

# Judaism and the Rise of Scientific Materialism after the Great War

Charles A. O'Connor, III

*Georgetown University*

More than three millennia ago, the Jews introduced monotheism to the Middle East in the person of an awesome, righteous, and loving God who created the heavens and the earth, pronounced them good, and gave humanity dominion over the earth. The Jews' belief in God enhanced their appreciation of nature, their quest for meaning, and their confidence about engaging the world for the better. The Jewish view of the world as God-given, meaning-laden, and inherently comprehensible permeated Western civilization and gave rise to modern Western empirical science (Smith 1991, 271–272, 279). But a modern scientific cosmology now poses the greatest challenge to Jewish theism and its historic worldview—and to monotheism generally. In this cosmology, called “scientific materialism” or “evolutionary materialism,” ultimate reality is essentially valueless matter obeying physical and natural laws with no transcendent meaning or purpose. For scientific materialists, the idea of a providential deity and purposeful universe is an untenable and delusional hypothesis (e.g., Dawkins 2008, 24; Dennett 1995, 18). Today, their atheistic worldview permeates academe and the secular intellectual establishment and reigns as the modern Western metaphysic (Haught 2007, 25; Nagel 2012, 127). This article explores Judaism's response to materialism's profound challenge to its long-standing theistic worldview.

Scientific materialism came to dominate Western thought shortly after the catastrophe of World War I, then called the Great War (1914–1918). Alfred North Whitehead defined it as “the fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations” ([1925] 1967, 17, 54–55). Its proponents

maintain that cosmic and biological evolution of irreducible brute matter fully accounts for the universe, nature, and humanity. Thus, scientific materialism strikes at the very heart of the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which attribute divinely inspired meaning and purpose to the physical universe. "Religion can get on with any sort of astronomy, geology, biology, physics," writes philosopher Walter Terence Stace, "but it cannot get on with a purposeless and meaningless universe. If the scheme of things is purposeless and meaningless, then the life of man is purposeless and meaningless too." In 1925, Whitehead declared scientific materialism to be the "reigning" conception of the universe in every university, and by midcentury, Stace considered it "the quintessence of what is called the modern mind" (1948, 54–55). In books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2008), today's outspoken New Atheists proclaim that modern science proves this materialist worldview, that reality therefore lacks meaning or purpose, and accordingly that God is "dead."

Thoughtful religious believers reasonably expect their religious leaders to supply an intellectually satisfying rebuttal to such a grave and purportedly science-based challenge to the Judeo-Christian worldview. But from the Great War until the last two decades of the twentieth century, Christian thought failed to grapple effectively with this modern atheistic cosmology. Mainstream Christian theology disregarded the religious implications of modern science and focused instead on the limits of human reason to understand God and God's relationship to the world (Protestant Neo orthodoxy), or on the psychic wounds of a disastrous war (Christian existentialism), or on the rationalist philosophy of being (Catholic Neo-Thomism). Indeed, Catholic Church leaders stifled the efforts of the Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to integrate cosmic and biological evolution into Christian thought. American fundamentalists addressed scientific materialism, but instead of challenging its metaphysics, they launched a scientifically untenable anti-Darwinian crusade based upon biblical literalism and inerrancy. Thus, for most of the post-World War I era, Christian theology failed to effectively reconcile the findings of modern science, especially Darwinian evolution, with its religious worldview (O'Connor 2014, chs. 1, 4, 8). This raises the obvious question: did Jewish thought leaders do any more than their Christian counterparts to address the materialist challenge to theism?

## Judaism

The search for an answer must begin with Judaism itself and its complex engagement with natural science. For Judaism, the book of *Genesis* unravels the mystery of reality in the form of a personal God who lovingly created the physical universe and human life and imbued them with intrinsic meaning, value, and purpose. Thus, Judaism found meaning in ideas of God, Creation, and human existence, writes religious studies scholar Huston Smith, with history serving as the theater of God's involvement and of life's opportunities "in tension between its divine possibilities and its manifest frustrations" (1991, 271–285). The Jews interpreted their suffering – their enslavement in Egypt and then Babylon, and the destruction of Solomon's Temple– as God's punishment for their lack of righteousness. Similarly, they interpreted their escape from Egyptian slavery, their release from Babylonian captivity, and their rebuilding the Second Temple as evidence of God's reward for their fidelity. Their particular status as God's "chosen people" (*Deuteronomy* 7:6 AV), however, did not connote security or privilege; it was a divine calling to bear an existential burden for the entire human family, to repair the world with acts of kindness (*tikum olam*). Indeed, since their escape from the Pharaoh (1250–1220 B.C.E.), the Jews have perceived the divine hand in their very survival as a distinct people, and with good reason. For many scholars, the Jews represent a unique and "rationally inexplicable" history of survival against seemingly insuperable odds throughout the three millennia since Exodus (Smith 294–97, 307–308).

The Jewish Diaspora began in 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. This ended the era of sacrificial rites by Temple priests and inaugurated the era of synagogue services and rabbinical study of the Pentateuch or Torah, the first five books of the Bible (Roberts 2009, 49–50). Rabbis (or teachers) emerged from among the many factions or sects of the Second Temple period and grounded Judaism in Torah study as a lifelong commitment and mode of worship. Their incessant questioning and logical analysis of the Torah is set forth in the Talmud, considered the more important because it was composed over many centuries and vast geographies and helps to constitute Judaism (Efron 2011, 23). Thus, rabbis became interpreters of the law, and this long rabbinic tradition of multiple biblical interpretations sets Judaism apart from Christian theology.

Judaism is a religion of practice rather than creed, of ethical and ritualistic obligations rather than doctrinal belief and commitment. As Smith explains, “Jews are united more by what they do than what they think.” Whereas the Greeks imbue the Western mind with abstract reason, emphasizing creed and theology characteristic of Christianity, the Jews focused more on “ritual and narrative” characteristic of the Eastern mind (Smith 1991, 300). Thus, Judaism has no official creed obliging adherence among its followers, although most religious Jews hold a central core of beliefs, including belief in a personal and caring God. Otherwise, Jews remain free to think as they wish because no single biblical interpretation governs, and their affiliation with a particular movement affects their practice rather than their creed (Rabbi Mark L. Winer, personal communications, December 16, 2014; December 29, 2015).

Given its broad ethnic, cultural, and religious makeup, Judaism today runs the gamut from literal belief in Torah as the word of God to outright atheism. Whereas the Ten Commandments set forth minimum ethical standards, from the rabbinic perspective the Bible prescribes some 613 ethical commandments, the most important dealing with force, wealth, sex, and speech. The level of commitment to the four sectors of Judaism (faith, observance, culture, and nation) marks the intensity of one’s Jewishness (Smith 1991, 286, 300, 312). With respect to the subject matter of this article, Judaism’s acceptance of multiple biblical interpretations, its emphasis of practice over creed, and its wide range of adherence tend to mitigate the imperative of addressing specific theological challenges. But materialism targets Judaism at its religious core, its basic theism and worldview. Materialism holds that at bottom the world is just valueless physical “stuff,” that life and mind are only chance byproducts of Darwinian evolution, that theological explanations of humanity and the universe are groundless and untenable, and that the idea of God is intellectually indefensible and delusional. Thoughtful religious Jews surely need and justifiably anticipate from their leading thinkers an intellectually sound critique of the scientific truth-claims for this atheistic cosmology and rejection of theism.

### **Judaism and Natural Science**

Torah study and Talmudic teaching among ancient Hebrews gave rise to widely divergent and often conflicting views toward nature and its study. Hegel famously distinguished Jewish from

pagan conceptions of nature by contending that Jews desacralized nature and subjected it to human ends. But according to science and religion scholar Noah Efron, the Jewish concept of nature differed from both pagan pantheism and Greek rationalism by regarding nature as both sacramental and material, passive and active, divinely created and humanly influenced. Because there was no specific Talmudic view of nature, rabbis initially accepted scholarly Jewish involvement in natural philosophy. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), a court physician and respected rabbi, insisted that natural philosophy was an autonomous field of inquiry. He considered nature a manifestation of divine power, advocated study of nature separate from theology, and saw no genuine conflict between the two—any perceived conflict arising from imperfect human understanding of God or nature or both. Maimonides inspired Jewish scholars but he also prompted a backlash from many rabbis who viewed science as “Greek” or “foreign” wisdom and a distraction from traditional Jewish study and spirituality (Efron 2011, 20–34).

From the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, only an elite minority among Jews (as well as Christians) pursued science or “natural philosophy,” which provided a shared Judeo-Christian foundation for theology, then the “queen of the sciences” (Efron 31–39). The outlier among Jewish intellectuals of the early Enlightenment was Baruch Spinoza (1631–1677), who developed a remarkably modern view of reality, best described as “scientific naturalism” (Morgan and Gordon 2007, 6). He divorced the idea of God from its traditional personal, providential, moral, and eschatological characteristics. Instead, he equated God with the cosmos itself; God and Nature were interchangeable, a single infinite substance without any external cause and with infinite attributes of mind and matter. For Spinoza, mind and matter were attributes of a single infinite substance (God or Nature) and, therefore, he was not strictly speaking a scientific materialist because he did not reduce ultimate reality to valueless matter in a godless universe (Stumpf 1983, 241–244). Nevertheless, Spinoza’s heretical views are wholly at odds with *Genesis*. He rejects God as a transcendent Creator and the universe as purposeful, so understandably, the Amsterdam Synagogue expelled him. According to Efron, however, Spinoza eventually influenced many Jews to “see science as a foundation for their worldview and cease to see their religion as the alpha and omega of their identity” (Efron 2011, 41).

Modern empirical science began in the West rather than in the East, according to Whitehead, because of the Judeo-Christian worldview: “the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality” ([1925] 1967, 12). Enlightenment thought, however, soon placed into dispute Judaic convictions about nature’s divine ordering and supervision. The religious skeptic David Hume (1711–1766) questioned the mind’s capacity to understand essential reality or to prove God’s existence based upon the observable world. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) promptly responded with a new theory of knowledge and moral idealism. Kant agreed with Hume that the human mind could not comprehend the essence of things or prove the existence of God, but Kant countered that practical reason could devise moral principles on which to rationally postulate God’s existence and the soul’s immortality (Livingston 2006, 63–64).

In the eighteenth century, Jewish intellectuals (*maskilim*) of the so-called Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) were drawn to Kant’s moral idealism and natural (or rational) religion—not to defend Judaism’s worldview against religious skeptics like Hume, but to explain Judaism as a natural religion and thereby foster Jewish assimilation into Christian Europe. In his seminal work *Jerusalem* (1783), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) maintained that Judaism was fully consistent with Enlightenment ideals because it was fundamentally a natural religion. Although controversial among rabbis, the *Haskalah* movement continued throughout the nineteenth century, personified by Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), the first Jewish professor in a German University. Cohen’s lifelong project was to synthesize Kantian idealism and Judaism, linking Judaism and Christianity as natural religions and arguing that they were precursors to a universal ethical kingdom (Poma 2007). In the mid-nineteenth century, Judaism split into three branches—Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative—and Kant’s ideas resonated with *maskilim* from all three (Roberts 2009, 51–52).

Reactions among nineteenth-century Christian theologians to Darwinian evolution are well documented, but reports of contemporary Jewish attitudes are scarce because only a small number of rabbis ever commented on it (Cantor 2011, 50–52). One such was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), the first

Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, who asserted that “Evolutionary theory which is now achieving such world-wide acclaim coincides with the lofty doctrines of Kabbalah” (quoted in Feit 2006, 216). In nineteenth-century America, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis remained divided over evolution, whereas ultra-Orthodox rabbis rejected it outright as a secular scientific shortcoming that distracts from Torah study and devotional ritual (Cantor 2011, 52–54). Instead, issues of practice and Zionism, rather than philosophy or theology, dominated Jewish thought in both the United States and Europe.

In summary, during the two millennia before the Great War, Jewish thought generally marginalized natural science. Some Jewish scholars like Maimonides considered nature a manifestation of the divine and worthy of investigation, and Spinoza remained an outlier with his heretical scientific naturalism. During the Enlightenment the Judeo-Christian worldview encountered many scientific and philosophic challenges to which Christian thinkers like Kant, among numerous others, responded authoritatively (O’Connor 2014, 15–44). By contrast, Judaism largely disengaged from the philosophic-scientific controversies surrounding the Judeo-Christian worldview. Instead, the *maskilim* focused on Kantian idealism and natural religion to support Jewish social assimilation rather than to defend Jewish theism. Until the Great War, therefore, Christian rather than Jewish intellectuals served as the champions the Judeo-Christian perspective on ultimate reality.

### World War I, Scientism, and Materialism

For most intellectual and cultural historians, World War I marked the turning point in modern Western civilization—it “changed reality” (e.g., Hynes 1991, xi; Baumer 1977, 402). As a consequence, according to intellectual historian Franklin L. Baumer, the war required a fundamental rethinking of theological issues, which had become “not merely controversial, but meaningless, to a significant number of people, including theologians.” After the war’s unspeakable carnage, Jewish and Christian thinkers alike confronted its psychic toll on humanity and attendant difficulty of talking about God. “Nor can the antimetaphysical climate, exemplified by both existentialism and the positivistic explosion, make things easy for a certain kind of religious thinking,” writes Baumer, “it made theological metaphysics suspect, thus driving religion into the realm of faith,

which, for the foregoing, as well as other reasons, ‘secularist man’ could no longer accept” (410, 444).

For religious thinkers, the problem posed by scientific materialism was its purported grounding in science, materialism’s epistemological backbone. Science emerged from the war relatively intact, and quickly assumed primacy as arbiter of truth, the only route to genuine knowledge about the nature of reality. “I cannot admit any method of arriving at truth except that of science,” asserted philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), typifying this point of view: “what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know” (Russell [1935] 1961, 189, 243). This epistemological axiom, often called scientism, deems the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, to be the only authoritative source of knowledge about ultimate reality. Scientism undergirds materialism, and together they present “a radical conflict,” according to Jewish philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim, “between Biblical and rabbinic faith, on the one hand, and modern, scientifically inspired secularism on the other” (Fackenheim ([1970] 1997, 43).

For materialists, science had established “irreducible brute matter,” understood by physics and chemistry, as the essential reality—a metaphysical, not a scientific, conclusion. Thus, materialists drained the life out of nature, sapped nature of its prewar vitality, meaning, and purpose, and left it a lifeless mechanism—a metaphysical fatality of the Great War. Previously, “the cosmos once *was* alive as perceived by man,” asserted Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993), but now “the lifeless has become the knowable par excellence and is for that reason also considered the true and only foundation of reality.” Lifeless matter was more real than life itself; dead matter was primordial and life only epiphenomenal—a metaphysic that Jonas called “an ontology of death,” and “the mere indifference of matter” (Jonas [1966] 2001, 10–12).

To reassure believers that this moribund reality was just a belief system posturing as scientific truth, theologians and philosophers needed to defend the Judeo-Christian worldview by showing the compatibility of science and religion and exposing the limits of epistemic scientism and metaphysical materialism. In 1925, Whitehead did just that; he revealed materialism’s central methodological flaw: it turns scientific reductions, like the physical and chemical constituents of an organism, into metaphysical reductionism, as if such constituents constituted ultimate reality.



Whitehead called this reductionism the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness: materialists had mistaken scientific abstractions for concrete reality and “foisted onto philosophy the task of accepting them as the most concrete rendering of fact.” Philosophers, he admonished, are “the critics of abstractions” like scientific materialism; they pursue a wider field of vision, a broader empiricism, than just theoretic science in the search for truth about reality (Whitehead [1925] 1967, 18, 51-59, 66-67). Epistemic scientism ignores our basic experience and intuition of the world and inevitably leads to materialism’s metaphysical dead-end. But few postwar religious thinkers, Christian or Jewish, heeded Whitehead’s call, and materialism continued largely unchallenged.

### **Postwar Jewish Thought: Rosenzweig and Buber**

Two prominent Jewish thinkers, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) and Martin Buber (1878–1965), responded to the Great War in ways similar to their Protestant counterparts, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich—reverting to biblical revelation and pioneering religious existentialism, while rejecting prewar philosophic idealism and natural theology. Rosenzweig was a friend and mentee of Cohen and began his career as a German idealist with his 1913 doctoral thesis entitled *Hegel and the State*. But the war produced an apocalypse in Rosenzweig of “near-theological proportions,” writes historian Peter Eli Gordon. Rosenzweig “staged a Nietzschean rebellion against German idealism,” rejected his Hegel thesis “as an artifact of the world destroyed,” and began work on *The Star of Redemption* (1921), drawing on the writings of Hermann Cohen, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche (Gordon 2007, 123-26, 139, 18). In *The Star* Rosenzweig argued that philosophical and religious thought had become remote from daily life and had alienated humanity from a genuine encounter with God through biblical revelation and adherence to Jewish law. Like Karl Barth, Rosenzweig considered God the “other”—beyond human comprehension—and he undertook *The Star*, writes Gordon, to “guide the reader, both Jewish and Christian, toward the precipice of a this-worldly leap into religious commitment” (126–29, 132–34). While Rosenzweig critiqued the Western metaphysical tradition from Parmenides to Hegel, his overriding concern was restoring human contact with God rather than defending Judaism against materialism.

Like Rosenzweig, Buber developed an early interest in Kant, Nietzsche, and the Hebrew Bible, which they collaborated in

translating into German. But their views differed in several respects. Rosenzweig believed Jews should remain a covenant community rather than a political entity, whereas Buber became a passionate Zionist. Rosenzweig emphasized Jewish law, whereas Buber favored dialogic human relationships to encounter the divine (Roberts 2009, 87). The war profoundly affected Buber, as it had Rosenzweig; Buber thought he had failed a troubled young man who later died at the Front, and he suffered a friend's rebuff and felt remorse for initially supporting the Kaiser's war. Consequently, he determined to transform his views about interpersonal relations in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment (Wright 2007, 102–103, 105–106).

The result was Buber's influential book *I and Thou* (1923), which distinguishes the "I–Thou" relationship, in which two people are completely present and responsive to one another, from the "I–It" relationship, in which one person objectifies rather than genuinely encounters another. For Buber, I–It relationships merely use people as things, much as science does to gain knowledge of the world. Buber certainly recognized that objectifying science can produce a materialist worldview—an I–It relationship with the world—leading to a feeling of alienation, even despair. Indeed, *I and Thou* eloquently describes the materialist world where "the wandering stars now rule in senseless and oppressive might" and humanity loses its subjectivity and freedom. "If a man lets it have the mastery, the continually growing world of *It* overruns him and robs him of the reality of his own *I*"; materialism is fatalistic and "leaves no room for freedom." Buber faults traditional religion and theology for "making God into a thing," and thwarting genuine access to the "Eternal Thou" (Buber [1923] 1958, 46, 55–57, 112). God is not accessible through practice and theory but through interpersonal I–Thou relationships—an inexpressible revelatory experience of the infinite, eternal God through the medium of finite, temporal individuals.

But Buber, like Rosenzweig, endeavored to restore human access to God rather than to address materialism's challenge to Jewish theism. "Buber often seems to be more concerned with conveying a teaching intended for spiritual guidance than with elaborating a philosophical doctrine," writes Jewish studies scholar Tamara Wright (2007, 106). Buber focuses on achieving spiritual release from the materialist worldview rather than on examining its underlying epistemology or overarching metaphysics. He ignores materialism's purportedly scientific claims that human subjectivity

is essentially unreal, just the (mis)firing of brain matter, and that human freedom is illusory, just the deterministic workings of physical and natural laws devoid of divine involvement. Buber's omission is the more surprising because epistemic scientism and metaphysical materialism objectify the human person and create the ethical and cultural vacuum that contributed to the century's human atrocities. While providing valuable spiritual guidance and inspiration, Buber and Rosenzweig provide little intellectual comfort to either religious or agnostic Jews who confront the increasingly outspoken materialist truth-claims.

Scientific materialism soon filled the postwar theological vacuum resulting from what Baumer considered "the patent failure of religion to encompass, or even to fit satisfactorily into, the scientific worldview" (Baumer 1977, 442). By midcentury, Stace considered materialism's view of the "dead universe" to be characteristic of the modern mind (Stace 1948, 53, 55). After Stace came French biochemist and Nobel laureate Jacques Monod who disparaged the Judeo-Christian worldview as a discredited animist projection of nature's biological invariance, "a disgusting farrago of Judeo-Christian religiosity," and a cowardly failure to accept humanity's "fundamental isolation" in an indifferent universe (Monod 1972, 171–173). The New Atheists followed Monod, characterizing God as an intellectually indefensible delusion. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins called the Abrahamic God a "spectacularly weak" "scientific hypothesis about the universe" (Dawkins 2008, 24); and philosopher Daniel C. Dennett dismissed the idea of a providential God as "a myth of childhood, not anything a sane undeluded adult could literally believe in" (Dennett 1995, 18). Unsurprisingly, atheistic materialism saturated the scientific establishment. In 1999, *Scientific American* reported that ninety percent of the 1800 members of the National Academy of Sciences were atheists or agnostics and only forty percent of all American scientists believed in a personal God (Larson and Witham 1999, 90). Not long after the Great War, therefore, scientific materialism had effectively supplanted the Judeo-Christian worldview.

### **Recent Jewish Engagement with Modern Science**

In the United States after World War I, Jews began to play an increasingly prominent role in American intellectual life following two waves of immigration. From 1881 to 1924, more than 2 million Eastern European Jews came to escape anti-Semitic

pogroms following the 1881 assassination of Czar Alexander II; in the 1930s, highly educated Western European Jews came to escape fascism. According to Cantor, most of the Jewish intellectuals in postwar America were secular, particularly those entering the sciences. They turned away from religion while holding onto certain aspects of Jewish culture in their pursuit of secular lifestyles. Faced with Jewish quotas in universities, ambitious young Jews found the sciences less discriminatory than the liberal arts and a surer route to social equality, intellectual achievement, and widespread recognition. Unsurprisingly, Jewish scientists made disproportionately significant contributions in their fields (Cantor 2011, 56—61).

Jewish scientists held diverse views toward religion, which Cantor exemplifies by discussing Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Steven Weinberg (b. 1933), and Albert Einstein (1879–1955). Freud thought that his Jewish background liberated him from conventional thinking and freed him to express radical scientific views about sex drives and religious irrationality. The American Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg, a prominent scientific materialist and New Atheist, declared:

It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes, but that we were somehow built in from the beginning. ... It is very hard to realize that this is all just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless (1977, 154).

To Weinberg, the universe is purposeless and God is nonexistent.

Einstein rejected the idea of a personal God concerned “with the fate and doings of mankind,” but also declared he was not an atheist; his idea of God was “that deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe” (quoted in Isaacson 2007, 386–88). Whether Einstein’s “cosmic religious feeling” constitutes belief in

Spinoza's God, as he claimed, or belief in an impersonal, deistic Creator who transcends nature remains contentious. Cantor and Walter Isaacson, Einstein's biographer, consider Einstein's idea of God as deistic and thus different from Spinoza's idea of God as nature itself, whereas theologian John F. Haught considers Einstein effectively an atheist because he rejected belief in an interested, providential, and personal God and viewed the world as deterministic and devoid of human freedom (Cantor 2011, 60, 66n35; Isaacson 2007, 385; Haught, personal communication, December 31, 2015).

In the late 1920s, Conservative Rabbi Mortimer Kaplan (1881–1983) founded Reconstructionist Judaism to align Jewish thought with modern science, a movement considered “a blending of sociology and pragmatism in the form of religious naturalism” (Morgan and Gordon 2007, 9). But Kaplan's religious naturalism did not address the epistemic and metaphysical limitations of materialism or materialism's challenge to traditional Judaic theism (Swetlitz 2006, 52–54). In 1992, moreover, Reconstructionist Rabbi Arthur Green was still lamenting the failure of Jewish thought to address the relationship of science and God's involvement in cosmic and human creation (Swetlitz 2006, 47).

Carl Feit, a rabbi and professor of biology, asserts that Darwinism poses no problem for Jewish thought. In support he cites Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik “who based their analysis on fairly traditional readings of classic Jewish texts, [and] not only dismissed the notion of any conflict between modern science and the Torah, but actually found contemporary scientific notions of evolution and cosmology to be harmonious with classic rabbinic thought.” Personally reconciling Darwinian evolution with divine Providence is one thing, reassuring thoughtful religious Jews and persuading skeptical secular Jews quite another. Feit defends Kook and Soloveitchik's reconciliation on the grounds that they both wrote before the Neo-Darwinian synthesis of the 1940s, which recognized the role of genetics in evolution (2006, 224, 217). But the materialist challenge to theism based on evolution theory was well recognized by 1925, as exemplified by the Scopes Monkey Trial and by Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*. To rebut the metaphysical claims of a godless universe predicated on cosmic and biological evolution requires more thoughtful analysis. As Cantor points out, however, “rabbis have generally paid little attention to the sciences in their

sermons and writings,” and “the modern literature on the relation between Judaism and science is surprisingly thin” (2011, 55, 63).

In *Jewish Faith and Modern Science: On the Death and Rebirth of Jewish Philosophy* (2009), Jewish philosopher Norbert Samuelson is outspokenly critical of this failing of Judaism: “Never before in history have Jews as Jews contemplated less about the nature of the universe, the quality of life in the universe, and the relevance of Judaism to both life and the universe” (Samuelson 2009, 236–237). Samuelson asserts that modern Jewish philosophy is dead and requires revitalization to engage constructively with modern science. “Without modern science there is no Jewish philosophy,” he writes, “and this critical link is the source of our intellectual problem.” To restore this link Jewish philosophy must rethink its traditional claims about God and creation, which Samuelson considers both “wrong” and “unintelligible” (3–8, 12, 24). Referencing Whitehead’s process thought, Samuelson urges Jewish philosophy to confront materialism by showing that materialists have far exceeded the limits of their empirical methodology and have simplistically reduced mind and reality to the monism of matter (55–60, 160–175). A revitalized Judaism, he argues, must base its understanding of reality on science, but presently Jewish scientists play “no positive role in rethinking Judaism” and Jewish thinkers notably lack “any degree of scientific sophistication” (236). As a result, for Samuelson, Judaism has divorced the intellectual from the spiritual life of the Jewish people to both their detriment and that of Judaism itself.

## Conclusion

With its emphasis on ethical and ritualistic observance and its de-emphasis of creed and theology, Judaism over the centuries has remained largely disengaged from the potential theological implications of modern scientific developments. As a minority religion within Christian Europe, Judaism was less concerned about defending its religious beliefs against Enlightenment skeptics than advancing its societal status. The catastrophic Great War proved a turning point, however, for Judaism and Christianity alike: it produced profound changes in their ways of understanding and approaching God, and it produced epistemic and metaphysical challenges to the Judeo-Christian worldview. Significantly, mainstream Judaism and Christianity both pursued the former but ignored the latter. Rosenzweig and Buber placed important new emphasis on biblical revelation and personal encounter with God,

but they did not seriously address the foundational challenge to the Jewish theism posed by scientific materialism.

Although there is no inherent incompatibility between religion and science, materialists claim (erroneously) that science, especially cosmic and biological evolution, renders the cosmos and nature entirely self-explanatory and theism intellectually insupportable. Indeed, many secular Jews, including prominent Jewish scientists, embrace this atheistic metaphysic as the only credible worldview. Because mainstream Judaism is staunchly monotheistic, the relative quiescence of rabbinical voices on materialism's outspoken challenge to cosmic meaning and purpose is remarkable and troubling. Although some prominent rabbis have (no doubt properly) invoked the Kabbalahist idea of change to affirm evolution's consistency with the traditional Judaic worldview, their facile reversion to Jewish mysticism interposes a weak theological rejoinder to scientific materialism.

In summary, Jewish thinkers have not critically examined the growing challenge to Jewish theism posed by the rise of scientific materialism in academe and the secular intellectual establishment since the Great War. Judaism's elevation of practice over creed and religion over science may explain but hardly justifies such intellectual disregard. It downplays the importance of Judaism's gift of monotheism to the West and reinforces Samuelson's claim that modern Jewish philosophy is moribund. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, mainstream Christian thinkers also failed to integrate modern science into their theology and to confront materialism. In recent decades, however, Christian theologians like John F. Haught have refined and strengthened Christian teaching about God and the universe in light of cosmic and biological evolution, and their views have begun to influence Jewish thought (Haught 2000; e.g., Troster 2006, 225, 240–245). By disengaging from scientific materialism over the past century, however, Judaism, like mainstream Christianity, has enabled an atheistic scientific cosmology to displace the Judeo-Christian worldview as the dominant metaphysic of Western civilization.

#### *Acknowledgments*

I thank the following individuals for their helpful advice and assistance in preparing this article: Rabbi Mark L. Winer, Rabbi Dr. Peter S. Knobel, Professor John F. Haught, Mayor Earl M. Leiken of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Rabbi Brian Leiken, and Charles

A. O'Connor IV. This article rectifies the omission of Jewish thought in my book *The Great War and the Death of God*, which focuses primarily on Christian thought.

*References*

- Baumer, Franklin L. 1977. *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950*. New York: McMillan Publishing.
- Brooke, John Hedley and Ronald L. Numbers, eds. 2011. *Science & Religion Around the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buber, Martin. [1923] 1958. *I and Thou*, 2d ed., trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Cantor, Geoffrey. 2011. "Modern Judaism" in Brooke and Numbers, *Science & Religion Around the World*, 44-66.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Marc Swetlitz, eds. 2006. *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dawkins, Richard. 2008. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1995. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Efron, Noah. 2011. "Early Judaism." in Brooke and Numbers, *Science & Religion Around the World*, 20-43.
- Fackenheim, Emil L. [1970] 1997. *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*. Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Feit, Carl. 2006. "Modern Orthodoxy and Evolution: the Models of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik and Rabbi A. I. Kook" in Cantor and Swetlitz, *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, 208-224.
- Gordon, Peter Eli. 2007. "Franz Rosenzweig and the Philosophy of Jewish Existence" in Morgan and Gordon, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 122-46.
- Haught, John F. 2007. *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hynes, Samuel. 1991. *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. New York: Atheneum.
- Isaacson, Walter. 2007. *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Jonas, Hans. [1966] 2001. *The Phenomenon of Life*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.



- Larson, Edward J. and Larry Witham. Sept. 1999. "Scientists and Religion in America." *Scientific American* 281: 88-93.
- Livingston, James C. 2006. *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Monod, Jacques. 1972. *Chance and Necessity*. New York: Vantage Books.
- Morgan, Michael L. and Peter Eli Gordon, eds. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . "Introduction: Modern Jewish Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, and Modern Judaism" in Morgan and Gordon, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 1-13.
- Nadler, Steven. 2007. "Baruch Spinoza and the Naturalization of Judaism" in Morgan and Gordon, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 14-34.
- Nagel, Thomas. 2012. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Charles A., III. 2014. *The Great War and the Death of God: Cultural Breakdown, Retreat from Reason, and Rise of Neo-Darwinian Materialism in the Aftermath of World War I*. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing.
- Poma, Andrea. 2007. "Hermann Cohen: Judaism and Critical Idealism" in Morgan and Gordon, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 80-101.
- Roberts, Tyler. 2009. "Judaism and Modernity" and "Modern Jewish Philosophy." In *Skeptics and Believers: Religious Debate in the Western Intellectual Tradition, Course Guidebook*, 49-52; 87-89. Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company.
- Rosenzweig, Franz. [1921] 1985. *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. [1935] 1961. *Religion and Science*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Samuelson, Norbert M. 2009. *Jewish Faith and Modern Science: On the Death and Rebirth of Jewish Philosophy*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield.
- Smith, Huston. [1958] 1991. *The World's Religions*, rev. ed. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Stace, Walter Terence. Sept.1948. "Man against the Darkness," *The Atlantic Monthly*: 55-58.

- Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. 1983. *PHILOSOPHY: History & Problems*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Swetlitz, Marc. 2006. "Responses to Evolution by Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Rabbis in Twentieth-Century America," in Cantor and Swetlitz, *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, 47-70.
- Troster, Lawrence. 2006. "The Order of Creation and the Emerging God: Evolution and Divine Action in the Natural World." in Cantor and Swetlitz, *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, 225-46.
- Weinberg, Steven. 1977. *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe*. New York: Basic Books.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. [1925] 1967. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: Free Press.
- Wright, Tamara. 2007. "Self, Other, Text, God: the Dialogic Thought of Martin Buber" in Morgan and Gordon, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 102-21.