



Reconstructionism

By Steve Cohen

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Reconstructionism

A Diversity of Belief Systems

One cannot understand Jewish people today by studying only the Old Testament. Jewish people identify with different religious groups, writings, teaching and theology from a multitude of sources. The Jewish religious calendar and festivals, attitudes toward Jesus, traditions, concepts of family, and varying concerns comprise a multi-faceted Jewish milieu.

What Jewish people believe can cover an encyclopedia's worth of information. We will present a basic overview of the highlights to help Christians better understand Jewish beliefs.

The divisions, or denominations, that Jewish people tend to be found in today are:

- Orthodox
- Reform
- Conservative
- Reconstructionist

Some minor offshoots are the Hassidic movement (the ultra-orthodox) and the Zionistic movement (a political movement). Some Jewish people are atheistic or agnostic. And of course there are the Jewish Christians, also known as "Messianic Jews."

Current North American Jewish Demographics

Surveys taken to determine how Jewish people identify themselves have yielded different results. More than six million Jewish people live in North America today.

Nearly a third identify themselves as members of the Reform movement, about one quarter identify themselves with the Conservative movement, and less than a fifth describe themselves as Orthodox.

Orthodoxy today seems to be on the upswing, as many modern Jewish people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives through Judaism. Many Jewish people do not have religious affiliations, other than to attend services such as the High

Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Some even claim to be atheistic in their background, others agnostic, while still others claim to be Zionistic.

Zionism is sometimes mistaken to be a religious movement. But basically, Zionism is a political movement. It concerns itself with the return and restoration of the land of Israel to the Jews, rather than the maintenance of a religious theology.

Jewish people identify with different branches of Judaism, because there is no unifying theology of Judaism today. Different rabbis hold differing opinions; in fact, Judaism could probably best be typified as "unity with diversity." Jewish people feel a unity of purpose, but they hold a diversity of opinions as to how they should be leading their lives.



The Reconstructionist Movement

The Reconstructionist movement, a modern movement, also is a branch of conservatism. Advocates of Reconstructionism hold that Judaism is a culture and way of life, and provides some religious background. Reconstructionism requires constant adaptation to the contemporary conditions that Jews face in this world. Adaptation is necessary so that Jewish people can more readily identify and meaningfully participate within the larger community. Essentially, this means that the center role of the Supreme Being, or Creator, has been mostly replaced by moral and ethical teachings, and a cultural identity defined as Jewish.

Both the idea and the movement owe their inspiration to Mordecai Menahem Kaplan. Kaplan argues that with the breakdown of certain traditional beliefs, Jewish identity had become watered down. Jews remain loyal to their faith despite hardship and suffering because they believe that adherence to Judaism assures them of salvation in the next world.

But in Kaplan's view, this is no longer credible. Consequently, Judaism must transform itself from a civilization oriented toward the life hereafter into one that can help Jews to attain salvation in this world. Belief in the possibility of this salvation is crucial to Kaplan's thought.

Reconstructionism strives for the progressive improvement of the human personality and the establishment of a free, just, and cooperative social order. Kaplan maintains that there are adequate resources in the world and capacities in man to achieve such salvation. He defines God as the "power that makes for salvation." This notion of God conforms to man's experience, since man senses a power that orients him to this life and elicits from him the best of what he is able.

Some Reconstructionists, Milton Steinberg probably being the best example, refused to accept Kaplan's theology. A more popular notion of Kaplan's was his definition of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization whose standards of conduct are established by the Jewish people and whose common denominator is neither beliefs, tenets, nor practices, but rather the continuous life of the Jewish people.

The Jewish religion, said Kaplan, exists for the Jewish people, not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion. Judaism, like any other civilization, comprises a history, language, religion, social organization, standards of conduct, and spiritual and social ideals. Under the influence of the early French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, Kaplan stated that whatever is an object of collective concern takes on all the traits of a religion, which in its turn functions in order to hold up to the individual the value of the group and the importance of his complete identification with it. Religion, therefore, lies at the very heart of every civilization.

Many Jewish intellectuals were attracted to Kaplan's program for a Jewish life. Since Judaism is, in his view, a civilization, its parts can only function in interrelationship with one another. He argued for what he called an "organic community" in which the basic unit of Jewish life would be the entire aggregate of synagogue, educational institutions, Zionist organizations, and defense and fraternal bodies, linked into a single community with a democratically elected leadership. Kaplan was also among the first to maintain that the synagogue must function as a Jewish center where an individual might find expression for virtually all Jewish and related activities.



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The founding of the Reconstructionist movement may be dated from the establishment of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) in January 1922. The notes: society served both as a synagogue center and as a forum for Kaplan's ideas. In 1935 he launched the magazine *Reconstructionist* in collaboration with his closest associates, of whom Milton Steinberg, Eugene Kohn, and Kaplan's son-in-law, Ira Eisenstein, formed the nucleus.

In 1941 the *New Haggadah* and the *Guide to Jewish Ritual* were published. In the Guide, ritual was viewed not as law but a means to group survival and the individual Jew's spiritual growth. The individual was to choose which rituals or folkways should be practiced, though when choosing, he should strike a balance between his own needs and those of the group.

In 1945 the Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book* appeared, against which a ban (herem) was proclaimed by the Aguddat ha-Rabbanim and an adverse "statement of opinion" (gillui da'at) was issued by Louis Ginzberg and Alexander Marx (Hadoar, 24 (1945), 904f.). In accordance with Kaplan's ideology, it excised references to the Jews as a chosen people, and to such concepts as God's revelation of the Torah to Moses and a personal Messiah. Some passages of the traditional prayer book were retained, despite Kaplan's rejection of the concepts that lay behind them. In such cases the editors suggested to the reader how the passages should be understood. So, prayers for the restoration of Israel were retained, but readers were told this should not be construed as the return of all Jews to Palestine.

Kaplan was a Zionist of the American school, ardent in his support for the colonization of Palestine, but opposed to concepts implying the "negation of the Diaspora" and to emphasis on the necessity of aliyah. Kaplan's greatest success was in his impact on Jewish educators, social workers, and rabbis, especially students of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught from 1909 to 1963. He left an indelible mark upon many of the Jewish community leaders. The movement, however, was less successful in recruiting a mass following.

In 1970, there were just 10 congregations affiliated to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships and about nine havurot (small groups who meet once every week or two for study and/or to observe the holidays together). The Federation affiliates have a combined membership of about 2,300 families. However, not all members think of themselves as Reconstructionists any more than all members of Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform synagogues think of themselves as Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jews.

A more unreservedly Reconstructionist organization, the Reconstructionist Foundation, whose membership is open to any Jew (including Federation members), has about 1,000 members.

Reconstructionist influence, however, is far greater than these numbers suggest.

An enhancement and turning point in the movement's history came in 1968 when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was established in Philadelphia. Students are expected to complete a doctoral program in religious or cognate studies at neighboring institutions in Philadelphia (primarily Temple University) while preparing for rabbinical ordination at the college.



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After Kaplan, the leader of Reconstructionism has been Ira Eisenstein, who has served as president of the Reconstructionist Foundation and of the college, editor of the magazine *Reconstructionist*, and de facto editor of the Reconstructionist press. For further insights into the history and origins of these divisions and movements, see *Our Jewish Friends*, written by Dr. Louis Goldberg and published by Moody Press. It has an excellent section on the history of the divisions of Judaism today.



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For More Information

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