

A Prophetic Guide for a Perplexed World: Louis Finkelstein and the 1940 Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion

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Introduction

On Monday, September 9, 1940, in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), Rabbi Dr. Louis Finkelstein gave the opening address at the inaugural Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life (CSPR). In the first in a series of annual meetings that would last until 1968, JTS's recently appointed president warned his audience that "the military struggle in Europe [was] but one phase, perhaps a minor phase, of a far greater conflict, namely that between ideas which make for the development, and those which make for the destruction of human civilization."¹ In line with the description in *Time* magazine's 1951 cover story that pictured him as "a reasonable modern facsimile of an Old Testament patriarch," Finkelstein worked to fashion American leaders to serve God for the good of mankind.² In the face of the threat of political totalitarianism abroad and increasing intellectual polarization at home, America needed to protect its foundational liberal ideologies of pluralism and freedom.

Those assembled that day at JTS were neither the next cohort of young rabbis-in-training nor a meeting of Jewish clergy and educators; rather, the congregation Finkelstein addressed included Protestant and Catholic theologians, natural and physical scientists, and academics from across the humanities and burgeoning social sciences. Then-New York governor Herbert H. Lehman articulated his belief, which Finkelstein shared at the CSPR's first session, that only such a broad contingent could effectively serve as "moulders of American thought."³ In such an unstable political and intellectual atmosphere,

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Finkelstein imagined that his seminary, which hosted and funded the conference,⁴ could be the incubator for rearticulating America's moral, intellectual, and political footing, and that he, its leader, should assume the role of American prophet. As a place of study and worship that carried on the lineage of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, including their heirs, the Pharisees who founded Rabbinic Judaism, JTS was already an "ethical 'abode'" for the American democratic ethos.⁵

In one oft-cited analysis of the ubiquitous, and nebulous, midcentury invocation of America's Judeo-Christian foundations, the CSPR is described as the quintessential example of "[a]ntifascist affirmation of a shared religious basis for western values . . . [among] liberal academics and intellectuals."⁶ If totalitarianism was an all-out attack on democratic values that had hijacked Western thought for pernicious ends, the war effort could not neglect the need for a unified intellectual and moral front to protect the American way of life.⁷ The formation of what scholars have dubbed a "trifait America," the alliances among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, was a core constituent of this effort at collaboration,⁸ although the Judeo-Christian alliance, in reality, "was neither as productive of stable cultural consensus nor as liberal, tolerant, or inclusive" as the progressive narrative of increased tolerance suggests.⁹ Furthermore, within a fractured American liberal subculture, there existed widespread animus between Catholics and liberal Protestants; Jews struggled to chart out places in the public sphere as secular subjects and religious voices;¹¹ and others rejected traditional religions and placed their faith exclusively in the methods of modern science.¹²

Those who chose to participate in the CSPR were driven by a shared faith in democracy to cultivate alliances among not only religions but also philosophical stances and epistemic systems. In the shadow of increasingly authoritative modern science, culture was not only pitted religious fundamentalists against modernists who embraced the epistemic challenges of modernity, but also produced questions among modernists about how to best draw on scientific and religious systems for the sake of democratic governance.¹³ Finkelstein sought to engage in an experiment in methods of "corporate" thinking, reflective of a belief in scientific management that could formulate a unifying philosophy that would likewise protect intellectual autonomy.¹⁴ As Fred Beuttler has argued in his extensive analysis of the CSPR, the goal of developing a maximally inclusive "moral pluralism" should be viewed in large part as the attempt to create an "institutional structure" to manage and build a "moral framework that would support democratic values."¹⁵ As an effort to formulate a mode of pluralistic governance reflective of and

fitting its intellectual and political context, the CSPR became a semipublic forum, housed in a Jewish seminary, to contend with America's Protestant-dominated intellectual, social, and political institutions.¹⁶

The CSPR was but one among a number of academic conferences in this period that directed intellectual energies toward establishing social and political stability.¹⁷ New York University's 1932 centennial conference, "The Obligation of Universities to the Social Order," had succeeded in putting religious conservatives and technocratic progressives on the same program; however, it had created as many questions as answers about how to relate "spiritual values" and "specialized scientific expertise," each of which was represented by a group of men who claimed they held the necessary, and even sufficient, key to modern democratic life.¹⁸ Later, to rival the CSPR, a group of pragmatists and secular humanists, led by John Dewey, founded the Conference on the Scientific Spirit and Democratic Faith (CSSDF), which met annually between 1943 and 1946.¹⁹ During this same period, interfaith organizations and religious leaders came together around their belief that religion was fundamental to a stable American democratic social order.²⁰ The CSPR attempted to include representatives of all these groups, although some, including pragmatist Dewey, declined the invitation.²¹

Stories of binary opposition dominate the historiography of the period. The CSPR and the CSSDF, for example, are cast as representing "opposing teams" in the fight between logical positivism and Judeo-Christianity, groups whose "captains" were "Catholic theology and pragmatism,"²² respectively. To treat the conferences in these terms risks reproducing problematic, simplistic narratives of clear-cut divisions between religious liberalism and conservatism, and of religion and science as distinct, ideologically isolated bodies of ideas and practitioners. Midcentury historical actors had already begun to question the pervasive ideology that modern science was value-neutral and point out flaws in efforts to surgically extract the history of science from the tissue of institutional religion.²³ Scholarship on the period has also challenged the integrity of the category "science" in the period's debates about the best bases for public policy by showing how natural, physical, and social scientists disagreed about the political relevance of their expertise.²⁴ In parallel, scholars of religion have critiqued the narrowness, exclusiveness, and coherence of religious liberalism, pointing to the way Protestants deployed the category to the exclusion of others, especially Catholics; to groups, such as Conservative Jews, that defy the

terms of this taxonomy; and to the breadth of Protestant theological positions within it.²⁵ The *mélange* of religious traditions and scientific theories in popular “spiritual cosmopolitanism,”²⁶ and the ways that the elite scientific study of religion integrated religious values of sympathy with scientific methods for the “regulated encounter with difference”²⁷ further challenge the category’s integrity. This article, by complement, does not take these categories as “natural objects,”²⁸ but rather as historical formations, and approaches Finkelstein’s CSPR as an encounter among representatives of “multiple cultures” *invested in* American liberalism.²⁹ By doing so, it is able to show how science was instrumental to, and how non-Protestant models of religion shaped, the terms of negotiations of midcentury American pluralism.

In this vein, this article models an approach to twentieth-century American religion that groups science *with* religions, inclusive of Judaism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. By replacing “trifaiith America” with “tetrafaith America,” it resists a facile slippage into discourses of commensurability among the “religions” and emphasizes that these traditions all have ethical, philosophical, epistemological, and political dimensions in which Americans place faith. To describe a collaboration among faiths, however many, is to imagine an idealized alliance that risks masking their competition and conceals a great deal of difference within categories for the sake of analytic tractability. Like trifaiith America, the tetrafaith model recognizes the normative force of one partner in setting the terms of comparison, as well as each constituent tradition’s history of defining its identity in opposition to the others.³⁰ By reading the CSPR as a site of lived pluralism, this article seeks to cast light on some of the intellectual affinities and fault lines that structured horizontal ties among diverse American elites, the verticality of relationships between elites with differing public authority, and the strategies that Finkelstein deployed to navigate and manage representatives of America’s faiths.³¹

At the center of the story this article seeks to tell is Finkelstein, who deployed his religious and intellectual tradition to sketch the contours of tetrafaith collaboration for the sake of public, democratic governance. As he joined a chorus of voices calling for American unity whose foundation would be the “religions of democracy,” Finkelstein was neither immune to the scientism of his time nor naïve about the “cultural force” of Protestantism in defining the category of “religion.” Not only did Finkelstein recognize science as a countervailing force to Protestant authority in public life, he celebrated scientific methods for producing and organizing knowledge at the CSPR and in his own scholarship. Two decades prior to Herberg’s civic religion, Finkelstein conceptualized the “democratic way of life”; it responded to, and was

informed by, his vision of Judaism as an intellectual tradition with relevance for public governance of a nation whose faith combined science and Judeo-Christianity.³²

Finkelstein recalled that the idea for the CSPR emerged in conversation with Henry Sloane Coffin, president of the neighboring Union Theological Seminary, about a decade before the first conference³³; this article shows how Finkelstein's Jewish tradition served as a non-Protestant model of encounter that shaped the CSPR. As a leader of Conservative Judaism, Finkelstein championed a ritualistic and legalistic vision of the Jewish tradition based on rabbinic texts while acknowledging modern Judaism's necessary entanglement with the legacies of the Reformation and Enlightenment.³⁴ Finkelstein spoke in the idioms of "nonspecific Protestantism," but infused and disrupted them with particularly Jewish ones, too. He claimed that his own tradition's modes of thought and practice had created and supported the "metaphysical scheme that made possible and governed" America's Protestant religiosity and secularism.³⁵ History, Finkelstein argued, had shown that before and behind Protestant religiosity, modern science, and the secular democratic state, *his* historical, legal, practice-based tradition made the American way of life possible.

The legacy of the CSPR has been minimized, overshadowed by criticisms about the lack of concrete accomplishments and engrained factionalism. Alternatively, its legacy is presented with a sense of optimism about its *potential* as a model for interfaith collaboration.³⁶ Finkelstein's approach to the study of Judaism and to the CSPR was scientific and sympathetic but not submissive: Steadfast in his convictions and confidently contrarian, Finkelstein has a lot to offer to contemporary scholars of American religion. The CSPR's most significant legacy, then, may be what it can teach us, those invested in the academic study of religion in the twenty-first century, not only about the players in the collaboration but also about the politics of history and comparison in making the American "democratic way of life."

The article begins by introducing Finkelstein's presentation of the Jewish tradition and its relationship to science in a selection of his publications from the 1930s and 1940s. It then traces how Finkelstein deploys a Jewish political theology at the CSPR.³⁷ In his statement of purpose for the conference, he articulated a positive vision for collaboration among scientists and religious leaders based on his account of Judaism's fundamental contributions to "the "Democratic Way of Life." The statement, in turn, set the terms of debate for the first meeting of the CSPR's Executive Committee in 1939, for which

the meeting transcript shows that scientists and Protestant theologians pushed back at Finkelstein's effort to cut their authority down to size. When the founding members met a year later, in the face of debate over democratic stability and the question of epistemic certainty, Finkelstein defended the possibility that modern Judaism could lead American public culture. Finally, this article turns to the 1940 CSPR to show how Finkelstein managed competing epistemologies using the tools of the Jewish textual tradition to frame his authoritative, direct connection to a universal, accessible God.

Toward an American Great Assembly

Finkelstein was hardly the first American Jewish leader to claim that modern Judaism, heir to the Hebrew prophets, was an ideal democratic faith that had universal value; nor was he alone in securing a place for Jews in America by suggesting that Jews, practitioners of the "core" of "the Judeo-Christian tradition,"³⁸ could serve as a living moral and political model for a peaceful world.³⁹ What distinguished Finkelstein was his claim that Rabbinic Judaism, initiated by the ancient Pharisees and developed continuously over the course of two thousand years, augmented the Prophetic tradition with essential contributions to democracy *and* the development of modern science. Totalitarian regimes and their ideologies of progress not only put the Jewish people in existential danger but also threatened to destroy Jewish intellectual achievements, which included democracy, religion, and science.⁴⁰

This section lays out how Finkelstein's understanding of Rabbinic Judaism, and his position as a Talmud scholar, rabbi, and leader of JTS, shaped the contours of the CSPR. Beginning with his scientific studies of Jewish history and rabbinic texts, it shows how Finkelstein culled political, philosophical, theological, and scientific insights from the Jewish past. It then proceeds to his public scholarship and leadership to demonstrate how his understanding of Conservative Judaism undergirded his conceptualization of the CSPR and his role as a leader of a coalition of democratic scholars and theologians.

Political Histories: The Jewish Source of and Guide for Democratic Governance

Finkelstein put history to work to secure the "democratic way of life" and to justify the continued relevance of Jews and Judaism

within America. Finkelstein's writing of history was a political act that blurred past and present. He drew on his training in modern historicism in the secular academy and a theological understanding of the Jewish covenant as a continually unfolding narrative to transform Rabbinic thought into a living guide for American governance.⁴¹ In his scholarship, including historical accounts of Jewish communal life and technical philological studies of rabbinic manuscripts, he did not hesitate to include statements about the contemporary relevance of historical models. Furthermore, he projected modern epistemic values, especially objectivity, back onto sacred biblical and rabbinic texts,⁴² holding them up as true records that could be culled for timeless ethical values and models of democratic governance.

In Finkelstein's interfaith work, including his participation in the CSPR, he would call on scholars and religious leaders to recognize "their common responsibility for the welfare of our country"⁴³ and develop methods for consensus, "mutual consultation," and the "integration of the totality of our experience" for the sake of "democratic life."⁴⁴ From his knowledge of the Talmudic record, Finkelstein recognized that history was repeating itself. In the Foreword to *The Pharisees*, Finkelstein observed that contemporary society was showing symptoms of the same "prosaic, self-centered, materialistic, and cynical" culture, rotted to its spiritual core, which had brought ancient Rome to its knees. The Pharisees, as "profoundly spiritual" intellectuals who resisted assimilation to the decaying culture around them, could offer "guidance" for the contemporary crisis, hopefully preventing the same kind of "weakened sense of communal responsibility, particularly on the part of the intellectuals" that had preceded Rome's demise.⁴⁵

To make a case for the relevance of ancient history for twentieth-century America, Finkelstein traced a continuous line from modern Judaism back to the Second Temple Period sect, and by analogy, linked the Puritan origins of America to those of Rabbinic Judaism. "Pharisaism was Prophecy in action," Finkelstein argued, because they had rekindled "the words of the ancient seers . . . like flames of fire out of their own hearts." In turn, he explained, "Pharisaism became Talmudism, Talmudism became Medieval Rabbinism, and Medieval Rabbinism became Modern Rabbinism." Although the names changed and practices evolved, "the spirit of the ancient Pharisee survive[d] unaltered." The Pharisees were not only an anchor for Jewish leadership, but also an intellectual bridge between East and West, having drawn out vital "energies" from the Arabian Peninsula and cultivated a revival of "thought, commerce,

and even government."⁴⁶ Through this argument, Finkelstein fought back against supercessionist narratives claiming that European Aryan roots came from Hellenic, rather than Hebraic, sources.⁴⁷ By describing the Jewish spirit as a light within the Dark Ages, he likewise disrupted the Enlightenment–Reformation synthesis that fused the birth of Protestantism and the revival of Greek thought, as he denaturalized the ties between Protestant political theology and the American “democratic way of life.”⁴⁸

To root Jews in American soil and to anchor America to Jewish sacred narratives, Finkelstein also drew a parallel between the ancient Israelites and the Puritans. In the language of class, values, and destiny, Finkelstein wrote the story of a shared fight by the righteous against the powerful, enacted through piety and devotion, that culminated in “the Talmud of Babylonia” and “the culture of New England.” At a time when Protestant liberals were backing away from their Calvinist roots, and anticipating the Protestant accusation that Jewish (and Catholic) tradition was legalistic, he reminded his readers that America, too, was built on the Puritans’ religious legalism.⁴⁹

In Jewish history, Finkelstein also located specific models of leadership that could guide a troubled modern world in the struggle to maintain freedom and deal with “social conflicts” that were “once more with us, though in somewhat new form.” In the face of the “collapse of Palestinian civilization,” which had come “to parallel . . . the eclipse of reason in our own day,” Rabbi Akiba could serve as a political, philosophical, and ethical guide, as he had for Maimonides and Aquinas: “Artisans have been succeeded by factory hands; Samaritans and Ammonites by powerful nations; scriptural studies by modern science,” but Akiba’s “solutions still remain strangely applicable to our own time” and serve as invaluable resources for “the statesman and the sociologist, as well as to the historian and the general reader.” By writing his biography, Finkelstein hoped to render Akiba’s insights, “found on almost every page” of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, accessible to his democratic partners.⁵⁰ In doing so, he was carrying on the legacy of another hero, Maimonides, who, like the best-trained modern jurist, could navigate the Talmud, “that great reservoir of Jewish tradition which like the sea, to which it is so frequently compared, contains unparalleled treasures for him who knows where to find them.”⁵¹

Finkelstein also located a series of historical models of a council of experts convened to solve communal issues. From the “Great Assemblies” of Ancient Israel,⁵² to the Rabbinic High Courts (the Sanhedrins), to the Rabbinic Synods of the Middle Ages, Finkelstein

identified a continuous thread of democratic leadership that included not only patricians or priests, but also plebeians, and which based membership on scholarly, not heredity, qualifications.⁵³ These meritorious groups were ethical, political, and juridical bodies whose expert knowledge of tradition not only guided practice but also preserved minority opinions that were not codified as law. The result was a rich archive that modeled the value of tolerance and preserved Hebrew culture when threatened by powerful outsiders.⁵⁴ These Jewish bodies were thus responsible for the creation and maintenance of what Americans valued as truly democratic government.

Although Finkelstein did not explicitly describe the CSPR as a kind of Great Assembly, the parity among bodies of diverse experts brought together in times of crisis was no coincidence. Like the historical figures he held up as heroes, from the biblical Simeon the Righteous, to Rabbis Akiba and Hillel of Talmudic literature, to Maimonides and other rabbis across European and Muslim lands in the Middle Ages, Finkelstein understood himself as a textual interpreter and communal leader responsible for managing grave, "international" crises. Finkelstein's historical scholarship, then, was not merely an "inverted image of practice"⁵⁵ in written word, but rather a practice that could transcend the page, entering the lecture hall or the meeting room, and steering the helm of an institution or conference.

Pluralistic Guardians of Thought and Practice

To stem the tide of anti-Semitism, Finkelstein partnered with organizations like the National Council for Christians and Jews (NCCJ)⁵⁶ and started initiatives internal to JTS⁵⁷ to present Judaism to non-Jewish audiences in terms recognizable to Christian neighbors.⁵⁸ He was careful to frame Jews as a religious minority⁵⁹ rather than as an ethnic or racial group, bound not by blood but by a covenant with God.⁶⁰ The Jewish people upheld that covenant, passed on across the generations, through a specific set of laws and practices overseen by learned and sagacious scholars. Although it had become popular in Christian civilization to caricature Phariseeism as "narrow bigotry,"⁶¹ rendering the legal and ritual elements of Judaism as liabilities for Judaism's public relevance, Finkelstein argued that the primary mode of Jewish worship, the "study and practice of the Talmudic Law," was essentially democratic.⁶² That his Judaism did not resemble Protestant religion, Finkelstein insisted, did not mean it was foreign to American values, nor was it an antiquated relic out of step with modernity.

JTS, Finkelstein argued in his 1939 address for its semicentennial celebration, had been founded in the wake of nineteenth-century intellectual challenges, from Darwinian evolutionary theory to biblical higher criticism, when moderns had lost faith in the wisdom of centuries of great thinkers. Unlike those who “think that we have but two alternatives, to reject or to accept the law, but in either case to treat it as a dead letter,” the Seminary’s founders refused the simple choice between Reform and traditionalism.⁶³ Conservative Judaism’s vision was rational and adaptive. It maintained Judaism’s historical genius that created the tradition as a living body whose skeleton was a flexible, just legal system, not a fossil in a museum or an inert stone tablet like the Code of Hammurabi. As such, JTS was a place of study, worship, and leadership led by rabbinic experts who could be trusted as “clear-sighted” in the fog of modernity without being “blinded” by secular promises of progress.⁶⁴ The Conservative Movement’s approach, Finkelstein suggested, required neither belief nor the sacrifice of reason, and thus did not render Judaism an irrational possession, out of step with disenchanting modernity; rather, it was predicated on rigorous intellectual principles.⁶⁵

Finkelstein’s insistence that Judaism was necessarily rooted in Jewish law stood in contradistinction with the Reform Movement’s rejection of ritualistic and legalistic forms of practice. Public voices of Reform Judaism, notably Gustav Gottheil and Abba Hillel Silver, argued that their version of Judaism represented a democratic faith, as they maintained the universal, ethical nature of Judaism.⁶⁶ Finkelstein, by contrast, felt that the Reform Movement had abandoned the laws and practices incumbent upon all Jews as a fulfillment of the covenant between God and the Israelites. Still, he was careful to present all Jews as a unified whole, whose different institutions and forms were not sectarian divisions, and whose people shared the undying Jewish spirit born of covenantal theology, regardless of a person’s knowledge or practice.⁶⁷

Finkelstein introduced Judaism to interfaith audiences by explaining that “rigorous . . . discipline, as ideally conceived in Jewish writings,” was meant to render everyday practice a mode of “communion with God.” Jewish law and ritual not only reinforced ethical engagement with neighbors, but also made Jews ideal citizens, capable of living as loyal members of secular states. Phariseism preserved what had become the basis of Judeo-Christian religions: “[T]he principles of the Fatherhood of God and the dignity and worth of Man as the child and creature of God.”⁶⁸

Judaism likewise grounded hope for a stable future because of its historical relationship to science. Against the common argument that modern science was rooted in Hellenistic culture, Finkelstein affirmed the popular view that “[t]he Greeks contributed method and ideas to science” while insisting that “the Hebrew prophets endowed it with much of its dynamic power and its ability to persist in the face of obstacles.” The Hebrews, always making finite steps toward a transcendent infinite, inspired the search for absolute truth in nature while Greek science remained tentative. When rabbinic culture encountered Greek ideas, in turn, they extended an “urge to know the truth . . . [that had been] expressed primarily in a desire to understand the will of God as revealed in Scripture . . . [to] the whole realm of human thought and experience.”⁶⁹ Finkelstein wanted scientists, like Christians, to know of their debts to Rabbinic Judaism.

In the ethical, legal, and scientific genius preserved in the Talmud and subsequent Rabbinic commentaries, Finkelstein found the fundamental enactment of democratic principles, tried and tested through millennia of crises, to guide the people through troubled times. Finkelstein was adamant that his Judaism, rooted in “study and action, *Ma’aseh* and *Talmud*,”⁷⁰ created and sustained universal values that had, over centuries, been woven into the fabric of Western civilization, stretching to meet changing needs. It is no coincidence that the CSPR’s Executive Committee described its mission in the same terms as Finkelstein’s Judaism: The CSPR was an “active collaboration on the levels of both *thought and action*.”⁷¹

Renewing the American Experiment: Louis Finkelstein’s 1939 Vision of a More Perfect Union

In the introduction to a statement he drafted in preparation for the CSPR Executive Committee’s first planning meeting in 1939, Finkelstein wrote that America’s “contribution [to the spiritual life] is the more significant because it has been made by no individual or group of individuals, but by the people, and is inherent in the very fabric of her existence.” Echoing his sociological study of ancient Pharisaic culture and his description of Jewish tradition, Finkelstein argued that American democracy was not merely a “political device” but an entire “way of life and thought, based on the religious faith in human dignity and immortality.” The fundamental values of “liberty and human equality,” he added, were neither “secular” nor “anti-religious” but “part of a religious tradition.”⁷² Like other

Jewish leaders of the period, Finkelstein Judaicized America's founding political philosophy as he set the terms of debate for the 1940 CSPR.⁷³ In it, Finkelstein infused the familiar terms of "nonspecific Protestantism" with his particular Jewish political theology and emphasized the role multiple faiths had played in American history.⁷⁴

Finkelstein began by celebrating religious freedom and pluralism, choosing the term "Prophetic Faiths" rather than "Judeo-Christian," which many considered code for assimilation to Protestant norms.⁷⁵ In the opening pages, he honored the Catholic founders of Maryland and Baptist founders of Rhode Island, who had been trailblazers in the establishment of religious freedom. "The spirit of the Republic," he continued, was symbolized not by the traditions of any particular group but by the universal celebration of American civil religion, Thanksgiving Day. This festival commemorated Native Americans and Protestants who joined together based on "the firm rock of belief in God, and in human brotherhood and dignity," values he rooted in Judaism. This idealized pluralism maintained unity without forcing assimilation in a "melting-pot . . . [of] colorless and meaningless universalism."⁷⁶ Through this founding myth, Finkelstein resisted the secularization and Protestantization of America and its history.⁷⁷

He turned next to the specific contributions of Judaism to Western civilization and, using Jewish idioms, he articulated the present threat posed by atheistic and pagan "totalitarian 'religions.'" German and Soviet societies were dangerous reincarnations of Rome: Their beliefs were based in the apotheosis of Hitler and mummification of Lenin (like an ancient Pharaoh) and they were capable of reversing ethical growth and sending America back to the Dark Ages. These modern foes were particularly dangerous because of their appropriations of efficient scientific tools and deployment of pseudoscientific racial theories and falsified histories, which they effectively promoted through "subtle propaganda." With evocative flourish, Finkelstein warned that liberty of thought and ethical standards were being "sacrifice[d] to the Moloch of irreligion and anti-religion."⁷⁸ Secularization, the "replacement of God, by the social group, as the primary concept of the ethical life," leaves society vulnerable to a pervasive rot that threatens the very "fabric" of civilization. He cited signs of decaying religious tolerance and trends away from state religious disestablishment in America. Likewise, he noted popular amnesia about the essential links between the preservation of science and "the Christian monasteries and the Jewish Rabbinical Schools," and between Prophetic faith and

America's Puritan origins. He then quoted Benjamin Franklin, who, as he concluded the Constitutional Convention, "warned *us*" that to avoid despotism and maintain democracy, the people had to gird themselves against corruption. Contemporary scientific geniuses—"an Edison, a Marconi, a Rockefeller, a Ford, and an Einstein"—could not animate the Western soul like the "imaginative writing" of the humanists of past eras: "Shakespeare, Milton, Keats or Wordsworth." Americans were in desperate need of spiritual inspiration.⁷⁹

Against those who claimed that history was cyclical, and that the degradation of democracy into despotism was inevitable, Finkelstein propounded a progressive history born of Prophetic faith. "Democracy as a form of government can never be outmoded, for it is the final aim toward which political theory and organization has been moving since the beginning of history." Parallel to his writings on Judaism, where he explained that, "like early Christianity," ancient Jews established legal and ritual "regulations" "to prevent reversion to paganism,"⁸⁰ he reinforced the importance of religion as a prophylaxis against totalitarianism. His statement echoed a common refrain in his writings: "If Democracy is to survive, it must be reestablished on its permanent logical foundation—the Prophetic doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the dignity and equality of men," which God handed the Jews at Sinai, and which had proven, over thousands of years, capable of withstanding even the most trying "political and economic stress." When compared with the "efficiency," "power," and "discipline" of totalitarianism, democracy could not "survive as a secular phenomenon."⁸¹

In his proposed modern gathering of experts where "the various faiths and sciences [would] cooperate," Finkelstein strategically emphasized the importance of minority faiths. He made a special overture to Catholics, whose faith Protestants had long vilified as antidemocratic, and who had historically been less sympathetic to the ideals of interfaith collaboration.⁸² He imagined a school run by scientific and religious experts, inspired by "Averroes the Mohammedan, Aquinas the Christian, and Maimonides the Jew," whose philosophies "contain formulations of the element common to the three faiths" and who demonstrate that science and religion are compatible and complementary.⁸³ It went without explicit comment that these religious icons and medieval geniuses lived in an era before the youngest "Prophetic Faith," Protestantism, and that Muslims were not part of the American pluralistic imaginary. Immediately, Finkelstein introduced the figure of Francis Bacon, a devout Protestant natural philosopher who understood that the sciences needed religion. Paraphrasing Bacon, Finkelstein noted that

sciences, like youth, needed to lean even more heavily on established wisdom to steer them away from atheism and “to bringeth them about to religion.”⁸⁴ This was all the more true of the “newer” social and psychological sciences. By the end, it was clear that the statement was as much a “national self-critique”⁸⁵ of the current balance of public authority as a call to intellectual arms against totalitarianism.

Throughout his statement, Finkelstein argued that the degradation of American spiritual life was a disease that could sever the roots of liberal society and erase a history of epistemic compatibility and cooperation. His proposal inverted the assumption that the scientific was universal and the religious particular and refused the externalization of religious influence on science. Rather, Finkelstein championed the revival of historical models for integrating scientific epistemology, democratic political ideas, and religious values. The foundation of Finkelstein’s imagined tetrafaith America, however, was also infused with Jewish narratives and served Jewish interests. As the next section shows, although other men of faith and science supported Finkelstein’s goal of protecting democracy, they resisted many of the basic premises of Finkelstein’s proposal.

The First Run of the Experiment: The 1939 Executive Committee Planning Meeting

$$ds^2 = \frac{e - g(t)}{\left(1 - \frac{4r^2}{R_0^2}\right)^2} (dx^2 + dy^2 + dz^2) - dt^2$$

On November 3, 1939, pointing to this equation, a foreign expression in a room full of men who knew Greek, Akaddian, and Aramaic, Professor Harlow Shapley, an astronomer and director of Harvard College Observatory, presented his faith to the group: “I wrote down one expression here and I wonder if it has been excelled by any passage of script or any poetic flight in the history of the world, and still it is not in the language you know.”⁸⁶ A self-described “naïve and . . . crass experimentalist type,”⁸⁷ Shapley sought to reorient the group away from “questions that [were] far beyond [him] and of the doctrinal sort.” Instead, he used “the partial differential equation of the expanding universe” as part of his rhetorical spectacle of scientific power: It “is the Shakespearian poesy

of today—a bit of Holy Writ that includes the mechanical, the mystical, the imaginative, the beautiful,” but which “transcends anything . . . Shakespeare ever thought.”⁸⁸ The assembled gentlemen laughed, although one can only conjecture at whether, or for whom, it was a chuckle or a snicker.

Shapley’s challenge did not emerge out of thin air; instead, it was a response to Finkelstein’s precirculated statement, analyzed in the previous section. The transcript of the 1939 Executive Committee meeting serves as a window into the competition among intellectual authorities, and, by extension, among scientific epistemologies and theologies, as the group negotiated the terms of their pluralistic collaboration. The Executive Committee that Finkelstein invited to JTS to plan the CSPR consisted of several leading lights of local Protestant seminaries, a prominent Catholic intellectual, and a Jewish historian who served as JTS’s librarian, as well as a small contingent of influential natural and social scientists.⁸⁹ Finkelstein hoped to assemble a sympathetic group that could see the value in each other’s expertise for the sake of the American covenant, although it seemed some might have preferred to understand the meeting as a democratic experiment. For all the potential of tetrafaith collaboration, it could work only if delegates could speak the same language.

Although the members of the Executive Committee addressed each other cordially, as peers, rhetoric like Shapley’s was a vertical power play that laid claim to epistemic authority. This is not to say that Shapley’s position was representative of all scientists. Arthur Compton, a physicist who had previously applied quantum theory to a philosophical investigation of free will, took an early command of the meeting as a champion for cooperation. Impressed by Finkelstein’s account of the religious origins of modern science, Compton suggested it would be valuable to educate other scientists on their “debt” to religion through a series of lectures.⁹⁰

Protestant theologians then joined in to affirm the importance of religion but reaffirmed Protestant narratives that Finkelstein had attempted to unsettle.⁹¹ Frederick C. Grant, for example, spoke of Christianity and religion as one and the same, as he pointed to a scholarly source that showed “that it was the insistence of religion, Christianity, on truth that made the scientific attitude really possible.” Arthur H. Compton responded by reiterating Finkelstein’s argument that modern science could not have developed absent the rabbinical schools and Arab transmitters of knowledge. A pattern developed that continued through several iterations: a Protestant statement that linked the Reformation and Enlightenment

rediscovery of the lost Greek Golden Age, followed by suggestive questions about the importance of minority traditions. Scholastic philosopher Anton Pegis then pushed the group to consider Aquinas's definition of science, which was not focused "merely" on truth, but also on "unity and perspective."⁹² There were, after all, ancient Aristotelian and medieval definitions that predated the Enlightenment.

Ignoring Pegis, Shapley interjected a non sequitur directed at Compton: "Are you here as a scientist or a theologian? I have just been listening to your remarks." Shapley's statement challenged Compton's allegiances. The question made the conversation about personal loyalties rather than intellectual categories and reflected Shapley's effort to assert the independence of science. "How can I answer that?" Compton replied. This specialist on the theory of quantum indeterminacy, which guaranteed a limit to what was knowable, refused to embrace an epistemic hierarchy and pushed the group to continue discussing philosophical questions about experience.⁹³ Despite Shapley's best efforts, participants in this debate continually challenged the boundaries separating theology, social science, natural science, philosophy, psychology, and history. What ensued was a joint effort to develop a unified language and philosophy of sciences and religions, in which experts wove together their fields of knowledge and methods. This collaborative, synthetic effort was the context that led Shapley to write a relativity equation on the blackboard.⁹⁴

Against Finkelstein's claims that Judaism was the first, fundamental faith that united the group, and that humanists, not scientists, animated the human soul, Shapley forwarded his own narrative of scientific supersessionism. He argued that traditional religions were, at best, redundant to all-encompassing science.⁹⁵ The mystical, imaginative, mechanical, and beautiful relativity equation was not science's only spiritual resource. He also proposed that genetics, represented by Mendel's laws, could describe physical *and* spiritual traits. Furthermore, a branch of probability theory, the method of least squares, could evaluate sin. (The typist found this so foreign that it was twice rendered as "the *Method of Lee Squares*," even after a request for clarification.) Dismissing MacKay's and Compton's attempts to rescue religion by suggesting that science's quantitative language complemented religion's qualitative one, Shapley concluded that "the exponent of the coefficient" of Heisenberg's equation encapsulated spirituality.⁹⁶ In Shapley's imagination, the relativity equation was transfigured, to use Weber's language, into a kind of "impersonal force" that had taken the place

of the “old gods” in a secular age.⁹⁷ If science was to collaborate, he insisted that it take its rightful place—first—in the conference’s title. And, thus, the CSPR got its name.

As the meeting concluded, the frustrated men were considering whether it was even practical for scientists and theologians to work together.⁹⁸ It seemed like the only thing they could agree on was their common, external enemy. Perhaps, it was exactly because he was a scholar of Talmud, texts whose model of authority was a “heteroglossia of dialogue,”⁹⁹ that Finkelstein was undeterred. Less than a year after this initial meeting, several hundred representatives of various “democratic faiths” gathered together at the first CSPR.

Epistemic Authority and the Problem of Certainty

Over the course of a year, influential intellectuals like Franz Boas, Jacques Maritain, Albert Einstein, George Sarton, and Paul Tillich joined the ranks of the CSPR’s founding members, and, on August 9, 1940, a subset of this leadership team convened for a preliminary meeting.¹⁰⁰ As they discussed drafting a manifesto to present at the start of the CSPR in one month’s time, Hoxie N. Fairchild, an English professor at Columbia, reflected back to the group what he understood to be the “common denominator” of their mission: “[W]hat we are after, I take it, is to grope, probably very slowly, fumblingly and inductively toward a certain amount of intellectual unity which we know perfectly well does not now exist.” In contrast to a precirculated paper by fellow attendee, Mortimer Adler,¹⁰¹ which Fairchild described as “a pungent, forceful argumentative statement of fundamental principles,” he hoped the group could find a way to relate “the great intellectual disciplines” in the hope that “if the unity grew democratic intellect might some day have more solidity than it has now.”¹⁰² Adler, who championed Aquinas’s philosophy, represented a point of contrast to Finkelstein. Whereas Finkelstein presented Judaism as a vital faith that was the backbone of democratic governance, theistic ethics, and scientific thought, and, thus, constituted the very “common denominator” the group needed, Adler proposed resuscitating scholastic thought, which could offer universal stability.

At the August preliminary meeting and a month later at the CSPR, a near-unanimous consensus emerged on at least a single ground: Adler was a hostile party promoting an outmoded system. In his presubmitted paper, Adler diagnosed disciplinary distinctness

as a root of the chaos that the CSPR sought to treat. The antidote was to impose a hierarchy of knowledge according to "proper function," akin to the work of Maimonides or Aquinas for the modern age. Harmony, he argued, would never come about "so long as they are all asked to lie down together."¹⁰³ The group needed "an intelligible order of questions," without which, he stated, "there is nothing to talk about."¹⁰⁴

Archaeologist and biblical scholar William Foxwell Albright succinctly laid out the problem with Adler's method. Regardless of any participant's personal feelings about Aquinas's philosophical system, "if we accept them we thereby, ipso facto, cut out all of the members of the Conference, including practically all the men of science and philosophers and theologians who are not scholastic philosophers." Adler's memorandum not only "gave the specious appearance of everything being absolutely out and dried, fixed," but also was hopelessly flawed by modern standards because "St. Thomas lived before the days of modern definitions of terms." Although it would be "perfectly legitimate as the understanding of a group or as the representation of a minority," it could not undergird a pluralistic, democratic conference. Professor Shapley would proclaim his intention to "speak in defense of Dr. Adler," but his defense largely pivoted on the accusation that Finkelstein had not informed Adler that the CSPR was an experiment aimed at *progress*. With characteristic bluntness, Shapley stated that Adler's "dialectic" method was not what "modern intelligent people in a general exploratory investigation" were expecting. Even Catholic philosopher Anton Pegis, a potential ally, explained that, although he himself accepted Adler's system, "it seems true that history is against him." In the post-Enlightenment, modern world, scholasticism was not a viable universal epistemic system.¹⁰⁵

Whether out of stubbornness or patience, Adler remained steadfast, explaining that he was willing to deliberate until eternity. To cure "the complete chaos which is democracy and democratic culture [and] contemporary corrupt liberalism," it was necessary to talk and argue with the clear aim of changing other people's minds until agreement could be reached. "It might take infinite time. I am not saying how long it will take for two minds to work together, but unless their aim is—" Finkelstein jumped in before Adler could finish: "Professor Adler, Professor Maritain is a Catholic. I am a Jew. I mean to approach this problem together with him. I haven't the slightest intention of ever becoming a Catholic, and I haven't the slightest desire to ask Professor Maritain to become a Jew." If people with different identities could not collaborate, Finkelstein concluded,

the CSPR and all of "Christian civilization [was] hopeless." He refused to accept that the only solution was conversion to sameness or an infinite debate: The Jews in Europe did not have time to endlessly deliberate.¹⁰⁶

For his positions, many called Adler a totalitarian. It did not bother him when he was called that at home, Adler replied, but in academic settings, he was disturbed by the implications. "If a man can't say that it is important for human beings to agree about the truth without being called a Fascist, then I want to be called a Fascist," he concluded.¹⁰⁷ The group laughed, but the humor should not distract from the substance of Adler's response. Where one feels at home, it is safe to make demands, even of an unyielding order. This sense of at-homeness was something that Finkelstein was working tirelessly to create. In his interjection, one could hear Finkelstein performing in the legacy of the Pharisees, who "considered themselves teachers of Israel alone" and yet "were destined to become the mentors of mankind." Finkelstein admired their distinct ability to provide universal knowledge and ethical teachings "without sacrifice of their individuality, or compromise of their principles."¹⁰⁸ Extending the positive historical approach to Judaism, which balanced metaphysical belief in divine revelation with the epistemic values of modern empiricism, as well as adherence to traditional law with a commitment to adaptability, Finkelstein would demonstrate that he embodied the role of modern prophet.¹⁰⁹

A Prophetic Guide for the American Mind and Spirit

On September 9, 1940, Finkelstein presented the first paper of the CSPR, reciting the words on the deep intellectual rifts that threatened human civilization, which opened this article.¹¹⁰ In his address, after mentioning the import of rabbinical and monastic schools for the creation of scientific thought, Finkelstein declared the need for timeless, stable religious traditions that could nonetheless remain relevant in the present. He addressed the assembled delegates using many of the same words he had to describe Judaism in his writings: "Each of us, following his own train of thought, has arrived at the conclusion that our own disciplines and traditions are more consistent with democracy than with totalitarianism. I believe that we all hold fast to the principle of dignity, worth and moral responsibility of the individual, as a child and creature of God."¹¹¹

This was precisely the spirit of Finkelstein's Judaism, and he was the modern Jewish mind that was best suited to lead such a group.¹¹²

It was necessary to develop a mode of unified thinking that was neither rigid nor ahistorical, and that was both rational and theistic. After referencing suggestions that what was necessary was "a super-Thomas Aquinas or Maimonides, a genius capable of assimilating the mass of modern learning, imposing architectonic order upon it, and above all, enabling his system to adjust itself to the dynamic character of modern science," Finkelstein turned to Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain's measured vision of a "pluralistic but well regulated universe of thought" that could foster "mutual respect and understanding" by formulating "significant analogies."¹¹³ By tolerating a lack of closure on metaphysical questions, like how to "explain . . . at once the elements of uncertainty in electrons, and in human beings," they could find a way to work together. He remained sure, however, that through the process, it would become clear "why certain ethical, philosophical and religious values transcend tentative scientific and historical constructions." To close, Finkelstein quoted a specialist in medieval philosophy, Étienne Gilson, who argued at Harvard's 1936 tercentenary that "the conviction that there is nothing in the world above universal truth" was necessarily connected with "the very root of intellectual and social liberty." Through the words of his Catholic partners, Finkelstein articulated his own Jewish values.

After his talk, Finkelstein opened the floor for discussion. Shapley immediately directed the conversation to "the practical problems that might be ahead of us," anticipating the presentation of Adler's paper the next day, although Finkelstein explained that Adler was not going to attend after all.¹¹⁴ Akin to what had been said in the smaller group a month prior, several members of the group dismissed Adler's position. Finkelstein then encouraged a pivot to practical suggestions on how to run a democratic meeting that, to paraphrase several participants, could "tolerate dogmatic positions" without "formulating a creed," as well as appreciate the contributions of diverse traditions without defensive, or offensive, posturing for authority. After a long discussion along these lines, Albright spoke frankly of his "strong suspicion that one of the principal reasons why our Conference is succeeding so well as it promises to succeed is that our Chairman is neither Protestant nor Catholic, nor liberal Jew, nor liberal Protestant, nor scientist."¹¹⁵ This biblical archaeologist and son of evangelical Methodist missionaries continued: "He is a conservative Jew. He knows from the outset that we cannot achieve unity and that this is not a parliament of religions,

it is not a conservative congress; it is a congress where we all aim at one kind of unity, and that unity is a unity of goal." Albright recognized that Finkelstein's Great Assembly welcomed and respected all voices and did not push for shared belief but sought a coherent, practical way forward, framed through common values.

Wednesday morning, September 11, 1940, the penultimate session of the CSPR, at which the natural scientists presented their papers, proved to be a chance to test Finkelstein's blend of theistic and rational thought. Through comments and discussions, several scientists, philosophers, and theologians in the room debated the relative value and merits of science and religion for democratic thought. An exiled German Protestant, Richard Kroner, felt compelled to reply to the scientists' aggressive "invasions" into metaphysics and philosophy, and the blind arrogance by which they claimed superiority and confused mathematics for God's speech.¹¹⁶

Amid contentious debate, Finkelstein rose to voice his own ideas on the subject. "[I]t is quite conceivable in my opinion that a man may work in the laboratory for a number of years and not come across anything in his experience which definitely demonstrates the existence of a God or would lead him to engage in any form of worship," Finkelstein postulated. The scientist's "tools" and "technique" were not equipped to facilitate access to "such experience." Finkelstein accused those who, lacking the experience, had argued that day that "the belief in God and worship is an unnecessary hypothesis" of committing a grave and logical error that betrayed their own epistemic values.

Scientists frequently endangered society with such claims from authoritative podiums. The prior day, Finkelstein recounted, "three very eminent philosophers" and "three eminent sociologists, approaching the problem from quite a different point of view," had all, after years of devoted study, reached the same conclusion: God exists. And, yet, Dr. Albert Einstein, whose paper was read in absentia, "indicated that so far as he was concerned he didn't see that science necessarily will require the conception of a God to whom one could pray." The public took the scientist's tentative denial over the positive assertions of devoted experts. That a microphone, a scientific product, amplified his voice for the room to hear did not make the expertise of either natural or applied scientist relevant to how he should reach God when he would "say [his] afternoon prayers." This, too, represented a "hierarchy of disciplines" akin to the one the group had so adamantly protested in reaction to Adler, whose pre-Enlightenment philosophy diminished modern science. To contend with positivist claims that denied his theistic

worldview, Finkelstein looked to the wisdom of a Jewish sage and scientist who, he hoped, “might not strike the scientists as being quite so humiliating to them.”¹¹⁷

Referencing, although not citing, a passage from *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Finkelstein illustrated the fundamental difference between permanent and temporal truths. “[Maimonides] speaks of the study of phenomena as being outside, on the campus; and the study of philosophy as being somewhat in the inner room; and the study of theology as being in the very shrine itself,” Finkelstein explained. “Well, it is all the same ground, you see, but one is outside, one is inside, one is right there.”¹¹⁸ The room erupted in laughter and applause. The center, where God resided, produced truths that would “never be superseded.”¹¹⁹ It was there that a person could find “a transcendent value, a value which gives him at-homeness in the world, which no natural scientific theory can give him.” Finkelstein did not demand his fellow citizens believe in the existence of the inner sanctum, but rather that they respect the expertise of those who had experienced it. Unlike the rarified halls of the laboratory, where scientists dazzled the world with equations only intelligible to an elite few, theologians could guide any willing person to experience God.¹²⁰

The house where Maimonides and Finkelstein’s God resided was open and accessible to the American public and could be the solid foundation American democracy needed. Although Finkelstein was willing to accept that “these and these are words of the Living God”¹²¹ when they were spoken from the mouths of fellow theologians, those who made claims that the universe was disenchanted were rebuked using their own positivist terms. As a modern Jewish prophet, who inherited the perseverance and patience of the Hebrew prophets and the methods and wisdom of the Pharisees, Finkelstein could lead the group, finite step by finite step, to political stability.¹²²

Conclusion

By following Finkelstein’s efforts to unsettle popular Protestant and scientific hegemony, this article questions the terms central to the study of midcentury American pluralism. Far from a simple story of conflict or competition among scientific and religious experts, the CSPR’s participants, all figures of authority, debated the epistemic, spiritual, ethical, and political strengths of their respective traditions. The pluralism that emerged through these negotiations, however,

cannot just be understood in terms of collaboration among (unequal) partners vying for authority; rather, it also shows how participants brought tools, techniques, and experiences to the table to cultivate sympathy and discover what each member could contribute.

In its pre-Aristotelian usage, the term *ethos* refers to a rhetorical space, a dwelling, where individuals who “reliably and recognizably” perform the society’s ethical system could reside.¹²³ Faced with external threat and internal fracturing, American intellectuals, desperate to build structures that could secure a stable future for their “democratic way of life,” were eager to find such a space. Finkelstein’s CSPR, like his narrative of American democratic life, was built on an ancient Jewish foundation that rabbinic authorities had successfully adapted to meet the needs of a changing world for millennia. Because his seminary’s Judaism was the common denominator of prophetic faiths and modern science, and because he, as its leader, was a modern authority on the tradition that was the ethical, political, and epistemic fabric of Western civilization, Finkelstein contended that there was no better place or leader to convene a council of experts to protect democratic life. As representatives of America’s four faiths came together to shape American thought and practice, Finkelstein did not seek to dismantle familiar forms of American civic discourse, but rather to reattribute their source to his historical tradition.

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Notes

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¹Louis Finkelstein, “The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion,” *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1940):

681. The same essay, with a few minor revisions and an additional paragraph that Finkelstein ad-libbed, which was recorded in the meeting transcript, appears in the published Conference Proceedings: "The Aims of the Conference," *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc., 1941), 11–19.

²"A Trumpet for All Israel," *Time*, October 15, 1951.

³Finkelstein began the meeting with letters from both Lehman and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. CSPR, "Proceedings, Monday Morning Session, September 9, 1940," in Record Group 5, Box 36 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1940), 1–2.

⁴Fred Beuttler, *Organizing an American Conscience: The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion 1940–1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85–93.

⁵The pre-Aristotelian meaning of the Greek *ethos* signifies a rhetorical space demarcated by a coherent, shared set of social values. Lynda Walsh argues that, in midcentury America, through their "privileged access to knowledge" not held by the public, scientists began to perform a "prophetic ethos," which she defines as "a role that a polity . . . authorizes to manufacture [political] certainty for them" by reinforcing the fundamental "covenant values" that bind the group together. Lynda Walsh, *Scientists as Prophets: A Rhetorical Genealogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2–4. From the late nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century, American Jews used a similar strategy, drawing on historical narratives that connected modern Jews to the prophetic tradition to justify their position as essential to America and to the development of democracy. Beth S. Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2–7, 38–44.

⁶Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 67.

⁷On efforts to seek "common ground" and form broad American coalitions, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63–102.

⁸Kevin Michael Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹K. Healan Gaston, "Interpreting Judeo-Christianity in America," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no. 2 (2012): 293. See also Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 81–186; J. Terry Todd, "The Temple of Religion and the Politics of Religious Pluralism: Judeo-Christian America at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair," in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, ed. Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Laura Levitt, "Interrogating the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Will Herberg's Construction of American Religion, Religious Pluralism, and the Problem of Inclusion," in *The Cambridge History of Religions in America*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 201–20.

¹⁰John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 166–215.

¹¹Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 73–92; Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41–76; David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 17–41; Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 1/2 (1998–1999): 52–79; Wenger, *History Lessons*, 2–7, 38–44.

¹²Science in this period was understood not only to produce knowledge but also to play a role in the ethical cultivation of democratic citizens. Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–19, 320–334; James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 63–93. On Merton's formulation of the "scientific ethos" as the basis of liberal democracy, see Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 80–96. Although there were critics of the extension of scientific expertise to the realm of politics, during the 1920s through the 1940s, scientists were also increasingly understood as authorities outside their particular fields. Marcel C. LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own: Public Images of Science, 1910–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 159–62.

¹³George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 144–95; Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 320–34; Ronald L. Numbers,

Science and Christianity in Pulpit and Pew (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59–72.

¹⁴Finkelstein, “The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion,” 681–86.

¹⁵Beuttler, *Organizing an American Conscience*, xiv.

¹⁶On Finkelstein’s mission to define a novel, de-Protestantized, civil religion and to position JTS as a leader in Jewish engagement with American life, see Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 79–84; Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture*, 63–94; Pamela Susan Nadell, *Conservative Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 279–84; Fred Beuttler, “For the World at Large: Intergroup Activities at the Jewish Theological Seminary,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Volume 2: Beyond the Academy*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997).

¹⁷For a list of other such meetings, convened mostly in New York and occasionally other major cities, which were “oriented to inform and direct public agendas,” see Terry Wotherspoon, “Knowledge and Salvation for a Troubled World: Sociology and the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion,” *The American Sociologist* 46 (2015): 376.

¹⁸Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 60–79. Hollinger notes that “secular-liberal philosophers” who were vocal critics of “genteel culture” were not invited to attend.

¹⁹The CSSDF’s leaders included pragmatist philosophers and educators John Dewey, Horace Kallen, Sidney Hook, and the Unitarian minister Rev. Edwin H. Wilson. James Gilbert argues that the CSPR’s significance can be appreciated only in relationship to the meeting whose focal point was the better-known and broadly influential Dewey. Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture*, 63–93.

²⁰For example, the NCCJ held interfaith seminars that it called “Institutes of Human Relations.” Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 38; Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 142–71.

²¹Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture*, 84. This is not to say that the CSPR was maximally inclusive. The public relations materials presented the CSPR as a group of men and women who differed “widely among themselves in religious faith, intellectual convictions, educational experience, racial origin, and social background” (Conference Executive Committee, “Press Release for July 22, 1940,” in Record Group 5d, Box 3, Folder 14 [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1940], 18–19). This is despite the fact that the majority of participants

were white men from the northeast and midwest, worked in the academy, and, with few exceptions, were Protestants or post-Christian Protestants and, in smaller numbers, Catholics and Jews. At the August 1940 meeting, Finkelstein told the group that he had received a number of complaints about the regrettably “undemocratic” lack of inclusion: There were no “Negroes” or women and the range of denominations and regional affiliations represented was quite narrow. Finkelstein explained that, although he was open to the criticism, his focus had not been on proportional representation. CSPR, “Proceedings, Monday Morning Session, September 9, 1940,” in Record Group 5, Box 36 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1940), 11–12.

²²Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture*, 84. This opposition narrative likewise appears in William A. Durbin, “Science,” in *Themes in Religion and American Culture*, ed. Philip Goff and Paul Harvey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 318–19. Two more recent works add nuance to such bifurcation. In Jewett’s treatment, the CSPR is an example of alliances among religious leaders and physical scientists who did not believe that science should be a “source of values to guide social behavior. . . . As elsewhere, they tended to rhetorically erase the social sciences and to portray social change as a joint project of scientist, humanists, and religious thinkers.” Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 322–23. In addition, Wotherspoon tells the story of diverse social-scientific participation in conferences, including the CSPR and the CSSDF. Wotherspoon, “Knowledge and Salvation,” 373–413.

²³In the 1930s, George Sarton championed the new field of history of science, which began to destabilize an image of science as a universal. George Sarton, *Sarton on the History of Science: Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 355–61. Some of the CSPR’s delegates understood science as a spiritual or moral system, whereas others discussed religion and science as relatives in a historical genealogy, occupants of separate spheres, or as competitors in claims to truth. Still others described philosophical or theological systems as competing kinds of scientific systems.

²⁴Dewey is but the most widely recognized symbol of a diffuse group that historian of science Andrew Jewett dubs “scientific democrats,” those who championed “science, as they understood it . . . [as] the basis for a cohesive and fulfilling modern culture.” Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 4–6, 9. Jewett complicates the narrative of science versus religion by highlighting crucial distinctions within these broad categories: It was, for example, Dewey’s scientization of the *human sciences*, rather than championing

of science in general, that drew criticism from both physical scientists and religious leaders. In comparison with the human sciences, the physical sciences, and to some extent the biological sciences, were less politicized. Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 321.

²⁵John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928–1960," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (1997): 98–99; Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 101–22; Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Leigh Eric Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, *American Religious Liberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1–12.

²⁶Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, 10; see also 172–213.

²⁷Kathryn Lofton, "Liberal Sympathies: Morris Jastrow and the Science of Religion," in *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Leigh Eric Schmidt and Sally M. Promey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 253–57.

²⁸Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 5, note 6.

²⁹Rather than use the phrase "cultures of liberalism," which implies constitutive elements, I wish to point to the usefulness of the idea of liberalism as a rallying point, even among diverse participants. Lofton, "Liberal Sympathies," 254.

³⁰Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 17. I do not mean to collapse difference in enacting such a comparison, but rather to nod to the disruptive challenges mounted by scholars who have critiqued comparison, on both ethical and epistemological grounds. See, for example, Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Marcel Detienne and Janet Lloyd, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³¹The language of verticality draws on the way that scholars of lived religion have discussed the relationship between religious elites and lay people in terms of "high" and "low." See, for example, David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), ix.

³²Following Ronit Stahl's analysis of Will Herberg's and Robert Bellah's dual role as commentators on and creators of a vision of civil religion in America, I am suggesting that Finkelstein played a parallel role. Ronit Stahl, "A Jewish America and a Protestant Civil Religion: Will Herberg, Robert Bellah, and Mid-Twentieth Century American Religion," *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 435–48.

³³“Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939,” in Record Group 5d, Box 2, Folder 12 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1939), 2–3.

³⁴Conservative Judaism, JTS, and Finkelstein are players in a longer story of Jewish negotiations of tradition and modernity, in which science, religion, and politics were key categories. Moses Mendelssohn and his followers fit their tradition of “thinking and acting,” a language Finkelstein also deployed, into the category of religion. In the shadow of the Enlightenment, Jewish historians and philosophers developed a scientific study of Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, to deal with challenges like the scientization of the study of history. The Conservative position, to which Finkelstein was party, grew out of what came to be called the positive-historical school, which sought to reconcile a transcendent God with immanent political change. Leora Faye Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 28–49. Beginning in the 1920s, Finkelstein was instrumental in formulating a distinctive set of doctrines to consolidate a diverse array of rabbis and synagogues affiliated with JTS into what came to be known as the Conservative Movement. Abraham J. Karp, “A Century of Conservative Judaism in the United States,” *The American Jewish Year Book* 86 (1986): 34–51.

³⁵I use the term *secularism* to refer to a blend of political and epistemological assumptions that shaped matters of public culture and governance. Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61; John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 19–20.

³⁶Beuttler, *Organizing an American Conscience*, x; Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture*, 84.

³⁷In discussing Finkelstein, I use the term *political theology* in a way similar to what Vincent Lloyd has labeled the “sectarian sense,” which Lloyd defines as “the branch of [Christian] theology concerned with politics.” Although I do not mean to simplify the complexity of Jewish theological traditions in the image of Christian theology, nor suggest that Finkelstein understood himself as a theologian, I want to show how he looks to models of political leadership by Jewish sages in history, which are inflected with theological assumptions. Vincent W. Lloyd, “Introduction,” in *Race and Political Theology*, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 8.

³⁸Louis Finkelstein, “Tradition in the Making: The Seminary’s Interpretation of Judaism,” in *The Jewish Theological Seminary of*

America, Semi-Centennial Volume, ed. Cyrus Adler (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1939), 27.

³⁹Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis," 55–59; Alon Gal, "The Mission Motif in American Zionism (1898–1948)," *American Jewish History* 75, no. 4 (1986): 368–70; Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 84–92.

⁴⁰Louis Finkelstein, "Faith for Today: A Jewish Viewpoint," in *Faith for Today*, ed. Stanley High, et al. (Garden City, NY: Town, Hall Press and Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1941), 155–60.

⁴¹De Certeau argues that modern historians replaced princes as political actors who "made history," beginning with the act of separating present and past. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2, 6–11. Jewish history and theology are inseparably linked through the belief that "God is known only insofar as he reveals himself 'historically,'" rendering the memory of Ancient Israel sacred. Finkelstein's mode of historicism is hardly unique; ideas of providential, sacred history pervaded Jewish historiography well into the modern period. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8–9, 89–90. For a parallel story of contestations over theology and historicism in Weimar, Germany, see David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴²Finkelstein describes the Hebrews as "the fathers of history" and the writer of The Book of Samuel as "the world's first true historian." Louis Finkelstein, *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936), xiii. Likewise, although by the standards of today's historiography, it was a work of collective memory, he viewed the Talmud as "objective" and constituted by an "almost scientific approach." Louis Finkelstein, *The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of Their Faith* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1938), xxiii. See Seth Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews in the 'Talmudic Period' (70–640 CE)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83–87.

⁴³Finkelstein, "Faith for Today: A Jewish Viewpoint," 182.

⁴⁴Finkelstein, "The Conference on Science Philosophy and Religion," 688.

⁴⁵Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, xxvi–xxvii.

⁴⁶Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, x–xxi.

⁴⁷Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), vii–viii.

⁴⁸Finkelstein repeats many elements of this narrative in other places. See, for example, Finkelstein, *Akiba*, xvi–xxiii. See also JTS librarian Alexander Marx's foreword as well as Finkelstein's first chapter of his study of European Rabbinical councils. Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1924), xi–xii, 2–4.

⁴⁹Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, xv–xx. On the popular “Jewish embrace of America's claim to a biblical legacy” through connections with Puritanism, see Wenger, *History Lessons*, 11, 15–57. Finkelstein aligned with neo-Orthodox Protestants who were likewise reconnecting to Calvinist roots in reaction to Protestant liberalism. See William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 165–69; Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 62–63.

⁵⁰Finkelstein, *Akiba*, x–xi. Akiba ben Joseph, a late first- and early second-century Rabbi, was a major figure in the earliest collection of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah, and led the Bar Kokhba revolt, a fight for Jewish freedom from the Romans.

⁵¹Louis Finkelstein, “Maimonides and the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 25, no. 4 (1935): 470.

⁵²Louis Finkelstein, “The Maxim of the Anshe Keneset Ha-Gedolah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 4 (1940). Finkelstein notes that these assemblies, which existed from around the sixth to the second century BCE, likely “did not refer to a particular meeting [but were] . . . rather an institution which had developed in ancient Israel for bringing together the people in times of crisis” (455, n. 1).

⁵³Finkelstein, *Akiba*, 34–35, 74, 79, 92–135; Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government*, 63, 96; Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, 400–401, 576–608.

⁵⁴Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government*, 4; Finkelstein, *Akiba*, 35. Finkelstein repeatedly argues that, although Greek thought was important, the Hebrews stemmed the “tide of Hellenization” through these bodies of collective memory. Without these institutions, the Abrahamic faiths “would have perished before they were born.” *Akiba*, 35–36.

⁵⁵De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 87.

⁵⁶Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 15–67; Egal Feldman, *Catholics and Jews in Twentieth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 45–83. For an example of Finkelstein's work with NCCJ, see Louis Finkelstein, J. Elliot Ross, and William Adams Brown, *The Religions of Democracy: Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism in Creed and Life* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1945). See also Stanley

High, et al., *Faith for Today* (Garden City, NY: Town, Hall Press and Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1941).

⁵⁷In intra-Jewish politics, some criticized Finkelstein's devotion to interfaith work as a distraction from his Jewish leadership and attention to the spiritual needs of Jews. Louis Finkelstein, *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949), xxvi; Louis Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1941), 5.

⁵⁸Finkelstein wrote an essay, of approximately ninety pages, introducing the basic tenets of Judaism, which appeared in multiple publications during the 1940s, including *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*; Finkelstein, Ross, and Brown, *The Religions of Democracy*; Finkelstein, *The Jews*. I cite the earliest version.

⁵⁹Beginning in the 1930s, Conservative rabbis like Finkelstein joined their Reform counterparts and secular intellectuals who were using sociology to defend Jewish belonging in America by marketing "Jewishness through its function" as an American minority. Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 77.

⁶⁰Finkelstein's arguments to this effect relied on the history of mass conversions in Europe, sociological analysis of the diversity of Jewish communities, population statistics, and explanations of Jewish covenantal theology. Louis Finkelstein, "The 'Jewish Problem,'" in Record Group 5d, Box 1, Folder 77 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary); Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 5–6.

⁶¹Finkelstein, *Akiba*, xvi.

⁶²Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 10. Finkelstein's approach challenges the popular idea, forwarded by Reform Judaism and taken up in the historiography, that the Jewish theology of chosenness was a political liability and that Talmudic culture represented deference to tradition over reason. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 9.

⁶³See Karp, "A Century of Conservative Judaism," 6–17, 34–36.

⁶⁴Finkelstein, "Tradition in the Making," 22, 26, 29–30.

⁶⁵In his *Essays in Sociology*, Max Weber (1864–1920) discussed the nature of religion, by which he meant Christianity, in the context of disenchantment. Weber argues that creeds are not "'knowledge' in the usual sense, but rather a 'possession,'" which one must believe in to make the tradition a logical system. Through the Latin "*credo non quod, sed quia absurdum est*," he argues that belief is, by nature, absurd. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 87.

⁶⁶Max Weber, Hans Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 154. See also Caleb J. D. Maskell, "'Modern Christianity Is Ancient Judaism': Rabbi Gustav Gottheil and the Jewish-American Religious

Future, 1873–1903,” *Religion and American Culture* 23, no. 2 (2013): 140–41; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 264–334; Abba Hillel Silver, *Democratic Impulse in Jewish History* (New York: Bloch, 1928).

⁶⁷Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 4, 14.

⁶⁸Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 3, 7–9.

⁶⁹“Faith for Today: A Jewish Viewpoint,” 174–78.

⁷⁰Finkelstein, “Tradition in the Making,” 31.

⁷¹“Press Release for July 22, 1940,” in Record Group 5d, Box 3, Folder 14 (New York: JTS, 1940), 18–19. Emphasis mine.

⁷²Louis Finkelstein, “Draft,” in Record Group 5d, Box 2, Folder 19 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1939), 1.

⁷³Wenger, *History Lessons*, 15–57.

⁷⁴Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 61.

⁷⁵Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, 144.

⁷⁶Finkelstein, “Draft,” 1–3.

⁷⁷See Wenger, *History Lessons*, 58–95.

⁷⁸Moloch is the pagan god of child sacrifice; the location of Moloch’s shrine, Gehinnom, came to be the Jewish equivalent to hell.

⁷⁹Finkelstein, “Draft,” 3–12. Finkelstein underlined “us” in pencil.

⁸⁰Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 7.

⁸¹Finkelstein, “Draft,” 8–9.

⁸²Finkelstein quoted a paragraph from Pope Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *Divine Redemptoris*, in which the Pope urged Catholic collaboration with other men of faith to fight their common foe. Pope Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical against “religious interaction with Protestants” had been a barrier for Catholic participation in the NCCJ in the 1930s and 1940s. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, 144. See also McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 174–80.

⁸³As Maimonides had taught, these were merely different kinds of truths, the former temporal and the latter eternal. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 4th ed. (New York: Dutton, 1904), 384–91. Moses Mendelssohn articulated the relationship between temporal, political truths and eternal, religious truths using this same passage, which I discuss in detail later in this article. Moses Mendelssohn and Allan Arkush, trans., *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 39. Weber’s differentiation of science, which is “chained to the course of progress,” from art, which does not lose value as new artistic ideas are formulated, is in this same vein. Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 137.

⁸⁴Finkelstein, “Draft,” 6–12.

⁸⁵Stahl, "A Jewish America and a Protestant Civil Religion," 434.

⁸⁶"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," in Record Group 5d, Box 2, Folder 12 (New York: JTS, 1939), 15.

⁸⁷"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 13.

⁸⁸"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 15.

⁸⁹"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 1–2.

UTS's Reinhold Niebuhr was supposed to arrive late, but he never made it to the meeting. Anton Pegis was the sole Catholic representative thanks to a late cancelation by French theologian Étienne Gilson. For a list and description of attendees, see the following chart:

Executive Committee Members

Name	Title, Institution	Denomination or Discipline
Henry Sloane Coffin	President, Union Theological Seminary	Presbyterian Minister
Frederick C. Grant	Professor, Union Theological Seminary	Biblical Theology
Hughell	President, General Theological Seminary	Episcopal Bishop
E. W. Fosbroke		
John A. Mackay	President, Princeton Theological Seminary	Presbyterian Minister
Harlow Shapley	Director, Harvard College Observatory	Astronomy
Arthur H. Compton	Professor, University of Chicago, Nobel Laureate	Physics
Anton Pegis	Professor, Fordham University	Thomist Philosophy
Harold Lasswell	Professor, William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation	Social Science and Psychology
Alexander Marx	Professor and Librarian, Jewish Theological Seminary	Jewish Historian

⁹⁰"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 3–5.

⁹¹This paragraph analyzes "Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 3–7.

⁹²"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 7–8.

⁹³"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 8–10.

⁹⁴"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 10–13.

⁹⁵"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 15–19.

⁹⁶"Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939," 17.

⁹⁷Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 149. Weber argued that disenchantment caused people to believe that the universe was incalculably magical and its irregularity prevented mastery of it. In 1927, between the publication of "Science as a Vocation" in 1917 and

the CSPR, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle unsettled the scientific understanding of reality. The universe was perhaps completely calculable, but it was not completely knowable; science could no longer ensure certainty (138–39).

⁹⁸“Transcript of Luncheon Meeting, November 3, 1939,” 58–64.

⁹⁹As Gerald Bruns wrote, “From a transcendental standpoint, [the Talmudic] theory of authority is paradoxical because it is seen to hang on the heteroglossia of dialogue, on speaking with many voices, rather than on the logical principle of univocity, or speaking with one mind. Instead, the idea of speaking with one mind . . . is explicitly rejected; single-mindedness produces factionalism.” Quoted in Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 27.

¹⁰⁰The members of this group who were also on the Executive Committee included Louis Finkelstein, Frederick Grant, Harold Lasswell, Anton Pegis, and Harlow Shapley. Additional attendees were Mortimer J. Adler, William F. Albright, Lyman Bryson, Watson Davis, Hoxie N. Fairchild, C. P. Haskins, F. Ernest Johnson, Robert M. MacIver, Jacques Maritain, and Luther A. Weigle.

¹⁰¹Mortimer Adler (1902–2001) was born to a nonpracticing Jewish family. He spent his intellectual life devoted to Catholic philosophy, especially focused on the work of Aquinas, although it was not until late in his life that he converted officially to Catholicism. At the time of the Conference, Adler was a professor at the University of Chicago.

¹⁰²CSPR, “Proceedings, Preliminary Meeting, August 9, 1940,” in Record Group 5, Box 36 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1940), 23–24.

¹⁰³The full paper is reprinted in the CSPR's publication. Mortimer J. Adler, “God and the Professors,” in *Science, Philosophy, and Religion; a Symposium* (New York: Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life Conference on Science, 1941), 121–22.

¹⁰⁴“Proceedings, Preliminary Meeting, August 9, 1940,” 27–28.

¹⁰⁵“Proceedings, Preliminary Meeting, August 9, 1940,” 30–36.

¹⁰⁶“Proceedings, Preliminary Meeting, August 9, 1940,” 39–40.

¹⁰⁷“Proceedings, Preliminary Meeting, August 9, 1940,” 41.

¹⁰⁸Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, ix.

¹⁰⁹Karp, “A Century of Conservative Judaism,” 34–36.

¹¹⁰“Proceedings, Monday Morning Session, September 9, 1940,” 10.

¹¹¹Finkelstein, “The Conference on Science Philosophy and Religion,” 683. As he wrote repeatedly, the core of Judaism was to be

found in “the principles of the Fatherhood of God and the dignity and worth of Man as the child and creature of God [, which] are more consistent with those of democracy than any other system of government.” Finkelstein, *The Beliefs and Practices of Judaism*, 8.

¹¹²Finkelstein, as well as his mentors and colleagues, often used the language of a “Jewish mind and spirit,” constant through history although adapted to modernity, to describe the essence of Conservative Judaism. See Karp, “A Century of Conservative Judaism,” 5–6, 34–36.

¹¹³Finkelstein, “The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion,” 683–89.

¹¹⁴“Proceedings, Monday Morning Session, September 9, 1940,” 13.

¹¹⁵“Proceedings, Monday Morning Session, September 9, 1940,” 46–47.

¹¹⁶“Proceedings, Wednesday Morning Session, September 11, 1940,” in Record Group 5, Box 36 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1940), 211–17.

¹¹⁷“Proceedings, Wednesday Morning Session, September 11, 1940,” 219–21.

¹¹⁸Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 384–91. Finkelstein draws on Book 3, Chapter 51, in which Maimonides argues that those with knowledge of the natural sciences have not reached the level of perfection of those who know God. After one knows God through intellect, he continues, it is essential to devote oneself to worship of God, which includes following the law, prayer, and other commanded ritual acts. These practices are all means of turning the mind completely toward God.

¹¹⁹In contrast to a modern historian’s temporal narrative, situated around an arbitrary “mythic ‘zero,’” representing the “‘beginning’ which is *nothing*,” Finkelstein’s imagination of absolute sovereignty was spatial. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 90–91.

¹²⁰De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 221–23.

¹²¹Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 27–29. This is a popular translation of a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b, in which the *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, enters to resolve a seemingly intractable debate over which one of two legal traditions is correct.

¹²²Finkelstein, “Faith for Today: A Jewish Viewpoint,” 176–77.

¹²³Walsh, *Scientists as Prophets*, 4.

ABSTRACT *This article traces negotiations over the epistemic, ethical, and political authority of Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and science in mid-twentieth-century America. Specifically, it examines how the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Dr. Louis Finkelstein, led a diverse group of intellectual elites as they planned and convened the 1940 Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life (CSPR). Based on the conference's transcripts, proceedings, and papers, in addition to Finkelstein's writings from the period, this article shows how Finkelstein used his vision of the Jewish tradition as a model to form a pluralistic intellectual space that brought together the representatives of multiple religious traditions and modern science. To accredit the American way of life to Judaism, Finkelstein traced America's ethical values, democratic politics, and scientific genius back to the Hebrew Prophets through Rabbinic Judaism. In response to Finkelstein's historiography and the political and ideological challenges of World War II, scientific and religious experts negotiated their authority and debated how to mobilize their traditions in a quest for political stability. By analyzing the CSPR as a meeting of multiple discourses, this article reinstates science as a fundamental player in the story of American pluralism and demonstrates the way a non-Protestant tradition shaped the terms of an elite public's understanding of the "democratic way of life."*