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## Mordecai M. Kaplan's proposal of Judaism's renewal : reconstruction or deconstruction?

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(Gniezno)

**MORDECAI M. KAPLAN'S PROPOSAL OF JUDAISM'S RENEWAL.  
RECONSTRUCTION OR DECONSTRUCTION?**

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**Abstract**

Amidst all trends present nowadays, the latest and the most controversial appears to be the Jewish Reconstructionism, which has been conceived by Mordecai M. Kaplan. The starting point for Reconstructionist involves actual reconstruction of traditional Judaism, which takes place based on ideas taken from social and natural sciences. The performed analyses permit to state (but not to conclude decisively), that Jewish Reconstructionism is a specific Jewish theory, a way of living for a certain group of Jews, but it is not a Judaism. The Kaplan's system, which represents a result of an intentional reconstruction and revaluation of traditional Judaism, becomes in fact a deconstruction and a devaluation of Judaism.

**Key words**

Mordecai. M. Kaplan, Reconstructionism, Jews, Judaism

In the evaluation of contemporary times, one often points to two phenomena which condition one another. The first is total rejection of the religion of past generations accompanied by atrophy of religious practices (which does not always mean questioning the existence of God), the second is departure from traditional religious notion of God, who is nevertheless still believed in. “It is a fact that for the past two hundred years Jews have been experiencing a genuine identity crisis [...]. Is Judaism a religion, civilisation or culture? [...] This crisis of faith, which represents the most important issue that Judaism has to confront, became more profound in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and faced with the Holocaust, it assumed virtually dramatic proportions”<sup>1</sup>. The cause behind that human tragedy in Judaism is doubting the existence of God or His essence. Many young Jews maintain “that the God of Jews, inherited from the ancestors, is a barrier hampering their normal life. Future belongs to the resurrected Jewish nation, which may forge its life according to its own will”<sup>2</sup>.

Many contemporary Jewish thinkers attempted to overcome the stalemate by developing such a concept of God which, in their opinion, would be the most adequate and helpful in the renewal of true faith unto God. In all certainty this was motivated by their solicitude and the awareness of being responsible for the future of Judaism. Among those suggestions one finds the concept developed Kaplan<sup>3</sup>, the creator of Jewish Reconstructionism. Like no other, the reconstructionist notion of God appears to offer an alternative to the theistic understanding of YHVH. Kaplan’s position is thus associated with negation of traditional faith in God, which has an existential (God does not influence the fates of Jews, as demonstrated by the events of World War II) and scientific foundation (rejection of the theory of creation as incompatible with science).

Kaplan’s proposal is also singular in that it constitutes an American phenomenon. One can hardly disagree with the thesis that “all modern currents in Judaism have their beginnings in Germany”<sup>4</sup>. The shape of the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> J. Eisenberg, *Judaizm*, I. Stapor, E. Wolańska (transl.), Warszawa 1999, pp. 129–130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

<sup>3</sup> More on life and works of Kaplan see: Kaplan Mordecai, [in:] *Encyklopedia Judaica*, 10, Jerusalem 1971, p. 751–753; M. Scult, Mordecai M. Kaplan: His Life, [in:] E. Goldsmith, M. Scult (ed.), *Dynamic Judaism. The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York 1991, p. 3–13; A. Hertzberg, Introduction to the 1981 Edition, [in:] M.M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, Philadelphia–New York 1981, p. XIX–XXXV; I. Eisenstein, Mordecai M. Kaplan, [in:] S. Noveck (ed.), *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, Clinton 1963, p. 253–279.

<sup>4</sup> H. Wahle, *Wspólne dziedzictwo*, Z. Kowalska (transl.), Tarnów 1993, p. 118.

God in Reconstructionism was affected by both Jewish and American element. Regardless of confession, one can speak about shared traits of American religiousness, or even about "American religion"<sup>5</sup>. At its core one finds the biblical God-Creator, God of the Old Testament rather than the New, who is situated not above and beyond the believers but in the believers themselves. Ministers, priests and rabbis encourage people to find God within, to look inwards rather than gaze into the heavens<sup>6</sup>. Not a person in the United States can be accused of heresy, since "the constitution guarantees freedom to think and express anything and the freedom of believing in anything"<sup>7</sup>. The absolute rule of democracy leads to a situation where a religious person is repeatedly compelled to find their bearings in the dense thicket of emerging theories about God and the human being. The criteria for selection and the choice of appropriate alternative are an exclusively individual affair, without any recourse to some authority. "G.K. Chesterton's statement still holds absolutely true, namely that a person who does not believe in God not so much believes in nothing but rather believes in everything"<sup>8</sup>. New American religion is not so much the work of Puritanism but a product of democracy<sup>9</sup>. Many contemporary Jews in America have yielded to such mentality. It would be difficult to disagree with the view of Sorman's, who claims that those who are neither assimilated nor orthodox became reformed Jews who increasingly seek for a God who is personal and therapeutic<sup>10</sup>. One should add that Reconstructionists with Kaplan at the forefront are prominent in that group. "The idea according to which it is

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<sup>5</sup> The name originates from Harold Bloom (born 1930) — American culture critic, author of *The American Religion. The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, New York 1992.

<sup>6</sup> A very insightful and at times surprising analysis of American religiousness may be found in: G. Sorman, *Made in USA*, W. Nowicki (transl.), Warszawa 2004, pp. 89–107. The author claims that most Americans see God as a loving Father, with whom they are in a dialogue. An ecclesiastic is principally a mediator between God and the individual, not a preacher of the true Word of God. It is a seldom occurrence that minister, priest or rabbi express their views on the conduct of their charges. Morality has become a personal affair, without any relationship to God. Any innovations are enthusiastically received, as long as they reduce the distance between God and human. Followers of the so-called American religion prefer concrete results here and now, reluctant to wait for the beyond. Indeed, the everyday God of an American is a God who improves material, emotional and physical well-being.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> M. Serretti, *Rozpoznawanie Boga*, Kielce 2006, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 104.

history and culture, not theology, that define collective identity, has attracted a number of modern Jews who wished to sustain their Jewishness. It enabled them to remain that part of the past they wanted to preserve, while adding new elements and discarding the remainder”<sup>11</sup>.

One should note that being a Jew today does not mean being a religious person. Such identity did exist in the past. Nowadays, one encounters atheism, humanism, theism and Reconstructionism among Jews — in each case some stance on the issue of God is taken. As Armstrong observes, “after all, not all religions are theistic”<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, not every believing Jew is a theist. Monotheism is usually construed as faith in one God. Such a definition of monotheism “conceals a whole range of nuances. Throughout the long history, Judaism has always had a sense of powerful bond with the one deity, but the meaning of that faith and the associated theology differed substantially from period to period. In every period, there existed various, fluctuating notions of God, which exerted influence on one another”<sup>13</sup>.

Today, Judaism does not have one, universally binding concept of God either. Sometimes we forget that contemporary Judaism is not a mirror reflection of the biblical Judaism. It also happens that we approach present-day Judaism with the past Judaism in mind. Goldberg speaks of it with some reproach: “Judaism we have today is the work of long history which lasted three thousand years. Many know its beginnings from the Holy Scripture, but for the majority it is obscured by the caricature of Phariseism that is still conveyed in Christian teaching of religion. In general, nothing is known about the current Judaism, with an exception of a handful of its customs”<sup>14</sup>.

Reconstructionism is certainly a rational attempt at approaching the issue of God. Is the attempt a successful one? This paper seeks to answer that question. However, this task requires one to outline contemporary Judaism, discuss concepts of God in Judaism, explain the nature of Jewish Reconstructionism and foundations of the postulate of non-personal God in Jewish Reconstructionism, answer the question whether Jewish Reconstructionism is Judaism.

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<sup>11</sup>J. Eisenberg, *Judaizm*, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup>K. Armstrong, *Historia Boga*, Warszawa 1995, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>A. Unterman, *Żydzi. Wiara i życie*, Warszawa 2002, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>A.M. Goldberg, *Judaizm*, [in:] E. Brunner-Traut (ed.), *Pięć wielkich religii świata*, Warszawa 1996, p. 118.

Traditional Judaism, which is nowadays referred to as Jewish theism, is represented to a greater or lesser extent by the Orthodox, Reformed and Conservative Jews. In spite of the differences, the above denominations still uphold the traditional understanding of Judaism and the Jewish articles of faith. Before setting out to devise a new vision of Judaism, Kaplan engages in a critique of the aforementioned groups<sup>15</sup>. According to Kaplan, theistic Judaism which was characteristic of the past and, being still unreasonably upheld, is unacceptable to a contemporary Jew. Hence the need to restructure the ages-long tenets is such a way as to allow for both tradition and the achievements of modern science. In order to accomplish that goal, one should, as Kaplan argued<sup>16</sup>, explore the inspirations of Jewish tradition and foster its strength; reinterpret the elements rooted in the tradition: the values, history and the literature by means of notions derived from contemporary science; perceive Judaism as a continually developing religious civilisation, simultaneously avoiding the error of dichotomy between the secular and the religious; lay the social and spiritual foundations for an organic and democratic functioning of the Jewish community and its various institutions; instil new creative strengths in Jewish groups, which would enable them to discover standards of science, as well as morality and values of all kinds that are inherent in Judaism; impart spiritual significance and motivation into individual and collective life; relate the life of Jewish community to American society and international affairs.

Kaplan strove to reevaluate the three principal aspects of Jewish life: Jews as people, the Torah as the Jewish way of life; God as the source of all Jewish values<sup>17</sup>. This triad is the cornerstone of Jewish tradition. It seems paradoxical that Reconstructionism, in a zealous and firm manner, retained the traditional form but rejected the fundamental theistic content of Judaism. Kaplan employs terms such as reinterpretation, reevaluation and reconstruction, not interpretation, evaluation and construction, because he is interested in describing the process of arriving at new meanings, forms and practices without having to reject the original sources of Judaism. Surprisingly enough, Kaplan simultaneously accepted tradition and did not accept it. He recognised the Torah, the Law

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<sup>15</sup>See: M.M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization. Toward a Reconstruction if American-Jewish Life*, New York 1981, p. 91–169.

<sup>16</sup>See: I.S. Chipkin, *Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan and Jewish Education*, [in:] I. Eisenstein, E. Kohn (ed.), *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, New York 1952, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup>See: *ibidem*, p. 94.

and God but attached entirely new significance to those realities. He did not claim that those realities had never existed in Judaism but argued that they are not the ones and not such as it was previously conceived. At present, Judaism is at such a stage of development that, in Kaplan's view, one has to realize and acknowledge the fact if those realities are ever to be preserved. As Kaplan saw it, Judaism should adopt a path of reconstruction.

The essence of traditional Judaism was imbuing everything with religion, making the profane into the sacred. The Haskalah strove to reduce that domination by assigning religion a place and setting the secular-humanistic Jewish reality apart. Kaplan did not reject the tradition; guided by the tenets of the Haskalah and rejecting all dogmatism and intolerance he sought to reinterpret Jewish theism. To Kaplan, tradition is a challenge to think not a prohibition of cogitation; it offers a release of human capacities, not their enslavement; it is the beginning of intellectual struggle not the end of exploration. As he argued, people without tradition are in a far worse situation than people without homeland<sup>18</sup>. Still, human being without science, ignorant of the achievements and truths which have their sources in human rationality is even more pitiable.

Kaplan's stance on tradition derives from the enthusiastic fascination with the achievements of secular culture. The faith in scientific and technological progress is evident in all his writings<sup>19</sup>. This led him to a firm renouncement of the notion of religion, a religion crystallised in tradition, finished and immutable. He asserts that the truths discovered by science, with its experimental devices, is in total contradiction to traditional theology<sup>20</sup>. As sentient beings, we cannot accept theological truths which clash with the universally acknowledged natural truths. It would also be unwarranted, Kaplan claims, to believe in truths which are derived from a source which is beyond human reason and understanding. Therefore religion as a spiritual strength should be renewed and reconstructed. It would be a fundamental error to reinstate past Judaism for which tradition is both the safeguard and the embodiment.

Changes that took place in Judaism in the past were negligible and immaterial in comparison with the radical modification of Kaplan's. Religious Jews of

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<sup>18</sup>See: M.M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, New York 1967, p. 289–291.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. E. Schweid, *Reconstruction of Jewish Religion Out of Secular Culture*, [in:] E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, R.M. Seltzer (ed.), *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York–London 1990, p. 37–38.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 38.

any affiliation found that the most controversial aspect of Kaplan's concept was his anti-anthropomorphic, anti-personalist and anti-supernaturalist concept of God, from which all other notions were derived<sup>21</sup>.

Kaplan's essential aim was to refashion Judaism into a living reality that a contemporary Jew would readily accept. This desire was accompanied by a certainty that traditional Judaism, in all its forms and varieties, is unable to face the challenges posed by the present day. All previous attempts at revitalising and bringing Judaism up to date proved either ill-advised or insufficient. Kaplan was of the opinion that traditional Judaism is ill, and the attempts to cure it were more concerned with the effects rather than causes and failed to solve the problem<sup>22</sup>. The outcomes of any efforts depend on the attitude to tradition. The idea is that spiritual leaders need to take a stance with regard to Jewish past that would differ from the approach of scientists and researchers. Kaplan states explicitly that leaders responsible for the appearance of Judaism "[have] to cause the dead-wood of tradition to blossom anew"<sup>23</sup>. The world is in constant change, therefore Judaism cannot stay the same. From the dead past one has to extract that which will revive the present and the future. The differences between the world from which Jews emerged and the world in which they live now are so striking and manifold so as to be almost beyond description.

Kaplan realised that the contemporary Jew is in a difficult position. Their traditional faith clashes with the intellectual and spiritual turmoil of modern times<sup>24</sup>. As they come out of their isolation, Jews acquire secular knowledge along with their own tradition, and the former has to be reconciled with their heritage. Hence the need to harmonise what a Jew knows with what they believe in. This was the motive behind Kaplan's attempt to effect such a synthesis. He

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. R.M. Seltzer, Kaplan and Jewish Modernity, [in:] E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, R.M. Seltzer (ed.), *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York–London 1990, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> "Came the Orthodox doctors and prescribed more prayer and mitzvot. Came the reform doctors and advised the amputation of nationhood. Came the secularist doctors and advised the amputation religion. Came the Conservative doctors and said that all that traditional Judaism needed was a change of climate of opinion. Came the reconstructionist doctors and pointed out that what Judaism needed was neither prayer nor surgery, but mental therapy. [...] The Orthodox conception of ideal Jewish life is to swim against the stream. The Reform view is that Jewish life can be lived by swimming with the stream. The Reconstructionist view is a matter of swimming across the stream". M.M. Kaplan, *Not So Random Thoughts*, New York 1966, p. 293, 296.

<sup>23</sup> M.M. Kaplan, *The Future*, p. 374.

<sup>24</sup> The situation is described in: M.J. Cohen, *Mordecai M. Kaplan as a Teacher*, [in:] I. Eisenstein, E. Kohn (ed.), *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, New York 1952, p. 9–10.

never rejected tradition, even less religion, but only wished to put it into a new framework<sup>25</sup>. Once, just as the rest of the ancient world, Jews shared the universal belief that salvation meant attaining joy in the future by virtue of living in accordance with God's will in this world. "Consequently he was free from all in the scheme of divine redemption. But all such conceptions together with the reasoning upon which they are based are alien in the modern world. In the short time that the Jew has lived in the modern world, these conceptions have become almost unintelligible to him. He thus finds himself deprived of what had been the principal justification for his loyalty to Judaism"<sup>26</sup>.

How should one attain it? "The method which the ancients employed may be termed *transvaluation*<sup>27</sup>; the method we must employ may be termed *revaluation*<sup>28</sup><sup>29</sup>. In Kaplan's view, transvaluation is characteristic of traditional Judaism, which employed it as a tool enabling Jewish religion to maintain continuity<sup>30</sup>. Both the tradition articulated in the rabbinical period and by the later Jewish allegorists gave new meanings and values to the original scriptures of Judaism. According to Kaplan, the transvaluation which had been taking place in the past centuries is not viable today. He is straightforward: "But the method of transvaluation cannot do that for the modern Jew"<sup>31</sup>. The concern with regard to maintaining continuity between modern and past Judaism or the gradual switch from traditional Judaism to the Judaism of the future "can be effected only in the glaring light of complete awareness of the change involved"<sup>32</sup>. The development of science has changed our awareness and expanded our cognitive capacities. This applies to religion as well. As Kaplan suggests, we

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<sup>25</sup>"Not timelessness but timeliness is the desideratum. Religion is necessarily rooted in the soil of the tradition, but its life depends on its ability to send forth new shoots into the light of our own day". M.M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, New York 1962, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup>M.M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 511.

<sup>27</sup>Transvaluation — imparting a new value (or transformation of the former).

<sup>28</sup>Revaluation should be construed as return to the original value or restoration of the former value.

<sup>29</sup>M.M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Kaplan held that rabbinical references to written text (Torah) reveal fairly substantial discrepancies with the literal meaning of the text. In order to prevent it, one should study the original sources of Jewish tradition. See: M. M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, p. 3–4.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibidem*.

know today that the right meanings, sense and values cannot be looked for in the accrued tradition but in the original sources of Judaism. "For that reason we have to avoid transvaluation and resort to revaluation"<sup>33</sup>.

Transvaluation is repeating of what was in a new guise but cannot accomplished given the present circumstances. "Revaluation consists in disengaging from the traditional content those elements in it which answer permanent postulates of human nature, and in integrating them into our own ideology"<sup>34</sup>. As Kaplan elucidates further: "When we reevaluate, we analyze or break up the traditional values into their implications, and single out for acceptance those implications which can help us meet our own moral and spiritual needs; the rest may be relegated to archeology"<sup>35</sup>. Additionally the revaluation of a religious concept of institution may be accomplished only by comprehending those phenomena in the light of the entire situation whose part they were<sup>36</sup>. By applying revaluation, Kaplan also arrived at a new understanding of the old truths: he made the personal God into a Force or a Process, construed Judaism as civilisation, opted for transnaturalism while rejecting supernaturalism, identified salvation with self-fulfilment in this world.

When Kaplan discusses God, he moves within a transnatural loop, setting out from the human being and ending with the human being. One could say that in this case theology was transformed into a singular anthropology and sociology. This is particularly evident when Kaplan reinterprets human being created in God's image (theory of creation). As we read in his work, there is "something in the nature of life" that is expressed in the existence of human personality and arouses human need for ideals and the desire for salvation. Identifying that "something" with God leads to a specific understanding of the traditional truth about the human having been created in God's image, since such identification presumes that "there is something divine in human personality, in that it is the instrument through which the creative life of the world effects the evolution of the human race"<sup>37</sup>. It is true that the aspect of reality which is responsible for the development of human personality is shown a "creative life of the world" only because the human associates value with

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<sup>33</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup>See: *ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup>Ibidem, p. 89.

personality. “Something in the nature of life” is recognised by Kaplan as God solely because the human recognises their ideals and aspirations. It may be seen as an attempt at deifying human values. Undoubtedly Kaplan notices a divine element in human personality. As may be seen, Reconstructionism features a projection of human personality onto the universe, onto “something in the nature of life” which is responsible for its development. This, in turn, verges on deification of human personality. Hence it is not an attempt to find the image of God in the human being but to discover the image of the human in God. This results in a deification of the human being and at the same time deification of cosmos. Thus, consciously or not, Reconstructionism conceives a situation in which the idea of God was constructed in human image. In Kaplan’s approach, God is not the creator of religion. It is the human, with all their cultural ‘baggage’ who ‘creates’ God<sup>38</sup>.

Whenever discussing God, Kaplan speaks about the human. Even for an average reader transnatural theology gives the impression of being a science about the human being or science about society. The teachings of the Creator mutate into a science of creation. On Rosh Hashanah, a holiday frequently mentioned by Kaplan, the human faces a judgement which in fact is a self-judgement. The human appraises themselves “in the light of whatever truth experience has revealed to him”<sup>39</sup>, not in the light of revealed will of the personal and transcendent God. The Reconstructionist recognition of God as King and Sovereign consists in attaining faith in human<sup>40</sup>. Serving God is nothing else than serving oneself, aspiring to self-fulfilment. The human is always the goal, while God only plays the role of means to an end. Ultimately, such is the naturalist and pragmatic reinterpretation of the traditional faith in YHVH. Even the attribute of God’s sanctity is fused with the idea of sanctity of life<sup>41</sup>. The category of sanctity is assigned to life as such, while God receives it only because He is identified with the life of cosmos. For this reason, Kaplan’s approach is not merely a deification of the human and the universe, but also an anthropomorphisation (and thus personification) of forces and processes occurring in the universe. By the same token, God is relationalised.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. H.C. Weisberg, Mordecai M. Kaplan’s Theory of Religion, [in:] I. Eisenstein, E. Kohn (ed.), Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation, New York 1952, p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> M.M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 83.

Kaplan defined the principal problem of Jewish religion as a task to discover in life “a common purpose, which makes for the enhancement of human”<sup>42</sup>, which should be construed as an obligation, because it needs to be treated as “a manifestation or revelation of God”<sup>43</sup>. This seems logical given the premises of Reconstructionism. That which is divine does exist in the human being, as the human deifies that which is best in themselves. All Kaplan's intuitions concerning God revolve around human, who serves their own aspirations. In such a context, any cult resembles building an emotional and intellectual communion with oneself, or in fact with one's deified self.

There is no doubt that Reconstructionist theology with its transnaturalism is a form of pantheism. The nature of that pantheism needs to be determined in the light of critical analyses and assessments. History of philosophy distinguishes acosmic and atheistic pantheism<sup>44</sup>. Spinoza's pantheism represents the acosmic variety, whereby nature is identified with God. As a matter of fact, Spinoza did not question God but nature. Pantheism inherent in Reconstructionism does not advance that type of pantheism, nor any other that is inspired by metaphysics. In order to determine the Reconstructionist proposition in that respect, it would be most appropriate to call it “Reconstructionist pantheism”, as the concept does not wholly identify God with universe, nor is the world a component of God's nature; instead, God is a fragment of the universe (a Force or a Process of cosmos, along which there exists chaos, as a part of nature that has not been penetrated by divinity).

For Kaplan, the starting point does not lie in considering the entirety of nature and identifying it with God; instead he set out with the human, their aspirations, drives and values. The extent to which the human accepts their goals and impulses is matched by the extent to which they are mediated in the universe and amount to being a cosmic momentum, revealing the structure of reality. Recognising those aspects of reality as being divine means identifying God with cosmos, yet this is a cosmos shaped in the image of human and their desires. Reconstructionism should not therefore be denoted as pantheism we know, since

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<sup>42</sup>M.M. Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, New York 1958, p. 216.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup>There are various forms of pantheism. Sometimes one distinguishes extreme pantheism (God and the world are forms of being that were originally identical) and moderate pantheism (a difference between God and the world is noted: the world would be a component of God's nature — then it is called panentheism — or God would be a fragment of cosmos). Broader on that subject [in:] S. Kowalczyk, *Filozofia Boga*, Lublin 1993, pp. 22–24.

paradoxically it is the most radical form of anthropomorphism, which by default was to have been rejected by Reconstructionism. If Berkovits's suggestions are taken into account, it should rather be called "pananthropomorphism"<sup>45</sup>.

Against Kaplan's designs, Reconstructionism did not effect a "reevaluation" of the traditional notion of God, but its "devaluation" and "devastation". Consequently, as Jewish critics state, "Christianity as well as Islam are by far closer to Judaism than Reconstructionist religion"<sup>46</sup>. In view of the above remarks it would be difficult not to see Jewish Reconstructionism as a radical form of Judaism, albeit not the most extreme<sup>47</sup>.

Reconstructionism eludes unequivocal assessment, especially the concept of God that Kaplan suggested. The founder of Reconstructionism never put his concepts into an explicit treatise. Therefore critics and even disciples interpret and evaluate his thought in a variety of ways. Some claim that "regardless of his prosaic style, he was a theological visionary"<sup>48</sup>, not a professional philosopher or theologian. Consequently, they emphasize that the value of his views is mainly in the vision of contemporary Jewish theology, not in the postulates he advanced. Seltzer believes that his merit lies in paving the way for contemporary Jewish natural philosophy, similar to the theology of process created by Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb and Schubert Ogden<sup>49</sup>. Kaplan was not inclined, nor did he have the tools to develop his religious naturalism into a Jewish philosophy of process. However, his frequent appeals to consolidate Jewish values on more than just existential plane, i.e. find their foundations in natural facts and modern science set, as Seltzer observes, a direction of development which Jewish religion and theology should adopt<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup>"Pananthropomorphism" — see: E. Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, New York 1974, p. 182.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 185.

<sup>47</sup>The so-called Jewish Humanism advanced an even more extreme vision of God, rejecting faith in God completely. In 1960, reformed rabbi Sherwin Wine started the movement which was a secularised attempt to uphold Judaism in contemporary world. Not only does it deny any forms of supernaturalism (just as Reconstructionism) but also strives to abolish theistic faith altogether. Judaism in this guise is a proposition addressed to those Jews who wish to identify with the Jewish community without the need to adopt Jewish faith or any belief in God. For more see: D. Cohn-Sherbok, *Judaism*, London–New York 2003, pp. 345–346.

<sup>48</sup>R.M. Seltzer, *Kaplan and Jewish Modernity*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup>See: *ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup>See: *ibidem*.

According to Kaufman, Kaplan's greatest achievement is the development of a thought system which surpasses reductive naturalism and yet does not go beyond the limitations of natural law<sup>51</sup>. At the same time, he observes that thanks to his transnaturalism, Kaplan arrived at a new notion of divine transcendence. This proposition is intended for rationalists who wish to have a clear view of the feasible ahead before they make the leap of faith. His thought will not appeal to those who seek a mystical or positivist path to God, "but will provide premises to both scientists and students of the humanities who would like to broaden their horizons of limited rationality"<sup>52</sup>. Elsewhere, Kaufman argued that Kaplan's concept of God is exceptionally comprehensible and offers support to modern Jews in their perplexity, because "it is not shrouded in mystery and mysticism. Nor is it unclear for the reason, as it does not require faith in the suspension of natural law"<sup>53</sup>.

Another enthusiast of Kaplan's thought is Chipkin, according to whom the pioneer of Jewish Reconstructionism breathed some new life into Judaism, demonstrating the sanctity and presence of God in human experience, without which the deliverance of Jewish civilisation in the modern world would have been impossible<sup>54</sup>.

Cohen is probably the least critical in his evaluation of Kaplan's views. Cohen finds that his master is a modern Maimonides and a "guide for the perplexed" of the modern era<sup>55</sup>. A similar view is expressed by Gittelsohn, who argued that the only difference between Philo and Maimonides on the one hand and Kaplan on the other consists in utilising different achievements of science to devise a rational concept of Jewish God. Whereas Philo and Maimonides "spoke of God using the language of Plato and Aristotle, Kaplan described Him in the light of Darwinian and Freudian theory as well as in terms of modern physics and biology"<sup>56</sup>. Adherents of his theories constantly emphasize that Kaplan,

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<sup>51</sup>W.E. Kaufman, *The Contemporary Relevance of Mordecai M. Kaplan's Philosophy*, *Conservative Judaism* 4, 1981, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup>W. E. Kaufman, *The Concept of Transcendence in Reconstructionism*, *Reconstructionist* 30, 1972, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup>See: I.S. Chipkin, *Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan and Jewish Education*, p. 107.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. M.J. Cohen, *Mordecai M. Kaplan As Teacher*, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup>R.B. Gittelsohn, *Mordecai M. Kaplan and Reform Judaism: A Study in Reciprocity*, [in:] I. Eisenstein, E. Kohn (ed.), *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, New York 1952, p. 240.

more than any other Jew, translated the idea of God into a language that is acceptable to followers of Judaism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>57</sup>.

Almost everyone agrees with respect to one point. The creator of Reconstructionism belongs to the most influential Jewish thinkers of the modern times, while simultaneously he is appraised as the most controversial and revolutionary Jew in America<sup>58</sup>. Methodologists find it difficult to determine why Kaplan was hailed as “the most creative Jewish thinker”<sup>59</sup>. Some are of the opinion that the creator of Reconstructionism is not a philosopher but an ideologist<sup>60</sup>. Critics indict Kaplan saying that his vision of God is calculated and lacks the fear and mystery that had always been present in Judaism<sup>61</sup>. Although Kohn observes that Kaplan’s greatest contribution to Judaism is his method of reinterpreting Jewish tradition<sup>62</sup>, most Jewish critics do not share this enthusiastic view. On the contrary, they find that Reconstructionism represents a deconstruction of Judaism as such; traditional Judaism is most certainly adversely affected. Kaplan was the only Jewish naturalist who drew upon the achievement of non-Jewish thinkers, in an unlimited and almost unconditional fashion. The problem is not that he applied different categories than those known in tradition (many contemporary Jewish thinkers did so), but that he chose categories that disagree utterly with the traditional religious thinking, and thus contradict tradition.

Kaplan’s naturalist approach is visible particularly in the attempt to describe mutual relationship between philosophy of religion and theology. In of his works Kaplan observes: “Religious philosophy approaches the idea of God and His relation to man and the world. It does not recognize any authority other than that of the thinking [...]. In theology, the problem is how to interpret or

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> See: J.B. Agus, *Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, New York 1941, p. 283.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Ch. Liebman, *Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life*, [in:] Ch. Liebman (ed.), *American Jewish Year Book*, Philadelphia 1970, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. W. Cutter, *Kaplan and Jewish Education: Reflections on His Influence*, [in:] E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, R.M. Seltzer (ed.), *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York–London 1990, p. 377. Actually quotes the assessment by I. Aron, who expressed her views in the matter in the paper: *To Create a Liberal Philosophy of Jewish Education*, *Religious Education* (Fall 1986), p. 547.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. R.T. Alpert, J.J. Staub, *Exploring Judaism. A Reconstructionist Approach*, Elkins Park 2000, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. E. Kohn, *Mordecai M. Kaplan As Exegete*, [in:] I. Eisenstein, E. Kohn (ed.), *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, New York 1952, p. 137.

reinterpret a particular religious tradition, in the light of objective truth ascertained in religious philosophy”<sup>63</sup>. As may be seen, Kaplan completely changed the notion of Judaism and God and reversed the previous order of things into the bargain (in this sense effecting a revolution in Jewish religion). Science and philosophy of religion became the criterion of truth in theology as opposed to the Torah and tradition which govern Jewish theism. The most vivid expression of such an approach is the following: “The past has a vote, not a veto”<sup>64</sup>. Ultimately, the vote of the past was vetoed by Reconstructionism.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Kaplan tried to adapt Judaism to modern science rather than find compatibilities between the achievements of science and theology, as Maimonides did it. Therefore it would be difficult to concur with the notion that Kaplan is a contemporary Maimonides. This is also where the beginnings of Reconstructionist “revolution” are to be sought. In fact, Kaplan’s proposition is not an enhancement of Judaism and the concept of God but an altogether different religion and a diametrically dissimilar concept of God. In Steinberg’s opinion, the postulate advanced by Kaplan is “an inadequate theism”<sup>65</sup>, because God, who is simply an aspect of nature, “is not enough of a God”<sup>66</sup>. Steinberg referred to Kaplan’s speculation concerning God as a “flight of the imagination but without real significance”<sup>67</sup>.

The difference between Kaplan’s concept of God and the notion of God in traditional Judaism is tremendous and indisputable. Confronted with Jewish theism, Jewish Reconstructionism appears to be an inadequate postulate<sup>68</sup>. The God of Israel is a personal entity, both a transcendent and immanent being, the one and the only, omnipotent and omniscient, the one who creates and sustains the existence of the world. Kaplan’s God is not even an entity, as in Reconstructionism it is identified as a relationship, a bond, a reference, a force and a process. Such a transnatural God is not transcendent in the ontological sense but immanent: He is not the one and the only, but one of many (forces and processes); He is not omnipotent, but constrained by the chaos of nature

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<sup>63</sup> M.M. Kaplan, *The Future*, p. 167.

<sup>64</sup> R.T. Alpert, J.J. Staub, *Exploring Judaism*, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> S. Noveck, Kaplan and Milton Steinberg, [in:] E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, R.M. Seltzer (ed.), *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York–London 1990, p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. J.B. Agus, *Modern Philosophies*, p. 308.

which cannot be fully controlled; He is not omniscient but only anticipates the direction of the world; He is not the supreme creator but is merely creative and co-dependent on human intellect and will.

From the standpoint of philosophy of religion, Reconstructionism is not a satisfactory proposition, while Kaplan's postulate of non-personal God is difficult to accept as a vector of development for contemporary Judaism<sup>69</sup>. The problem is not in questioning the need or the possibility of a contemporary version of Judaism, but in the inappropriate, transnatural attempt to fit Judaism into a new framework, whereby the old work is destroyed and replaced with a new one. Irrespective of what Kaplan thought and intended, his attempt does not resemble renovation of a valuable masterpiece of the past, which requires careful and professional treatment, but creation of a new faith, a new religion, a new concept of God. Kaplan does not devise a new framework but paints a new picture in the post-modern spirit. To use philosophical idiom, we are dealing with new form and new matter with interspersed elements of the old, so that the work may remain within the boundaries of religiousness. In the light of the above deliberations, one is compelled to concur with Agus who observed that having demolished the traditional notion of God, Reconstructionism did not introduce a mature concept in exchange, a concept that would be coherent, clear and consistent, if only from the scientific point of view<sup>70</sup>.

Such a far-reaching departure from traditional Judaism cannot be reconciled with historical Judaism. The postulate of non-personal God is firmly rejected by contemporary Jewish theism. The main reason behind it is the enduring, strong conviction that faith and the traditional teachings of the previous generations are by no means a lesser authority in the affairs of faith than philosophy or science<sup>71</sup>. In traditional Judaism, Jewish awareness relied on the obligation towards God as a Person. In Reconstructionism, Kaplan does not assume that God is the principal incentive of the obligation but the Jewish people, whose goal is reduced to survival. This is an explicit switch from the awareness of mission to the awareness of ordinary persistence and survival.

Personal God is the most appropriate and most characteristic approach for Judaism. The notion subsumes elements of substance, spirit, reason and will while at the same time it harbours a mystery which is superior to the human

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 312–313.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 315.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 319.

being in every respect. In Judaism, questioning the personal nature of God eliminates the need to be a follower of Jewish religion at all, since the sole purpose of Judaism is to support Jewish people in attaining self-fulfilment in this world instead of aspiring to carry out the will of God and meet Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. One does not have to be a follower of Judaism, not even a Jew to have the will to last in this world, to the fullest if possible. Such a goal motivates every human being and every human community. Also, being chosen, the Covenant and the destiny of the Jewish people as servants to God all become pointless. It is no surprise that in Reconstructionism Jewish theology morphed into anthropology and sociology, because in this particular vision of Judaism being a Jew does not differ from the ordinary being human. Contemporary Judaism is not a monolith. Among all the currents in evidence today, Jewish Reconstructionism proves to be the most recent and the most controversial. All other approaches (Orthodox, Reformed, Conservative) represent Jewish theism which, in the most crucial issues, remains true to tradition. Consequently, one can speak of the theistic concept of God in Judaism, a conception which in various forms reflects the heritage of the past. Meanwhile, Reconstructionism sets out with reconstruction of traditional Judaism, which takes place based on ideas derived from natural and social sciences. In such an approach, the criterion of knowledge rather than faith determines the validity and truth of the concept of God. Without doubt, Reconstructionism has gone beyond the boundaries of Jewish theism and situated itself in opposition to the latter.

Kaplan construes Judaism as a civilisation as opposed to religion it had previously been. Religion is but one of the elements of civilisation, not the most important, the most significant and unconditional. In Reconstructionism the notion of God not only may, but has to fluctuate just as other components of Jewish civilisation. From now on, one does not have to be a theist in order to remain a follower of Judaism. This is an utter novelty in the Jewish world. A Reconstructionist does not acknowledge supernaturalism and, as a result, does not recognise the divine origin of the Torah, theory of creation, the miracles or eternal life in a world beyond. The postulate of non-personal God springs from negation of supernaturalism and traditional Jewish soteriology.

Kaplan's God is a Force or a Process which lead human and humanity to salvation construed as self-fulfilment in this world. Thus comprehended, God fits solely into the horizon of human experience. He is nothing else but a "tangle" of notions and ideas which mutate constantly, century by century. Here, the history of God is understood as the history of human consciousness of God,

which heeds the workings of the idea of God (as function) but not the God Himself (as substance).

Kaplan adopted an intermediate position: he did not accept typical naturalism and questioned supernaturalism. He defined his approach as “transnaturalism”. With respect to God, this means that God is neither a natural reality nor a supernatural one. He is not transcendental, but He is not entirely immanent either. He is not a being, nor is He nothingness. Not a person, and although He is attributed the features of a personal entity any form of anthropomorphism is simultaneously rejected. The position “in between” is as original as it is enigmatic. Transnaturalism itself is vague and requires multiple assumptions, even presupposes a faith greater than the theistic one. Therefore Kaplan can be considered neither a Jewish atheist nor a theist. Paradoxically, those two extreme approaches to the issue of God are much more cohesive and comprehensible when contemplated by reason than Reconstructionism with its transnatural, non-personal God.

Kaplan is in a grip of certain modernism, which may be interpreted in typically Anglo-Saxon categories, from the standpoint of pragmatism and empiricism. Two modernist elements are particularly evident in Reconstructionism: immanentism stressing the internal, intransferable value of personal faith and the importance of conscience, which becomes a *God enchanted into human*, and evolutionism in which religious truths are subject to ongoing processes of cultural transformation instead of being fixed, revealed and unchangeable. As a result, Kaplan focuses on the functioning of nature. Questions about God are reduced to questions how God, as a Force or a Process, functions in nature as an entirety and in its parts. Consequently, Reconstructionist theology was converted into biology, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Reflections concerning God are contained in the deliberations on nature, society and the human being, because God is a Force which induces the development or renewal of human nature, the nature of society and ultimately the nature of universe. God as a Force which manifests itself in nature and history assists in the process of self-fulfilment (salvation) of human in the course of history through nature. In Reconstructionism, God as a Presence is not a substantial presence but a means of revealing the divine aspect of both the nature of universe and the nature of human.

The suggestion of non-personal God does not seem to be any more appealing to the contemporary human being than the concept of God in traditional Judaism. Kaplan failed to provide a better and more convincing alternative to Jewish theism. Recognising God as a Force or a Process does not necessitate

any greater knowledge, as Kaplan argued, but greater faith which surpassed even the faith of a theist. At best, the postulate of non-personal God has the same proving capacity as any other hypothesis which cannot be either verified or falsified. In addition, the theory lacks any authority save for the authority of Kaplan himself. Contrary to the declarations of transnaturalists who held that the concept of God should correspond with modern science, the fact that the idea they developed should meet the needs and expectations of the new generation of Jews proved more important than the requirements of logic and science. It is not without a reason that the critics maintain that Kaplan's God is the work of his imagination rather than rational mind.

For some, Judaism created by Kaplan is completely inadmissible, for others it is acceptable, at times even as the only way to renew and consolidate contemporary Judaism. The matter cannot be resolved decisively as there is no authoritative body or entity that would determine the boundaries of Judaism. The conducted analyses enable one to observe (though not state conclusively) that Jewish Reconstructionism is a singular Jewish theory, a way of life for a certain group of Jews, but it is not Judaism. The transnatural concept of God, albeit Jewish, does not correspond with the Judaic notion of God; what is more, it does not tally with the monotheistic belief in God. Such a vision of God yields a modern Jewish religion of a non-sectarian nature, a denomination in which every Jew may find a place for themselves. Kaplan's system, an outcome of deliberate reconstruction and revaluation of traditional Judaism, became in fact a deconstruction and a devaluation of Judaism. Moritz Steinschneider, a leading Jewish scholar of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who strove to collect and compile the entire Jewish literature, when asked why he embarked on such a tremendous effort, responded sarcastically: "I'm preparing Judaism for a dignified and honourable funeral"<sup>72</sup>. In this context one cannot help but reflect whether the concept of God as conceived by Reconstructionism is not an attempt to give Judaism a burial, an attempt that seems neither dignified nor honourable.

What then is Reconstructionism, since it cannot be pronounced Judaism, while Kaplan's non-personal God cannot be considered Judaic? This reflection demonstrates that the phenomenon meets all the conditions to be a Jewish New Age. The principal feature of the New Age movement is pantheism, construed as a belief that everything is God and that God is in everything. At its founda-

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<sup>72</sup>A. Hertzberg, A. Hirt-Manheimer, *Żydzi. Istota i charakter narodu*, Warszawa 2001, p. 214.

tions one finds the conviction that all are one, while the individual sense of being separate from the world and other beings is the reason's realisation of its own *ego*. Here, God is also non-personal and non-transcendent. In New Age, God is not a Being who created the world and sustains its existence (monotheist theories of *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* are rejected), but a non-personal energy, a form of cosmic oneness, the principle of life, the spirit of the world, the sum of all consciousness existing in the world. It should be noted that New Age never rejects God, but negates the manner of perceiving God in monotheist religions, in which anthropomorphisms may be encountered. It is also characterised by drawing on the old notions and symbols from the existing religions and philosophies, which are given new, transformed meanings. The similarity between New Age and Reconstructionism, especially in how they construe God, though it may be unintentional, is nevertheless obvious. From the standpoint of Jewish theism, Jewish Reconstructionism is a philosophy of God without God.

Jewish theists were aware that a unilateral shift of immanence in comprehending God, without adequate and clear reference to transcendence leads to underestimation of supernaturalism, then to its negation and consequently to naturalism. However, they failed to predict that an intermediate form will emerge in the bosom of Judaism, manifested in Kaplan's transnaturalism. Regardless of the intentions entertained by the creator of Reconstructionism, the movement does not appear to be a miraculous cure fostering a renaissance of Judaism in contemporary world. Kaplan wanted "the dead-wood of tradition to blossom anew". However, it would be hard to expect a tree to bloom if it had been previously cut down. Reconstructionism did not improve the old tree but planted a new one in its place, a tree which sprouts different fruit of a different quality.

Finally, we arrive at the fundamental conclusion, namely that transnaturalism is not an appropriate mode of seeking truth in Judaism and religion in general, as the Reconstructionist conduct relies on the following principle: Our knowledge is not an illusion! It is an illusion to suppose that what science cannot supply may be obtained elsewhere. Meanwhile, the creed of a Jewish theist is: Our faith is not an illusion! It is an illusion to suppose that what faith cannot supply may be obtained elsewhere.

**Waldemar Szczerbiński**

**MORDECAI M. KAPLANA PROPOZYCJA ODNOWY JUDAIZMU.  
REKONSTRUKCJA CZY DEKONSTRUKCJA?**

**Streszczenie**

Współczesny judaizm nie jest monolitem. Wśród dzisiejszych nurtów najnowszym i najbardziej kontrowersyjnym okazuje się rekonstrukcjonizm żydowski. Wszystkie inne (ortodoksyjne, reformowane, konserwatywne) reprezentują teizm żydowski, który w najistotniejszych sprawach zachowuje wierność tradycji. Dlatego w judaizmie można mówić o teistycznej koncepcji Boga, która w różnych postaciach odzwierciedla dziedzictwo przeszłości. Tymczasem punktem wyjścia rekonstrukcjonizmu jest właśnie rekonstrukcja judaizmu tradycyjnego, która dokonuje się w oparciu o idee zaczerpnięte z nauk przyrodniczych i społecznych. Przy takim podejściu nie wiara, lecz wiedza stanowi kryterium prawdziwości koncepcji Boga. Bez wątplenia rekonstrukcjonizm przekroczył granice teizmu żydowskiego i postawił się w opozycji do niego.

Judaizm w rozumieniu Kaplana jest cywilizacją, a nie, jak dotychczas, religią. Religia jest tylko jednym z wielu elementów cywilizacji, i to wcale nie najważniejszym, najistotniejszym i bezwarunkowym. Pojęcie Boga w rekonstrukcjonizmie nie tylko może, lecz wręcz musi zmieniać się tak, jak inne składniki cywilizacji żydowskiej. Od tej pory nie trzeba być teistą, aby pozostać wyznawcą judaizmu. To jest całkowita nowość w świecie żydowskim. Rekonstrukcjonista nie akceptuje supernaturalizmu (nadprzyrodzoności), a co za tym idzie — nie uznaje boskiego pochodzenia Tory, teorii kreacji, cudów, życia wiecznego w innym świecie. Postulat nie-osobowego Boga jest wynikiem zanegowania supernaturalizmu i tradycyjnej soteriologii żydowskiej.

Dla jednych judaizm wykreowany przez Kaplana jest absolutnie nie do przyjęcia, dla innych możliwy do zaakceptowania, a nawet uważany za jedyny sposób umożliwiający odrodzenie i umocnienie judaizmu współczesnego. Trudno o ostateczne rozstrzygnięcie w sytuacji, gdy nie ma jednego autorytatywnego podmiotu, który określiłby granice judaizmu. Przeprowadzone analizy pozwalają stwierdzić (nie zdecydować), że rekonstrukcjonizm żydowski jest swoistą teorią żydowską, sposobem życia pewnej grupy Żydów, lecz nie jest judaizmem. Transnaturalna koncepcja Boga, chociaż żydowska, nie odpowiada judaistycznemu pojęciu Boga, co więcej — monoteistycznej wierze w Boga. Taka wizja Boga prowadzi do nowoczesnej religii żydowskiej o charakterze bezwyznaniowym, w której każdy Żyd będzie mógł się odnaleźć. System Kaplana, który jest wynikiem zamierzonej rekonstrukcji i rewaluacji judaizmu tradycyjnego, w rzeczywistości stał się dekonstrukcją i dewaluacją judaizmu.

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