

# The American Jewish Experience and the Emergence of the Muslim Community in America

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Efforts to foretell the future of the American Jewish community date far back to the nineteenth century, and for the most part the prophecies have been exceedingly gloomy. Former President John Adams predicted in a letter to Mordecai Noah in 1819 that Jews might "possibly in time become liberal Unitarian Christians." A young American Jewish student named William Rosenblatt, writing in 1872, declared that the grandchildren of Jewish immigrants to America would almost surely intermarry and abandon the rite of circumcision. Within fifty years "at the latest," he predicted, Jews would be "undistinguishable from the mass of humanity which surrounds them." Just under a century later, in 1964, *Look* magazine devoted a whole issue to the "Vanishing American Jew," at the time a much-discussed subject. More recently, in 1984, Rabbi Reuven Bulka, in a book entitled *The Orthodox-Reform Rift and the Future of the Jewish People*, warned that "we are heading towards a disaster of massive proportions which the North American Jewish community simply cannot afford."<sup>1</sup>

So far, thank God, all of these predictions have proven wrong. The Jewish people lives on. Some might consider this a timely reminder that (as someone once said) "prediction is very difficult, especially about the future." Others may view our continuing survival as nothing less than providential: evidence that God, in a display of His divine mercy, is watching over us. A third view, my own, is that precisely because Jews are so worried about survival, we listen attentively to prophets of doom and respond to them. Gloom-

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<sup>1</sup>John Adams to M. M. Noah (March 15, 1819), reprinted in Moshe Davis, *With Eyes toward Zion* (New York: Arno, 1977), 19; W. M. Rosenblatt, "The Jews: What Are They Coming To," *Galaxy* 13 (January 1872): 60; Thomas B. Morgan, "The Vanishing American Jew," *Look* 28 (5 May 1964): 42-46; Reuven P. Bulka, *The Coming Cataclysm* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1984), 14; see also Stephen J. Whitfield, *American Space, Jewish Time* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), 171-91.

and-doom prophets function historically as a kind of Jewish early-warning system: their Jeremiads hit home and produce necessary changes. For this reason, contemporary prophets, much like the Biblical Jonah, are often fated to spend their lives as "self-negating prophets." Their widely publicized prophecies, instead of being fulfilled, usually result in the kinds of changes needed to "avert the evil decrees."

With this in mind, I should like to focus here on a basic challenge to the character of contemporary American religion that seems to me fraught with serious implications for American Jewish identity in the coming decades, and which is all too little discussed in professional Jewish circles. Specifically, my subject concerns the decline of the Judeo-Christian, Protestant-Catholic-Jew model of American religion, and the growth of non-Judeo-Christian religions, particularly Islam. While, broadly speaking, I see this development as part of a larger process that Robert Wuthnow understands as nothing less than "the restructuring of American religion."<sup>2</sup> I am going to focus here on the subject at hand, and postpone discussion of other aspects of this "restructuring" for another occasion.

To understand the decline of the Judeo-Christian, Protestant-Catholic-Jew model of American religion requires first a brief excursion into history. For well over a century after the Constitution was promulgated, a great many Americans still believed that they lived in a Christian, often more narrowly defined as a Protestant country. The First Amendment did not bother those who held this view, for they believed, following Justice Joseph Story, that

[t]he real object of the amendment was not to countenance, much less to advance Mahometanism, or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity; but to exclude all rivalry among Christian sects, and to prevent any national ecclesiastical establishment, which should give to all hierarchy the exclusive patronage of the national government.<sup>3</sup>

"Christian America" advocates were also not bothered by challenges from non-Christians. Given late-nineteenth-century figures showing that Protestant churches outnumbered all the others by a factor of more than ten to one, dissenters could be safely dismissed, if not altogether ignored.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States* (Boston, 1833), as reprinted in John F. Wilson and Donald L. Drakeman, *Church and State in American History* (Boston: 1987), 92-3.

<sup>4</sup>Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford, 1971), 118.

Even the Supreme Court agreed in 1892 that "this is a Christian nation." The justice who wrote that decision, David Brewer, the son of a missionary, subsequently defended his views in a widely published lecture unabashedly titled *The United States: A Christian Nation* (1905).<sup>5</sup> Jews certainly objected to this formulation, and consistently battled against the whole "Christian America" idea. But they did not make a great deal of headway.<sup>6</sup>

The more inclusive conception of America as a "Judeo-Christian" nation, referring to values or beliefs shared by Jews and Christians alike, developed only in the twentieth century, though adumbrations of it may be found a century or more earlier. Mark Silk, whose account I follow here, traces the contemporary use of this term to the 1930s. "What brought this usage into regular discourse," he writes, "was opposition to fascism. Fascist fellow travelers and anti-Semites had appropriated 'Christian' as a trademark ... 'Judeo-Christian' thus became a catchword for the other side." Using a wide range of examples from this period, Silk shows how "Judeo-Christian" gradually became the standard liberal term for the idea that Western values rested upon a shared religious consensus. "We speak now, with still inadequate but steadily expanding understanding, of the Judeo-Christian heritage," Hebrew Union College president Julian Morgenstern thus wrote in 1942. "We comprehend, as we have not comprehended in all of nineteen hundred years, that Judaism and Christianity are partners in the great work of world-redemption and the progressive unfolding of the world-spirit." Ten years later, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke of the "Judeo-Christian concept" that formed the basis of "our form of government." "As of 1952," Silk concludes, "good Americans were supposed to be good Judeo-Christians. It was the new national creed."<sup>7</sup>

Side by side with this creed, there developed in America a new and more pluralistic model of how the nation's religious character should be conceptualized and described. Earlier, the standard textbooks, from Robert Baird's *Religion in America* (1843) to William Warren Sweet's *Story of Religion in*

<sup>5</sup>Morton Borden, *Jews, Turks and Infidels* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 62-74; Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 98-100, 254-56.

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Jews and Church-State Relations: The Search for "Equal Footing"* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1989), esp. 4-10.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America since World War I* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 40-53. Silk provides numerous other quotations from this period in addition to the ones I have used here. See also Silk's "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1984): 65-85. In a forthcoming article, Benny Kraut will argue that the Judeo-Christian concept actually arose in the 1920s as part of that decade's interreligious "goodwill" movement. I am grateful to Professor Kraut for sharing his material with me prior to publication.

*America* (1930), adhered to what might be called the "Protestant synthesis"; they were overwhelmingly concerned, as Sydney Ahlstrom points out, with "the rise and development of the Protestant tradition."<sup>8</sup> With the twentieth-century decline of mainline Protestantism, the remarkable growth of Catholicism, the interreligious assault on wartime and postwar hatred, the rise of the interfaith movement, and the coming of age of non-Protestant intellectuals, this synthesis broke down. In place of the "Protestant tradition" paradigm, there arose a new tripartite model of American religion, the familiar trinity of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.

As early as 1920, before this ideology had fully crystallized, "leaders of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish groups united in an appeal to the people of America to help safeguard religious liberty from the menace of bigotry, prejudice and fanaticism." Seven years later, the National Conference of Jews and Christians was established (the name was changed in 1938-39), and by design it had three co-chairmen: Newton D. Baker, Protestant; Carlton J. H. Hayes, Catholic; and Roger W. Straus, Jew. The NCCJ's education program featured hundreds of local "round tables," each one "a body of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders" who joined together "to further the aims of the National Conference in its community." Everett R. Clinchy, the NCCJ's long-time executive director, developed this idea into a full-scale ideology, arguing that America consisted of three coequal "culture groups," each of which made valuable contributions to American life and should be encouraged to flourish. Within two decades, this tripartite approach to American religion was enshrined in countless symbols, from "equal-time" radio allotments on NBC to the famous Chapel of Four Chaplains, "an interfaith shrine" commemorating the 1943 sinking death—"standing on deck, arms linked, praying"—of four army chaplains, one Catholic, one Jewish, and two Protestant, on the *S.S. Dorchester*.<sup>9</sup>

What did more than anything else to make "Protestant-Catholic-Jew" a household concept was a book that appeared in 1955. Written by Will Her-

<sup>8</sup>Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 8-12; see R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford, 1986); and, more broadly, Henry W. Bowden, "The Historiography of American Religion," in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), vol. 1, 3-16.

<sup>9</sup>Everett R. Clinchy, "Better Understanding," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1942) vol. 2, 257; Louis Minsky, "National Conference of Christians and Jews," *ibid.*, vol. 8, 114; Benny Kraut, "Towards the Establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews: The Tenuous Road to Religious Goodwill in the 1920s," *American Jewish History* 77, no. 3 (March 1988): 388-412; *idem*, "A Wary Collaboration: Jews, Catholics and the Protestant Goodwill Movement" (forthcoming); Alex J. Goldman, "Alexander D. Goode," in *Giants of the Faith: Great American Rabbis* (New York, 1964), 311-29; see also Lance J. Sussman, "'Toward Better Understanding': The Rise of the Interfaith Movement in America and the Role of Rabbi Isaac Landman," *American Jewish Archives* 34 (April 1982): 35-51.



berg, recently characterized by David G. Dalin as "one of the most interesting Jewish intellectuals of the last half-century," it made the case for "the pervasiveness of religious self-identification along the tripartite scheme of Protestant, Catholic, Jew." According to Herberg, America had become a "'triple melting pot,'" restructured in three great communities with religious labels, defining three great 'communions' or 'faiths.'" "Not to be ... either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew," he warned, "is somehow not to be an American."<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1950s, then, both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the "triple melting pot" had become firmly entrenched components of American identity. Both models—and they were clearly linked—pointed to a more pluralistic understanding of America, an America that embraced Jews as equals. For Jews, all too used to being cast in the role of persecuted minority, this was a pleasant change. Indeed, it was so congenial that in a paper entitled "The Basic Task of the Synagogue in America," the Conservative Jewish lay leader Maxwell Abbell matter-of-factly read these assumptions back into history. "Americans," he explained, "have always spoken of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the basis of the religious life of the modern world, thus giving us Jews credit for the basic elements of this tradition. Americans have always spoken of the three great religions of this country as Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism, despite the fact that we Jews number only about five million out of about 160 million population."<sup>11</sup>

Abbell, and I think many other Jews as well, understood that Jews did not quite deserve the coequal status that America accorded them. They apparently hoped that Jews might compensate for their manifest numerical inequality by making a substantial contribution to American life. But there was a great danger here that I think we are only now beginning to appreciate; namely, that there was a large and indeed growing disjunction between myth and reality. Neither the Judeo-Christian tradition nor the "triple melting pot" adequately or accurately conveyed the full extent of American religious pluralism in all of its complex manifestations. For a long time, Americans lived with this disjunction, cognitive dissonance notwithstanding. Jews found their exaggerated status particularly convenient; an overwhelming number of Americans believed that Jews formed a far larger proportion of the nation's population than they actually did, and treated Jews accordingly.<sup>12</sup> But today these myths are

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<sup>10</sup>Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (rev. ed.), (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), esp. 256-57; David G. Dalin, "Will Herberg in Retrospect," *Commentary* 86 (July 1988): 38-43.

<sup>11</sup>Maxwell Abbell, "The Basic Task of the Synagogue in America," *Torch* (Winter 1955), reprinted in Milton Berger et al., *Roads to Jewish Survival* (New York: Block, 1967), 153.

<sup>12</sup>Charles H. Stembet et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 77.

dying. It behooves us to know why they are dying, and what the implications are for Jewish identity in the coming decades.

Silk demonstrates that the Judeo-Christian idea first met with resistance as far back as the 1940s. Criticisms included the charge that the concept was fuzzy (Harvard's Douglas Bush, for one, asked for "fuller hints of what the Hebraic-Christian tradition, to which all pay at least vague lip service, actually does or can mean in modern terms for modern men of good will"), and that it obscured age-old Jewish-Christian differences. The concept was further attacked in the wake of the 1967 Six Day War, an event that exposed deep theological fissures between Jews and Christians, especially with regard to Israel, and hastened a trend toward greater Jewish self-pride. More recently, "Judeo-Christian" has been attacked as a rhetorical ploy used by right-wing elements in order to promote an exclusively Christian political program.<sup>13</sup>

The so-called triple melting pot proved no more adequate as an explanatory concept. It seriously underestimated the importance of ethnic differences, totally misunderstood the significance of Evangelical Protestantism, and wrote off other American faiths completely, as if they did not exist at all. David Dalin points out that "even as Herberg was writing, new evangelical sects were arising and older ones were undergoing revitalization. Less than five years after the publication of *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, the sociologist Seymour M. Lipset could note that such fundamentalist sects were 'far stronger today than at any time in the 20th century,' and that the much-heralded growth in church membership was taking place precisely among these 'fringe sects,' rather than within the traditional Protestant 'mainline' denominations in which Herberg placed so much stock."<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, Herberg's model did help pave the way for subsequent discussions of American "civil religion." But the triple melting pot by itself was scarcely an adequate depiction of American religion in the 1950s, and was even less adequate thereafter.

Today, assumptions about America's Judeo-Christian character and its Protestant-Catholic-Jew makeup confront an even more critical problem: the rapid growth of American religions that are not Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, and that are totally outside the Judeo-Christian spectrum. I refer principally to Islam, among the fastest-growing religions in the United States, but we should also bear in mind the presence in America of so-called hidden religions (the term is J. Gordon Melton's), including metaphysical faiths, Eastern religions, Psychic or New Age religions, and the like. Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinley found in 1985 that non-Judeo-Christian faiths commanded the loyalty of twice as many Americans as Judaism and

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<sup>13</sup>Silk, *Spiritual Politics*, 42-4, 142-46, 180.

<sup>14</sup>Dalin, "Will Herberg in Retrospect," 42.

that nearly one American in ten reported no religious affiliation. In other words, at least 13 percent of all Americans do not fit our standard assumptions about America's religious character. This represents more than a four-fold increase in just thirty years, and there is every reason to believe that the number of these "exceptions" will continue to expand at a rapid rate.<sup>15</sup>

From the point of view of American Jews, the growth of American Islam merits special attention, especially given the organized Muslim community's hostility to Israel. Islam's emergence as a major American faith has failed until now to elicit much discussion in Jewish circles, probably from a fear of appearing religiously prejudiced. I am not familiar with a single scholarly study of what this development means to Jews, certainly none that investigates how Islam's rise may affect Jewish identity and life in the decades ahead. No detailed study can be attempted here either, but given my topic, "Jewish Identity in the Changing World of American Religion," some preliminary remarks are in order.

Historically, individual Muslims came to America as early as the colonial period. Small numbers of Muslims are known to have lived in various communities in the nineteenth century, but always as individuals; there was no organized Islamic presence. During the era of mass immigration (1880s—World War I), migration from what was then called Greater Syria increased owing to a wide variety of factors: political and economic insecurity, agricultural problems, overpopulation, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and the lure of economic advancement in the New World. Most of the immigrants were actually Christian Arabs, but a number of Muslims came too—"they hoped to earn as much as possible and then return home."<sup>16</sup> The oft-told story of the small Muslim community established near Ross, North Dakota, around 1900 demonstrates the difficulties that Muslims faced in a non-Muslim environment. To Jewish ears, the story sounds remarkably familiar.

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<sup>15</sup>Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: 1987), esp. 17; Silk, *Spiritual Politics*, 181. For an exhaustive survey of non-Judeo-Christian religions, see G. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Co., 1978, 1985). These "exceptions," it should be stressed, are not for the most part avowed secularists. Americans are simply defining religion in ways that they rarely if ever did before. For a valuable compilation of survey data regarding "unsecular America," see Richard J. Neuhaus, ed., *Unsecular America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1986), esp. 115-58.

<sup>16</sup>Anthony B. Toth, "The Syrian Community in New Castle and Its Unique Alawi Component, 1900-1940," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 69 (July 1986): 221-239; Newell S. Booth, Jr., "Islam in North America," *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), vol. 2, 725. For earlier sources, see George Dimitri Selim, comp., *The Arabs in the United States: A Selected List of References*, Mideast Directions bibliographies of the Library of Congress (Washington, 1983).



Before a mosque was built in the 1920s, prayer and ritual were conducted in private houses and led by the best informed among the group. Without a mosque for almost 30 years and without any cultural reinforcement from newcomers, the Muslims rapidly lost the use of Arabic, assumed Christian names, and married non-Muslims. The community dwindled as children moved away, and the mosque was abandoned by 1948.<sup>17</sup>

The most visible early centers of Islam in America were in Michigan, especially in the Detroit and Dearborn areas, for many Arab immigrants took jobs at the Ford plant. Other Muslim communities were established in East Coast and Midwest industrial centers. But given immigration restrictions and assimilation, the number of Muslims in America remained small—"a little over 100,000"—into the early 1960s. Since then, the nation's Islamic population has mushroomed, owing both to large scale immigration (14 percent of all immigrants into the United States now are Muslims) and to thousands of converts, especially blacks. Significant Islamic communities may be found in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and Toledo, Ohio. One recent study lists 598 mosques and Islamic centers operating in the United States, and estimates the number of American Muslims as "somewhere in the range of two to three million"—a conservative estimate.<sup>18</sup> "The high rate of birth, the growing number of converts, and the continuing flow of immigration," the study's authors conclude, "make it possible to predict that by the first decade of the twenty-first century Islam will be the second largest religious community in the United States."<sup>19</sup>

The Muslim community stands in the forefront of those who seek to break down the Judeo-Christian, Protestant-Catholic-Jew models of American religious life. Quite understandably, Muslim leaders feel that these models are exclusivistic; they imply that Muslims cannot participate as equals in American society. "We'd like people to start thinking of the U.S. as a Judeo-Christian-Muslim society," said Salam Al-Marayati, spokesman for the Muslim Political Action Committee. Another Muslim told researchers that he

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<sup>17</sup>Alix Naff, "Arabs," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 132.

<sup>18</sup>Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 3. *Time*, 23 May 1988, 49, quotes Carol Stone's estimate of 4,644,000 Muslims, and *New York Times*, 21 February 1989, 1, speaks of "6 million Muslims in the United States."

<sup>19</sup>Haddad and Lumis, *Islamic Values in the United States*, 3; *Time*, 23 May 1988, 49, makes the same point: "U.S. Muslims are expected to surpass Jews in number and, in less than 30 years, become the country's second largest religious community, after Christians."



looked forward to the day "when all will say 'Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims.'"<sup>20</sup> While such a change would not go far enough for those Muslims whose ultimate goal is to bring about an Islamic state in America, and would certainly not meet the needs of those whose faith is neither Judeo-Christian nor Muslim, it does bear out our earlier analysis. America's religious identity is changing; the way Jews understand American religion must change as well.

What are the implications of these changes for American Jews and American Jewish identity? Given what we have seen to be the rather poor results of earlier efforts to foretell American Jewry's future, I might be forgiven if, echoing Amos, I declared myself to be neither a prophet nor a prophet's disciple, and left it at that. But since the organizers of this conference have instructed me to pay special attention, at the very least, to the policy implications of my analysis, let me suggest ten possible changes that we may see in the years ahead, bearing in mind my earlier caution concerning self-negating prophecies. Some of these changes relate broadly to the new world of American religion that Jews must confront; the rest deal more narrowly with the growth of Islam and its possible ramifications.

1. The one-time familiar trinity of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews will, in the future, almost surely give way to a much wider religious circle. At the very least we shall have to include Muslims in the company of religious insiders; more likely, we shall have to expand the circle to include the full rank of American religious denominations, Eastern religions as well as Western ones.
2. Our image of American religion will have to change to comport more closely than it now does with statistical realities. As such, Jews may find themselves placed on an equal footing not with Protestants and Catholics, but, ironically, with Muslims, for both represent major world religions comprising less than 3 percent of the total U.S. population. A hint of what lies in store may already be found in J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (1978). The encyclopedia claims to explore "the broad sweep of American religions and describes 1200 churches." It divides American religion into seventeen "religious families," only ten of which basically follow Christian beliefs and practices. Jews do not even rate a religious family of their own in this classification; instead they are grouped together with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists under "the Eastern and Middle Eastern Family." "The inclusion here of the Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims in one family," J. Gordon Melton explains, "is

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<sup>20</sup>*Time*, 23 May 1988, 50; Haddad and Lumis, *Islamic Values in the United States*, 161.

based on shared characteristics, peculiar to their American sojourn, without negating their fundamental differences."<sup>21</sup>

3. Given the move away from the triple melting pot view of American religion, and the almost inevitable devaluation of Judaism's place in the panoply of American religion, Jews in the next few decades will have to endure what mainstream Protestants went through earlier in this century: the experience of status-loss, of feeling almost dispossessed. The rise in status that Jews experienced when the triple melting pot image gained ascendancy will, I believe, be partially if not wholly reversed. As a result, the Jewish community will have to learn how to live with a radically different image of itself—a much less flattering one.
4. As a consequence of all of the above, American Jews will receive far less textbook and media attention than they do now. Where for some years Jews benefitted from a disproportionate share of religious attention, almost on a par with Protestants and Catholics, now they will have to adjust their expectations down to a more realistic level in keeping with the Jewish community's actual size and significance.
5. Jewish political power in the years ahead may also fall into decline. As politicians become aware of America's changing religious situation, many may feel less inclined to listen when Jewish lobbyists come calling. Political power in America is, of course, more than just a function of numbers; organization, intelligence, experience, participation, and money also count for a great deal. But given countervailing pressure from constituents actively hostile to Jewish interests, the knowledge that America's Jews are a less significant group than they used to be cannot but have some impact. In the coming years, Jews will have to work much harder to achieve their goals and will not be able to take their power nearly so much for granted.
6. Israel may well suffer the most from these changes. The declining status of American Jews, coupled with the rise of American Islam and the growing political maturity of the American Muslim community, will make it much more difficult in the years ahead for massive aid to Israel to win congressional approval. Already, the Muslim Political Action

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<sup>21</sup>Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, vol. 1, vii-xii; vol. 2, 307-54. Melton's idiosyncratic classification scheme is, of course, easy to criticize. His depiction of American Judaism is filled with gross errors, and his inclusion of Jews for Jesus under "Mainstream Judaism" is offensive.

Committee is promoting pro-Palestinian policies. Having learned much from watching how Jewish political lobbyists work, American Muslims intend to increase their political activities in coming elections, and hope to elect a Muslim to Congress by 1992.<sup>22</sup>

7. For a few decades, at least, we are likely to see a return in this country to the rhetoric of religious triumphalism. Faiths new on the American scene and flush with fresh converts often delude themselves into thinking that theirs is the faith of the future, the religion that will bring The Truth to all Americans and unite them into a single all embracing church (or mosque). Almost inevitably, this pious hope stirs up religious fervor, spurs the faithful to participate in religious crusades, and successfully thwarts liberal efforts aimed at promoting interreligious harmony. Catholics, Jews, and mainstream Protestants know from experience that sooner or later all such hopes are doomed to disappointment; religious monism is not the American way. But this may well be the kind of lesson that every faith community must learn anew for itself.
8. Until this and other lessons *are* learned, interfaith conversations will become much more difficult. In the past, leading Jews, Protestants, and Catholics have, if nothing else, established certain properties that permitted them to interact; they all learned to practice what John Murray Cuddihy calls "the religion of civility."<sup>23</sup> Faiths previously excluded from the mainstream do not necessarily share these properties, and may in some cases openly scorn them—witness the intemperate rhetoric of some fundamentalist preachers or of Black Muslim leaders like Louis Farrakhan. Unless (or until) a new generation of religious leaders from a much broader spectrum of faiths can be initiated into the niceties of religious conversation, progress can scarcely be expected. Discussions will either prove too limited to be meaningful or too acrimonious to be helpful.

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<sup>22</sup>*Time*, 23 August 1988, 50. Writing in the wake of the Six Day War, the Arab sociologist Abdo A. Elkholy dreamed of a far more radical agenda for Arab Americans. "Many of the great national movements which have changed the course of our modern history started abroad," he pointed out. "Could it be that future historians will focus on the Arab elites in America and their role in a sweeping Arab revolution which would unify the Middle East and liberate it from both international Zionism and military domination and corruption?" See Abdo A. Elkholy, "The Arab-Americans: Nationalism and Traditionalism and Traditional Preservations," in *The Arab Americans: Studies in Assimilation*, ed. Elaine C. Hagopian and Ann Paden (Wilmette, IL: Medina University Press, 1969), 17.

<sup>23</sup>John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

9. On the brighter side, the rise of Islam and the widening parameters of American religion may in the long run promote closer Muslim-Jewish relations. Confronted with surprisingly similar kinds of religious problems in a society that is still overwhelmingly Christian, Jews and Muslims have every reason to learn to work together in support of common interests. Moreover, the neutral American environment should make possible a level of religious interaction between Jews and Muslims that would be unthinkable either in Arab countries or in Israel. For reasons that I have already outlined, I do not expect serious interreligious conversations to take place in the near future. But the history of Catholic-Jewish relations over the past century in America demonstrates that change is possible. Given what Robert Wuthnow writes about the "decline of denominationalism"<sup>24</sup> in recent decades, improvements may come about even sooner than we think.
10. Finally, the changing world of American religion may prompt Jews fundamentally to reevaluate their agenda and goals for the years ahead. If Jews are to be known once more as a religious minority, a so-called dissenting faith, they may want to act the part, just as they did decades ago. This means that Jews would focus first and foremost on their own interests, next on those issues of special concern to religious minorities, and only third on the great social and political agenda that majority faiths worry about. Historically, the Jewish community played a tremendously important role as leader and spokesman for America's religious minorities. It did more than any other faith community to promote inclusive theories of American life (the melting pot and cultural pluralism) and religious liberty for all. Jews, in my opinion, have had far less impact as yea-saying members of the religious majority, and have squandered precious resources on issues about which they have little new to say. By refocusing priorities back toward minority-group issues—particularly the age-old American question of minority rights versus majority rule—Jews may actually make more of a mark than they did as members of the religious "establishment." Such a refocusing would not only strengthen Jewish minority group identity, but would have the additional advantage of promoting group survival as a weapon against intermarriage and assimilation.

Let me close with this final thought. Jews have done exceedingly well in this country, both in the old days when they were viewed as members of a

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<sup>24</sup>Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 71-99.



religious minority roughly akin to Turks and infidels, and more recently when they became part of the religious majority, grouped together with Protestants and Catholics in a "triple melting pot." The fact that yet another change is now taking place should thus occasion concerned vigilance, but not necessarily alarm. Indeed, we have seen that some of the implications of this change may actually turn out to be positive. Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that Jews are merely the objects of history, tossed about by forces totally beyond their control. While Jews may not be able to do anything about the realignment of American religion and the growth of American Islam, the way they respond to these challenges may in fact make a great deal of difference. American Jews survived earlier challenges, prophecies of doom notwithstanding, because Jewish leaders responded to them creatively—with wisdom, discernment, and flexibility. Let us hope that our present leaders can do as well.