed that the universal or fundamental substance was non-material.[118] Ultimately, matter could only be held together by "vital force,"[119] which he understood to be a function of an intelligent divine will.[120] Thus, the act of creation was, in effect, the divine assertion of this force so as to counteract matter's tendency to dissolve or separate,[121] and the story of life was the story of the emergence of a hierarchical

115 Ibid.

116 Wise, "Lectures for Infidels No. 8: Revelation and the Right of Reason Controlling It," 4.

117 Wise, "Lectures for Infidels No. 20: Closing Lecture," 4.

118 Wise was profoundly influenced by German idealism, although he preferred to call himself an adherent of "spiritualism." He explained, "In materialism, matter is the substance, and the forces inherent in matter create, preserve and govern all which is in this universe mechanically and automatically. In spiritualism, spirit or mind is the substance, and the forces which create, preserve and govern all things in this universe, are manifestations of the will of that spirit, mind or intelligence." *The Cosmic God: A Fundamental Philosophy in Popular Lectures*, 71.

119 Ibid., 94–95.

120 Ibid., 126.

121 Ibid., 114.

order of stable forms of life from dead matter, achieved by the work of vital force, which eventually culminated in humanity.[122] The God whom Wise conceived was, to a degree, to be identified with both vital force and with nature itself. As Wise expressed it,

> He is omnipresent, revealed everywhere by the ever-active force of all forces in nature, and every motion of the human intellect. He is omnipresent, for He fills all space and penetrates all atomic matter . . . He is not in heaven above nor on earth below, for He is everywhere, in all space, in all objects of nature, in every attribute of matter, and in every thought of the mind.[123]

This made sense of the problem of suffering in nature. To anthropomorphize God, and especially to conceptualize Him as wise and as having organized His realm with care according to human standards, was, in Wise's opinion, a serious category error. After all, science showed that "There is, in the realm of nature, pain, suffering, misery, destruction, and death, as well as joy, pleasure, happiness, and goodness, and pessimism is entitled to the philosopher's most earnest reflection."[124] However, Wise went on to assert that the lesson to be learned was that our conceptions of God had to change; anthropomorphous conceptions of God and nature had to be dropped, for "God is no man and nature no dame, and the household of nature must be measured objectively, by the facts which it presents, and not by our feelings, wishes, hopes, desires, or prejudices."[125] As such, Wise's Cosmic God entailed a panentheistic conception of the world and of the divine vital force animating it, which, he argued, explained the problem of suffering and presented a better interpretation of scientific evidence than the argument offered by the scientific materialists.

Aaron Hahn was as defiant as Wise in refusing to allow that natural science justified an atheistic viewpoint. In his *Arguments for the Existence of God* (1885) he insisted that the mysteriously orderly nature of the world was suggestive of theistic explanations,[126] that the scientists' focus on secondary causes did not rule out the requirement of a Primary Cause or the original cause of the natural laws they studied,[127] and that, until science could account for these,

122 Ibid., 116.

123 Ibid., 163.

124 Ibid., 121.

125 Ibid.

126 "The assertion that natural sciences have dethroned God in nature is false, and will remain an error while there will be the least vestige of mysteries in nature, and while there will be traces of mathematical calculations in geometrical relations and arrangements in the universe." Hahn, *History of the Arguments for the Existence of God*, 8–9.

127 "No sensible man will hold that, because La Place and Humboldt excluded from their descriptions

"the argument for the existence of God from the design in nature will remain valid, all that is said by materialists and atheists to the contrary notwithstanding."[128] Hahn also took any opportunity to demonstrate how unscientific some atheists were. For example, in response to the suggestion made by Ingersoll in "The Gods" (1872),[129] that the world was full of imperfections and unnecessary suffering, such that God could be criticized for having made health, rather than disease, catching, Hahn in 1885 painstakingly set out a comprehensive demonstration of the chemical and philosophical reasons why this was not possible, concluding that

> [t]o desire that the contagious diseases shall not be catching, means to desire that the laws of nature underlying those chemical processes shall cease to work. Mr Ingersoll's words imply the idea that, had he the power to make improvements, he would put an end to the natural causes and effects in nature, and would rather perform miracles.[130]

At the same time, Hahn was concerned to show that scientists, including Darwin, themselves did not espouse atheism.[131] Furthermore, as far as he was concerned, scientists were free of blame for the rise of skepticism: "They teach facts. It is not their fault that the views of the Bible are not more in accord with the facts of natural science."[132] For Hahn, the truths of science and religion did not conflict, even if popular atheists and naïve readers of the Bible argued differently. Furthermore, in his defence against materialism he hinted at a kind of panentheism. In response to the question: "Is it proper to speak of Nature as the author of all things?" he replied in slightly awkward English that

> It is not objectionable in the eyes of Judaism to speak in the name of Nature when we designate thereby an intelligence which manifests itself in the nature as its soul. Thus used, the word Nature becomes an attribute of God, as many other words, which express any of his qualities. But it is a real atheism, a denouncement and abdication of Judaism, to deny a

---

of the universe the reference to a First Cause, and because of their treating exclusively only of second causes, there is no such thing as a primary Cause and that such a thing as a causality of the law of nature is not conceivable" (ibid., 14–15).

128 Ibid., 68.

129 This essay was published in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Gods, and Other Lectures* (Washington, DC: C.P. Farrell, 1879).

130 Hahn, *History of the Arguments for the Existence of God*, 37–38.

131 Hahn's argument was that the similarities between Darwin's "evolution idea," Kant's "internal finality" and Hegel's "imminent finality" meant that "all these theories mean essentially the same" and, since Kant and Hegel could hardly be described as materialistic, so Darwinism "cannot be pronounced an atheistic view" (ibid., 59).

132 Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism," 5.

> universal wisdom in the nature, and to ascribe all effects to the coincidence and concurrence of the atoms or elements, bodies, or to the chance.[133]

In his earliest work, published in German in 1869, Hahn had sought to reconcile rabbinic and mystical thought with theosophy; the book presented the idea of God as the world-soul – both as Jewish and in harmony with the classic Western thought of Spinoza and other philosophers.[134] It is therefore not entirely surprising to see him now raising a similar idea, this time in relation to a materialistic conception of evolutionary science.

Joseph Krauskopf shared with these others a belief that the great threat of materialism lay in its implications for social morality – "Ethics without a God must in the long run mean humanity without morality" – and was as concerned to counter the triumphant claims made by some materialists.[135] He complained in his book-length study *Evolution and Judaism* (1887) that "the great mass of believers insisted upon bringing certain primitive speculations of a purely scientific nature within the horizons of religion," necessitating a defence against "that skepticism which is engendered by poorly understood science" so as to ensure a modern "rational faith."[136] He readily admitted that religious knowledge could not ignore "the icy breath of skepticism which touches it" and which undermined tradition, and he fully accepted that its observed flaws had brought about the inevitable result that its authority was regularly questioned, so that its claims and doctrines were subjected to ever increasing scrutiny.[137] But Krauskopf was primarily concerned to reject the assertion of many materialists that science, and especially Darwinism, led to atheism, as if science should by necessity "drive God out of nature, and lead to infidelity."[138] A liberal religion could give proper weight to the findings of science without abandoning the key theological truths that generated an ethical foundation for modern social life. The solution, for Krauskopf, lay, in large part,

---

133 Hahn, *The Rational Judaism in Queries and Answers*, 11. Hahn cited as his sources: Judah HaLevi, *Cosri* (*Kuzari*) 1, 76, 77, and Chacham Tsvi, Response 18. The impersonal impression of the Divine was reinforced in Hahn's discussion of providence, and, in particular, in his description of the role of society "as God's agent," as well as in response to the question "Does God take care of the world and its contents?" As he put it in his answer, "The established inflexibility of natural laws, and the plan of the universe, are God's provision for the world at large" (ibid.).

134 Hahn, *Die Gottesbegriffe des Talmud und Sühar sowie der vorzüglichsten theosophischen Systeme* [The conception of God in the Talmud and Zohar and in the principles of theosophical systems].

135 Joseph Krauskopf, "Ethics or Religion?" (Sunday Lecture, 13 October, 1895), cited in William W. Blood, *Apostle of Reason: A Biography of Joseph Krauskopf* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1973), 157–58.

136 Krauskopf, *Evolution and Judaism*, preface.

137 Ibid., 6.

138 Ibid., 13.

in his de-anthropomorphized conception of God. Just as Kohler had done, he identified natural law with God.

> [N]ature is under the power of government under the control of supreme order and uninterrupted harmony, under the reign of ever-present, ever active, never-changing law which shapes all matter, organic and inorganic, according to *design*, and directs all force, physical and vital, according to *purpose,* and compels both to be eternally the same in their manifestations. This universally acknowledged supreme governing power, this universally acknowledged eternally invariable law… this universally admitted ever present design and purpose and order and harmony… is named by evolutionists "Natural Law"; by theologians it is called "God." … With this conception of the nature of God every difference between science and religion disappears.[139]

Insofar as nature was to be understood as the product or expression of natural law, and insofar as another name for natural law was God, then Krauskopf might have been regarded as pantheistic.[140] But more often for Krauskopf, nature or natural law was only part of the divine reality, not its entirety, which was the classic articulation of panentheism. For example, he wrote,

> According to our definition, *God* is the finitely, conceivable Ultimate, the Cause of all and the Cause in all, the Universal Life, the All-Pervading, All-Controlling, All-Directing Power Supreme, the Creator of the universe and the Governor of the same according to eternal and immutable laws by Him created. All existence is part of His existence, all life is part of His life, all intelligence is part of His intelligence, all evolution, all progress is part of His plan.[141]

Much later, Emil Hirsch took a swipe at Adler when he wrote in a discussion of atheism that "In modern Judaism, as is evinced by printed sermons and other publications, Atheism of every kind has found voice and adherents." He went on to complain that "The influence of the natural sciences, and the unwarranted conclusions now recognized as such by none more readily than

139 Ibid., 102–4. And again: "[W]e see greater evidence of the marvels of God's handiwork [via evolution] then ever we could glean from a belief in special creation… [W]e see God constantly creating… we see all nature reveal the ever present and constantly active final cause… This sum of Supreme Will, Supreme Power, Supreme Intelligence, evolutionists name "*The Reign of Natural Law*"; the theologians call it "*God*" (ibid., 116–17).

140 In support of such an interpretation were such incautious comments as when, reflecting upon the monism of Haeckel, Krauskopf suggested that "By it we arrive at the sublime idea of the Unity of God and Nature" (ibid., 239).

141 Ibid., 279–80.

by the thinkers devoted to the exploration of nature's domain, have also left their mark on Jewry."[142] The "unwarranted conclusions" included the views of those who, like Ingersoll, maintained that there was a conflict between religion and science. As he had sought to show in *Evolution and Judaism*, such views were old fashioned and out of date.[143] And, as he insisted in his sermon "The Doctrine of Evolution" (1903), "Atheism may extract no comfort from the recent expositions of the theory of evolution,"[144] not only because so many theists could reconcile their theology with modern science, but because the common view of materialists that religion was "a benevolent or malevolent invention of crafty priests or well-meaning lovers of their kind" had been discredited by the modern appreciation of religion itself as an evolved phenomenon, which could continue to adapt to the changing environment.[145] Like Kohler, Hirsch also did not believe that science could be regarded as a support for atheism. He condemned philosophical materialists (or "beer and cheese materialists" as he called them) for, among other things, their failure to explain the beginnings of existence or the nature of matter and energy, or to account for the transformations of the inorganic to the organic and of the unconscious to the conscious.[146] It seemed self-evident to him that "mystery still calls for faith" and that "there is a need and room for the introduction of an energy which religious faith and reasoning philosophy have always posited."[147] In attempting to articulate a theory that would adequately address such challenges, Hirsch offered a panentheistic conception of God's immanent relation to the world, as had others before him. He enthused:

> In notes clearer than were ever intoned by human tongue does the philosophy of evolution confirm the essential verity of Judaism's insistent protest and proclamation that God is one. This theory reads unity in all that is and has being. Stars and stones, planets and pebbles, sun and sod, rock and river, leaf and lichen, are spun of the same thread. Thus the universe is one soul, One spelled large. If throughout all visible forms one energy is manifest and in all material shapes one substance is apparent, the conclusion is all the better assured which holds this essentially one world of life to be the thought of one all-embracing and all-underlying creative directive mind . . . I, for my part, believe to be justified in my assurance that

142 Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "atheism."

143 Hirsch, "The Science of Comparative Religion, Part One (1897)," 155.

144 Hirsch, "The Doctrine of Evolution and Judaism," in *Some Modern Problems and Their Bearing on Judaism*, 14.

145 Ibid., 18.

146 Ibid., 5–6.

147 Ibid., 7.

> Judaism rightly apprehended posits God not, as often it is said to do, as an absolutely transcendental One. Our God is the soul of the Universe… Spinozism and Judaism are by no means at opposite poles.[148]

Such ideas went beyond philosophical Idealism, or, at least, were justified in a very different manner – by reference to biological science. And Hirsch's position was panentheistic, rather than pantheistic, in that God was explicitly identified with the universe while, at the same time, the natural world, in which energy and matter were unified, was regarded as the product of the divine mind and distinct from it.

In championing religion against the doubt associated with the continual expansion of scientific knowledge, the Reformers surveyed here presented several lines of defence and counter-attack. It was, after all, axiomatic to Reform that it was entirely compatible with science. Perhaps the most remarkable defence against the materialists' presentation of science was the emergence of a panentheistic tendency, expressing the image of a divine element woven into the fabric of the cosmos, while maintaining the distinctiveness of the Deity. This complemented the de-anthropomorphizing and depersonalizing tendency that had dominated the discourse about biblical inaccuracies and failings. A depersonalized Deity was explicitly identified with, among other things, the natural law that bestowed order to the world, the vital force that animated it, the soul of the universe, and the universe itself. While it is not possible to claim that such conceptions were argued for consistently, they were certainly a feature of the discussions. The suggestion made here is that the context, that is, the engagement with natural science to counter the skeptics' contempt for religion, accounts in large part for the Reform rabbis' most panentheistic moments. With regard to counter-attacks, it was the materialism of the unbelievers, rather than science, that was the chief target of the Reformers' ire. Some atheists, it was argued, made silly, unscientific pronouncements, while the findings of science, including that of evolutionary science, were perfectly compatible with a liberal religious worldview. The very order of the universe, described and measured by science, pointed to a designer, they argued, insisting that religion remained significant and relevant in a scientific age, where mysteries such as the origins of organic life remained, and where mechanistic ideas of change and contingency were unconvincing. The Reformers also maintained that morality – even an evolving morality – was required as a foundation for society, which, they believed, only religion, and certainly not materialism, could provide. Several of the rabbis contrasted the pessimism and nihilism that resulted naturally

148 Ibid., 10–11. Interestingly, Hirsch singled out Spinoza as a system-building precursor to Darwin. Ibid., 2.

enough from the materialistic worldview with the optimism and hope that Judaism offered. One area where this last approach developed in a particularly interesting direction was in discussions of the afterlife.

4: Suffering and the Afterlife

Finally, there was the matter of suffering as a prime cause of doubt and disbelief. The problem of evil in one form or another, illustrated by countless references to suffering in the world, whether caused by religion or other factors such as social injustice, lay behind much of what Ingersoll and Adler had written and spoken against religion. For these anti-religious agitators, belief in a good God who nonetheless allowed such suffering in His creation was a particularly rich vein to tap. Arguably, this issue helps explain why the subject of life after death came up frequently in the writings of a number of US Reformers in the context of discussions about skepticism, atheism, and infidelity, since the idea of a better and more just future life is one potential solution to the problem of suffering in the present one. Because it is only religion that can offer this hope, and not atheism or agnosticism, the Reformers emphasized the afterlife in their discussions of suffering and skepticism. Interestingly, these discussions distinguished sharply between immortality in general and resurrection of the dead in particular, something that also calls for explanation. In any case, the prominence given to the afterlife by US Reform Jews is best accounted for by their sense that this topic gave them an advantage of sorts in discussions about suffering, in that they could offer a more optimistic solution – or at least the possibility of hope – than could their skeptical antagonists.

The idea that the resurrection of the body was problematic and should be replaced by the more rational hope of a "spiritual" immortality had first been seriously mooted in debates during the Haskalah, following Moses Mendelssohn's treatise on the subject.[149] Early German Reformers from the 1840s had begun to think about how the liturgy, for example, might be modified to reflect more modern and acceptable beliefs. The father of German Reform, Abraham Geiger, made the argument that Judaism's theology had been historically influenced by "ideas and sentiments which have become entirely foreign to our time, which in fact have been strongly rejected by it," suggesting that the solution was to replace literal readings with a spiritual interpretation: "From now on," he argued, "the hope for an after-life should not be expressed in terms which suggest a future revival, a resurrection of the body; rather they must stress the immortality of the soul."[150] This approach was reflected in his translation of the

149 Moses Mendelssohn, *Phaedon* (Berlin: Bey F. Nicolai, 1767).

150 Abraham Geiger, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Berlin: Louis Gerschel, 1885), 203–4,

conclusion of the *Gevurot* benediction of the Amidah in the prayer book he prepared for the Breslau congregation in 1854, where he rendered the original Hebrew "revives the dead" ("*m'chayeh ha-metim*") as "who bestows life in this world and the other" ("der Leben spendet hier und dort"). It is worth noting, however, that Geiger's prayer book did not actually revise the Hebrew text, and it was left to Reformers in the United States to implement the change. The radical German-born Reformer David Einhorn made the necessary change in his prayerbook, offering praise to God – in Hebrew as well as German – "for implanting within us eternal life." This language was followed in the English *Union Prayer Book* (1895), which would be the standard Reform prayer book in the United States for the next eighty years.

As far back as 1850 Isaac Mayer Wise had declared in a public debate his disbelief in the doctrine of bodily resurrection.[151] As he later explained, his rationale was pragmatic, that is, that the logistics of feeding and housing all those who had ever lived were simply impossible to imagine and made the whole idea entirely implausible.[152] Furthermore, as a liberal, Wise rejected the literal reality of a heaven or a hell. Discussing the views of those who believed that unbelievers would be condemned to hell, he insisted that modern sensibilities made the pre-modern conception of the afterlife utterly unacceptable.[153] It would be better, he suggested, to speak of making a heaven or hell upon earth, in the here-and-now. Heaven or hell were to be regarded as states of being, dependent upon the world an individual created in and around him or herself by their moral behavior.[154] And yet, Wise certainly promoted the idea of

---

cited in W. Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 157–58.

151 For an overview of the subject of the tension between bodily resurrection and personal immortality in modern Jewish thought, see Jakob J. Petuchowski, "'Immortality: Yes; Resurrection: No!' Nineteenth-Century Judaism Struggles with a Traditional Belief," *PAAJR* 50 (1983): 133.

152 Ibid., 142.

153 "They have no means whatever to prove that one word of what they say about heaven or hell is positively true… Our conception of Deity flatly contradicts all those ideas of heaven and hell, of salvation and damnation." Isaac Mayer Wise, "Lectures for Infidels No.10: Can Infidels Go to Heaven?," *The American Israelite*, January 8, 1886, 4.

154 As he explained, "The lower instincts, passions and appetites which it has in common with the animal, rising from the main instincts of self-preservation and the propagation of the race, draw him forcibly down to the region of the unconscious. The more he yields to them the more he loses his individuality, his higher and nobler feelings, aspirations and ideals, and the more his intelligence deteriorates… So men go to hell all the time, on and on, perhaps to torments and destruction… If rebellion against the moral law leads to the loss of individuality and independence or emancipation, obedience to that law must be a perpetual striving, longing, seeking and volition for individuality and emancipation, and so it is… So men go to "Heaven," or rather struggle and strive to become constant and immortal spiritual personalities." "Lectures for Infidels No.11: Infidels May Go to Heaven," *The American Israelite*, January 22, 1886, 4.

immortality. On numerous occasions he argued that Jewish tradition supported the idea that human beings were dual creatures composed of a material body and an immaterial, eternal soul.[155] In his 1876 study of evolution, written in large measure to confound the champions of materialism, he included immortality as one of the theological convictions which he admitted that the present limitations of human knowledge and thought would likely prevent him from persuading a skeptic.[156]

> I know that there is… an immortality, and I know it as sure as I know anything; yet I am not superstitious, ignorant, or credulous; I know all the methods of cognition and evidence in philosophy and science. Still I may fail in convincing others of the correctness of my convictions, simply because the methods of cognition and evidence are not exhausted.[157]

This recognition did not prevent Wise from arguing in the same work that the study of evolution, which he understood to be the study of life's progress from inanimate matter to animate life and the emergence of self-consciousness, could not be accounted for by materialistic explanations, and was suggestive of an immaterial element to life. As he put it, the triumph of consciousness over "mechanical nature," and of mind over matter, justified belief in "the doctrine of the soul's immortality," when "man and mankind are elevated to immortality, i.e., to an attribute and self-conscious idea in the Deity."[158] Such a conception of immortality was not of a personal immortality as much as it was a more

155 For example: "With the birth of an organic being, it begins not its existence, it merely opens its mundane existence; so with death it does not close its existence, it simply closes this cycle of its sub lunar career," and "What we call the human body, is transient matter kept momentarily in this form. The soul is the man, efficient and ever active cause of the body's existence and motion." "Aphorisms," *The American Israelite*, April 28, 1876, 4.

156 As he put it in his preface, "This is an age of sober reflection, deep and irresistible. Either you are capable of defending your dogmas before the judgment seat of reason, or you must see them antiquated and impotent. The conflict of science and religion is before your doors, however sentimentally and devotionally you may whitewash the crumbling walls, or galvanize defunct forms, or close your eyes in fervent prayer, to see not how the platform shakes under your feet. You must defend yourselves or surrender." Wise, *The Cosmic God: A Fundamental Philosophy in Popular Lectures*, 5.

157 Ibid., 150.

158 Wise's argument is somewhat convoluted: "The highest law for man is to advance himself and others in self-consciousness, morality, and dominion over mechanical nature, the triumph and mastery of the conscious over the unconscious, of mind over matter. So man fulfills his destiny in society, and elevates himself to an immortal personality. Here is the fundamental idea in philosophy for the doctrine of the soul's immortality… [Man] is capacitated and prompted by natural impulses to co-operate with the Deity in bringing about the triumphs of mind over matter, of the conscious over the unconscious, in the steady progressions of mankind's self-consciousness, morality and freedom, and its reaction on the individual personalities, by which

Platonic idea of the return of an impersonal life force to its source. Regardless, Wise was highly conscious of its power to comfort and, ultimately, to make religion satisfying, later observing that "[a] convincing argument on immortality rouses every man's religious feelings and inspires zeal and enthusiasm."[159]

In the German original of his *Jewish Theology* (1910), Kaufmann Kohler made a clear distinction between the idea of the resurrection of the body and the idea of the immortality of the soul in relation to the teachings of one of Judaism's greatest philosophers: "Even Maimonides," he wrote, "whose purely spiritual conception of the soul and of eternal bliss is absolutely irreconcilable with a belief in bodily Resurrection,… lacked the courage to break openly with this traditional belief."[160] He justified his own belief in the immortality of the soul, a subject which lay beyond the realm of science, on the claim that this belief itself reflected in the human being something of the divine essence, which made possible man's apprehension of God. As he observed of the contemporary crisis of faith,

> It is just in periods like ours, when the belief in God is weakening, that the human spirit is especially solicitous to guard itself against the thought of the complete annihilation of its God-like self-conscious personality. This gives rise to the superstitious effort [doomed to fail] to spy out the soul by sensory [i.e., scientific] means… It is therefore all the more important to base the belief in immortality solely on the God-likeness of the human soul, which is the mirror of Divinity. Just as one postulate of faith holds that God, the Creator of the world, rules in accordance with the moral order, so another is the immortality of the human soul, which, amidst yearning and groping, beholds God. The question where, and how, this self-same ego is to continue, will be left for the power of the imagination to answer ever anew.[161]

Kohler's views on the teaching of the resurrection of the dead were entirely different from those supporting immortality, however. He believed that, however comforting this belief in resurrection might be, it was a primitive, superstitious one that had no place in modern Jewish thought or Reform liturgy.

> Certainly it is both comforting and convenient to imagine the dead who are laid to rest in the earth as being asleep and to await their reawaken-

man and mankind are elevated to immortality, i.e., to an attribute and self-conscious idea in the Deity" (ibid., 178–79).

159 "The Immortality Doctrine," *The American Israelite*, October 14, 1887, 4.

160 Kaufmann Kohler, *Grundriss einer systematischen Theologie des Judentums auf geschichtlicher Grundlage* (Leipzig: Fock, 1910), 230. This statement was not included in the English translation of 1918.

161 Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered*, 296.

> ing.... Whoever, therefore, still sees God's greatness... revealed through miracles, that is, through interruptions of the natural order of life, may cling to the traditional belief in resurrection, so comforting in ancient times. On the other hand, he who recognizes the unchangeable will of an all-wise, all-ruling God in the immutable laws of nature must find it impossible to praise God according to the traditional formula as the "Reviver of the dead," but will avail himself instead of the expression used in the Union Prayer Book... "He who has implanted in us immortal life."[162]

Aaron Hahn was equally dismissive of such an "irrational belief." His starting point was that mankind was not skeptical by nature, but quite the reverse: most people, and especially the religious, were only too credulous. As he saw it,

> Man is not born a skeptic. Man is from nature a believer. A child is inclined to believe most anything; and how great the inclination of the average class of grown-up people to believe is can be found best illustrated in the history of every creed. There are people in every creed for whom there is no story too hard to believe, and to feel only sorry that there are not still harder stories in the Bible to try and prove their faith.[163]

For many, however, "terrible episodes in society and shocking incidents in nature" provoked profound doubt. As such, suffering could be regarded as the primary cause of skepticism:

> When people see violence and injustice rain upon earth, and no God interferes to punish the evil doer, or when accidents happen, of which positively no good can come, or when vice and meanness triumph, and virtue and nobleness succumb, they are aroused and inclined to be skeptical... Every era of violence and oppression, when it seems as if the genius of justice and humanity has left the Earth, is productive of skepticism; and so are productive of skepticism shocking accidents.[164]

Hahn suggested that most religious people quickly overcame those doubts because "rather than to be unsettled in their minds, they persuade and deceive themselves to believe in all kinds of orthodox [religious] theories such as that of a future resurrection."[165] But for others, doubts remained as long as the experience of suffering could not be explained or justified. Hahn not only refused to criticize this position, but defended it, suggesting that "shocking accidents should set us thinking." Indeed, he criticized those

162 Ibid., 296–97.

163 Hahn, "The Philosophy of Skepticism," 1.

164 Ibid., 1–2.

165 Ibid., 2.

> who are afraid to ponder on such a topic. They think it would make God angry to say anything else but "everything is for the best"; and they believe that the least comment on the ways of Providence amounts to atheism. They are mistaken. Shocking accidents should set us thinking; and though we cannot explain everything, we can at least by reflection find out something about the laws and phenomena of nature and society.[166]

Two years previously, Hahn had given some lectures on one of the most important of these laws of nature, namely, the law of evolution, in which he had speculated that life after death was a plausible and rational belief.[167] Now, in the context of his discussions on skepticism, he returned to the subject, citing the philosopher of evolution, Herbert Spencer, as an agnostic who would not deny the possibility of the immortality of the soul, even if he could not confirm it.[168]

Of the various Reformers considered here, Joseph Krauskopf was the one who drew the connections between skepticism, suffering, and immortality most forcefully. In *Evolution and Judaism* (1887), Krauskopf set out the case for immortality as a kind of evolutionary phenomenon. Non-bodily immortality was, he suggested, a reasonable hope, in contrast to the irrational beliefs of most pre-modern cultures, including that of Orthodox Judaism, which, like Orthodox Christianity, expected the righteous to arise bodily from *sheol*, or the grave, on judgment day.[169] His suggestion that life continued beyond the grave was calculated to confound the pessimism of the materialists, since it was premised on a continuation of biological evolutionary logic, even if expressed in language colored by Jewish mysticism.[170] Each individual, he claimed, contained something of a greater whole, a life force that transformed over time, with death only one more stage in its continual transformative progression:

> The same life-principle that throbs in us to-day throbbed in us when we were yet a protoplasm and will throb in us when we shall become even as

166 Ibid., 3.

167 Hahn had suggested that "Even the belief in the immortality of the soul must not suffer from evolution; on the contrary, if everything tends to higher evolution and higher life, why not the human soul, too?" Aaron Hahn, "The Great Science of Evolution," in *Progress: A Course of Lectures under the Auspices of the Sunday Lecture Society,* 1:6 (1892), 10.

168 Spencer was cited as a prominent example of an agnostic who taught important lessons about humility in relation to "the limits of human knowledge," asserting that we needed to acknowledge that, strictly speaking, "we can know nothing about the existence of God and the immortality of the soul." Hahn, "The Mission of Skeptics," 6.

169 Krauskopf, *Evolution and Judaism*, 254–55.

170 The image conjured by Hirsch is that of Lurianic kabbalism, wherein a fragmented and broken godhead is dispersed throughout creation, and the resultant divine sparks animate the creaturely vessels or *kelipot* in which they find themselves, remaining there until a mystical reunion takes place and the godhead is restored to itself.

> our God. If matter is indestructible, if force is persistent, who dare claim that life alone is perishable? Life is a spark of "the universal Life," and "*the universal life*" *is God*… At the dawn of time into each of us a spark of "the universal life" was breathed, with the divine necessity to carry it forward, to develop and unfold it until the ultimate goal is reached. That spark has been clothed in many a garb, and has assumed many a shape. It has advanced through every stage of the lower species, and will advance through every higher state to come, until the God-like will be reached. When developing time comes, the unfolding life-principle forces the petals outward, they break and wither, but the seed lives. When developing time comes, the caterpillar-crysalis [*sic*] shuffles off its old and uncouth coil and becomes the golden winged butterfly. So, too, when developing time comes in the slow unfolding of or sparkle of life, the mortal coil is returned to its primal earthly elements, is wept for and mourned over, while the spark of live lives and passes on to a higher and better state.[171]

In a sermon entitled "After Death – What?" (1890) Krauskopf returned to the subject, insisting that the belief in immortality was perfectly rational. The materialists who decried it had not understood the proper relationship between science and religion.

> They reject it [immortality] because science cannot prove it, forgetting that the proving it does not lie at all in the province of science. Science deals with matter and physical forces, and into these realms mind and soul do not enter.[172]

Furthermore, he went on, there were scientific justifications for the belief, such as the law of conservation of energy and mass.[173] For Krauskopf, who identified a total of six scientific and theological arguments for the belief in immortality, the best argument was that immortality was a necessary consequence of the existence of a just God whose created world included much innocent suffering:[174]

---

171 Krauskopf, *Evolution and Judaism*, 264–65.

172 "After Death – What?," in *Miscellaneous Sunday Lectures* (Philadelphia: Oscar Klonower, 1890), 7–8.

173 Krauskopf argued, "The scientific teaching of the indestructibility of existing things almost necessitates the belief in another and higher form of life than the present, and which is the outgrowth of it" (ibid., 8–9).

174 Krauskopf organized the lecture around these arguments, which included: 1) consensus of belief shared by the whole human race; 2) the scientific truth that whatever is, is forever; 3) the superiority/distinctiveness of the soul over matter; 4) the theory of evolution teaching the gradual unfolding of light from the lowest and simplest to the highest and most complex; 5) the

> The argument derived from the belief in a God of Justice is the crowning argument of them all. If God is, justice is; if justice is, there must be a Hereafter. If we believe in a just God we must believe in a Hereafter.[175]

Belief in the immortality of the soul was the only effective response to the despair that a materialistic worldview inculcated. "Without it," Krauskopf wrote in 1898, "creation would have no purpose, the universe no meaning, God no existence, [and] mankind no reason for not quickly ending its stay in this vale of tears by a speedy exit through the gateway of suicide."[176] And he went on to exclaim: "What madness, what cruelty" for God to have created humans and

> to make their existence full of want and hardship; moreover, to design and endow… the human species with capacities and yearnings and aspirations for the highest and noblest ends – and all for no other purpose than that they might live and struggle and suffer their brief day, and then rot and be forgot, and add so much dust to this earthy crust.[177]

For Krauskopf, the materialist's nihilism was unthinkable. In fact, he insisted, if one's existence did indeed end with death, as was claimed, it would still be preferable to live one's life as though this were not the case. Remarkably, he believed that

> [E]ven though we err, even though it be but a dream, a mere delusion, then, far better so sweet a dream, so comforting a delusion than the agonising thought: that death means *total annihilation*… Better to look upon the coffin of the material as the cradle of the spiritual… than to see naught else there than darkness and corruption and the hungry worm.[178]

Such an open admission suggested that Krauskopf was confident that others, too, would recognize the wisdom of such an attitude of hope – and the impotency and insensitivity of materialism's response to suffering.

As we have seen, the subject of the afterlife features prominently in Reform discussions of skepticism and of the conflict between religion and science in a number of different ways. For several thinkers, the question of immortality lay in a realm beyond science's grasp, but for others, it was science itself, and especially evolutionary science, that suggested the very possibility. This interest

---

soul's gradual emancipation from the tyranny of matter in old age; 6) the justice of God and the problem of suffering.

175 Krauskopf, "After Death – What?," 11.

176 "Laid to Rest" (Sunday Lecture, January 2, 1898), cited in Blood, *Apostle of Reason: A Biography of Joseph Krauskopf*, 158.

177 Krauskopf, "Laid to Rest," 158–59.

178 Krauskopf, "After Death – What?," 12.

in the topic makes it a distinctive feature of North American classic Reform Jewish thought, and it is no coincidence that the Pittsburgh Platform gives such prominence to the claim, with Section Seven stating:

> We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.[179]

Once again, the prominence of this subject can be explained in large part by reference to the context of wider debates about skepticism and materialism in the late nineteenth century, in this case in relation to the problem of suffering. It is worth noting that it was by no means inevitable that a discussion of immortality would have featured in such debates – there are very many aspects of religion that critics attacked, but the teaching of a future life was not a particularly important one. In fact, while "The Great Agnostic," Ingersoll, did dismiss the possibility of life beyond the grave, portraying it as a dangerous teaching of the Church that distracted from making the world a better place,[180] Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture movement, actually allowed for the possibility.[181] But several things came together which help account for this interest in the afterlife and the considerable amount of time and effort that was invested in attempting to dismiss traditional Jewish teachings of the resurrection of the dead. In part the interest was due to the link between the hope of a future resurrection and the Zionist hope for the restoration of the Land, concerning which many Reform Jews were critical, and in part it was due to the likely non-Jewish origins of the belief.[182] But the key issue was that human

179 Section Seven reads: "We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward." For the text of the Platform, see Jacob, *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect*.

180 Robert G. Ingersoll, "Hereafter" (Manchester: Abel Heywood, 1882).

181 Felix Adler, "Immortality" (New York: Society of Ethical Culture for New York, 1904), 8–9.

182 Petuchowski argues that Kohler associated the promises of resurrection with the promises of the restoration of the Land, which, as an anti-Zionist, made the idea of resurrection particularly unpalatable to him. Petuchowski, "'Immortality: Yes; Resurrection: No!' Nineteenth-Century Judaism Struggles with a Traditional Belief," 145–47. In support, Hirsch and Kohler suggested that the fact that Sadducees believed in the resurrection, while Pharisees did not, was best explained by their "national and anti-national attitudes rather than [...] their philosophical or religious dogmas." Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "articles of faith." Kohler wrote more about this, saying, "The Jewish belief in resurrection is intimately

reason rejected the miraculous, and that the miraculous resurrection of the body, that is, a belief based upon a pre-scientific worldview, left Judaism open to ridicule.[183] At the same time, there was also a concern to show that belief in the immortality of the soul was entirely reasonable. Presumably, as a correlate of human nature, immortality did not fall into the category of the miraculous. Considering the context of the wider debate about disbelief, a distinction between bodily resurrection and spiritual immortality makes good sense. On the one hand, the rabbis demonstrated their modernist skeptical credentials in rejecting the pre-modern, alien beliefs that had shaped the traditional Jewish teaching of the resurrection of the dead, thus avoiding the ridicule of the critics of religion. On the other hand, the Reformers addressed the problem of suffering with the promise of future justice in an afterlife, which went a long way toward countering the nihilism and pessimism that they believed an atheistic worldview offered. Belief in immortality was reasonable – after all, even the agnostic Adler agreed it might be possible – and several went so far as to argue that science, that is, evolutionary science, actually justified belief in immortality. The Reformers could thus offer a very a powerful hope which unbelievers like Ingersoll could not, and which Adler could allow only grudgingly.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate the role of Reform Jews' engagement with unbelievers in explaining certain characteristics of nineteenth-century Reform Jewish thought in the United States. One might object to this view, however, and assert that indeed the opposite is true – that it was instead a growing interest in skepticism and doubt among Reform Jewish leaders that ultimately caused a change of heart towards unbelievers such as Adler and

bound up with the hope for the restoration of the Israelitish nation on its own soil, and consequently rather national; indeed, originally purely local and territorial." Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered*, 392. Kohler was also suspicious of the non-Jewish origins of the idea, although he changed his mind several times in the course of his career as to whether the origins were Persian or not. In Philadelphia, the father of radical Reform Judaism, David Einhorn (1809–1879), had suggested that the idea of the resurrection of the body was of Persian origin. At the time, Kohler, his son-in-law, had disagreed, stating that the supposition that the doctrine of Resurrection was of Persian origin was by no means established and that the time would come when the influence of a Persian arch-civilization that had colored so much of the Bible would be found erroneous. Kohler had changed his position by the time of German publication in 1910 of his *Jewish Theology* where he stated "The whole conceptual framework of Resurrection originated without question in the Persian system of beliefs." *Grundriss einer systematischen Theologie des Judentums auf geschichtlicher Grundlage*, 226. However, he appeared to change his mind again when he removed this statement from the English translation in 1918.

183 Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered*, 297, 395.

Ingersoll. From this perspective, the new interest in doubt is better accounted for in terms of a generational change associated with the classical reforms of the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885, rather than as the result of engagement with such infidels. After all, it is striking that Wise (and mid-nineteenth-century contemporaries such as Isador Kalisch) had been aggressively opposed to biblical criticism, while the following generation of Reformers had had no such reservations. Was this not an example of the younger generation feeling less threatened than its elders by cultural change? It could certainly be argued that this shift in the movement's attitude towards the embracing of skepticism and doubt at the time of the Pittsburgh Platform would naturally enough lead to a greater appreciation of the value of these infidels and an interest in their shared concerns by the next generation of Reform leaders. However, there are problems with this explanation.

First, the "changing of the guard" argument for Reform's embrace of doubt really only works in one of the four areas we have been discussing, namely, biblical criticism. While one might want to distinguish between the first and second generation of Reform thinkers' attitudes toward modern critical biblical scholarship, the other challenges levied by the skeptics – namely, religious hypocrisy and moral failings, scientific materialism, and the problem of suffering – interested Wise just as much as they interested his successors. Second, one would still have to account for why the second generation chose to embrace doubt to the extent they did. Whatever other factors might be identified, whether internal or external, the influence and effect of engaging with high-profile infidels remains one of the most plausible. After all, the context of Reform writings on these subjects was frequently that of engagement with anti-religious skeptics; and, in making this argument, there are scholarly precedents.[184] Third, the argument for generational change does not do justice to some of the ideas that distinguished US Reform's discourse of doubt, in particular the approaches to immortality and panentheism, which, once again, were as much of interest to Wise as to his successors. Thus, it seems reasonable to view the theological approaches espoused by Reformers of the pre- and post-Pittsburgh period as, at least in part, a consequence of their engagement with unbelievers.

Michael Meyer has argued that representatives of the "classical" Reform Judaism of this period, such as Kohler and Hirsch, were not original Jewish thinkers and had effectively translated the ideas of Abraham Geiger and other Germans into the popular thought of American Reform. But this over-states

184 As noted earlier, Kraut suggests that Hirsch's social justice concerns, as featured in the Pittsburgh Platform, were likely influenced by Adler. Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*, 181.

the case: Meyer himself admits that there were "new foci" as a result of greater exposure to Christian theology and secular philosophies, which led to interest in higher biblical criticism, comparative religion, Darwinism, and social relevance.[185] As we have seen, to these one might add a panentheistic tendency and a pronounced interest in modernist justifications for immortality; issues in which there is very little solid evidence of interest among Reform Jews before this time, in the United States or elsewhere. When one considers that many of these "foci" arose in juxtaposition in debates about atheism, skepticism, and materialistic philosophy, and often explicitly in response to Ingersoll's or Adler's attacks on institutional religion, it seems sensible to suggest that one of the most significant factors shaping US Reform at this formative period was the wider discourse of doubt. After all, as proponents of unbelief, both Ingersoll and Adler were high profile and prolific; Ingersoll's popularity and notoriety made him nothing less than a cultural phenomenon, and Adler's reputation as a social reformer and his insider knowledge of Judaism made him impossible to ignore within Jewish circles. Together they were instrumental in creating an environment that was unique to the United States and which generated highly distinctive responses to the highly distinctive challenges facing Jewish Reformers at that time.

For the leaders of North American Reform Judaism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, then, the challenge presented by systematic doubt cast something of a pall over their work. An examination of these leaders' engagement with Ingersoll, Adler, and unbelief more generally brings the key issues into high relief. Unsurprisingly, they felt obliged to argue *against* the skepticism of agnostic or atheistic critics of religion; in their view, these had thrown the baby out with the bath water, had falsely claimed a monopoly upon science, ethics, and social justice, and could offer only a pessimistic, nihilistic vision of the future. But Reformers of both the first and second generation could hardly avoid the reality that their progressive movement was itself frequently skeptical in its approaches to religious texts, traditions, and rituals. Thus they argued for the *healthy* skepticism of a rational faith wherein challenges to naïve biblical beliefs rightly took center stage, where there was an imperative to demonstrate that Judaism could be reconciled with science, and where criticism of religious hypocrisy and abuse was to be welcomed even when coming from opponents of religion. A shared conviction that the intellectual and moral progress of humankind had often been brought about by unbelievers meant that some Reformers came to appreciate and value the contributions of critics of religion like Ingersoll and Adler. All this helps explain some of the most distinctive aspects of US Reform Jewish thought, including how a panentheistic tendency is apparent

185 Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, 272.

alongside a de-anthropomorphizing programme in relation to biblical studies and/or in relation to the conflict between religion and science. Likewise, these factors help explain another particularly interesting part of this discourse, and one which reflects the inherent tension within Reform theology, namely, the idea of life after death. Here, a solid rejection of the pre-modern biblical belief in the resurrection of the dead accompanied a firm adherence to the idea of immortality as a reasonable belief that solved the problem of suffering and thus acted as a bulwark against the damaging effects of skepticism and unbelief.